

Some “Thing” to Talk About? Differential Story Utility From Experiential and Material Purchases

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Abstract

Psychological research has shown that experiential purchases (a hike in the woods, a trip to Rome) bring more happiness than material purchases (a designer shirt, a flat-screen television). The research presented in this article investigates one cause and consequence of this difference: People talk more about their experiences than their possessions and derive more value from doing so. A series of eight studies demonstrate that taking away the ability to talk about experiences (but not material goods) would diminish the enjoyment they bring; that people believe they derive more happiness from talking about experiential purchases; that when given a choice about which of their purchases to talk about, people are more likely to talk about experiential rather than material consumption; and that people report being more inclined to talk about their experiences than their material purchases and derive more hedonic benefits as a result—both in prospect and in retrospect.

Keywords

experiential purchases, materialism, happiness, storytelling, anticipation

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Imagine that you just returned from a week of hiking in the Sierras, a week relaxing on a beach in the Caribbean, or a week of sampling the restaurants, art galleries, and theater offerings in New York City. How likely would you be to tell others about your trip? Would the telling enhance your experience? Now imagine that you spent a similar sum of money on a home theater system, new furniture, or some high-end clothing you have been eyeing. How likely would you be to tell others about *these* purchases, and would the telling increase how much enjoyment you get from them? These are the questions that motivated the research reported here.

These questions were inspired by research showing that experiential purchases (a trip to Sardinia, dining at a favorite restaurant, attending a concert) tend to bring us more happiness than material purchases (new shoes, a flat-screen television, a new-and-improved mp3 player to replace the one bought last year; Gilovich & Kumar, 2015; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015a, 2015b; Howell & Hill, 2009; Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014; Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009; Pchelin & Howell, 2014; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). In one study, a nationwide sample of 1,279 Americans was asked to think of a material and an experiential purchase made with the intention of increasing their happiness (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The majority of respondents reported that they derived greater happiness from their experiential purchase. One could argue that self-presentation and social desirability concerns muddle these

data—when asked about both types of purchases, perhaps people think they are *supposed* to say that experiences bring them more happiness (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). This concern is less applicable to laboratory experiments using between-subjects designs in which participants are randomly assigned to reflect on *either* a material or experiential purchase. Participants in one study, for example, reported elevated mood after thinking about a past experiential purchase, compared with participants thinking about a past material purchase (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

In most research on this subject, *experiential purchases* are defined for participants as those “made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through” and *material purchases* as those “made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one’s possession” (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194). Although they are fuzzy categories and the boundary between experiential and material purchases is not always precise (is a bicycle a material good or a vehicle for experiences?), people (both

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coders and the consumers themselves) have no difficulty understanding the distinction and retrieving past purchases that unambiguously fit one category or the other. In addition, when participants are led to think of the very same item (a television, a CD box set) in experiential terms, they tend to derive more satisfaction from it than if they are led to think of it in material terms (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012).

Both types of purchases, of course, typically yield a great deal of pleasure: A new article of clothing and a night out are both exciting. But the work on the hedonic benefits of experiential and material purchases shows that the pleasure derived from experiential purchases tends to be more enduring. One quickly habituates to (and tunes out) the new item of clothing (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999), but the benefits of the night out are more enduring—a seemingly paradoxical stance given that the night out literally comes to an end with the end of the evening, while the clothing remains in the wardrobe. But research backs up this assertion. In one study, participants were randomly assigned to spend money on either a material or an experiential purchase (Nicolao et al., 2009). When participants' happiness with their purchase was tracked over a 2-week period, they exhibited slower adaptation to experiential purchases than to material purchases. In another study (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Study 1), participants who were asked about their initial and current satisfaction with an experiential or material purchase reported no difference in their initial satisfaction, but those asked about experiential purchases reported more current satisfaction than those asked about material purchases.

These results push the question one step back: Why is it that people habituate less to their experiential purchases than their material purchases? Experiences may suffer less from adaptation in part because they are more likely to prompt, and in turn be enriched by, conversation and storytelling. Conversation is necessarily social. Social interaction, in turn, is an important facet of well-being, with a large literature indicating that positive social relationships promote happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002, 2004; Myers, 2000). Evidence also indicates that experiences, more than material possessions, tend to encourage social connections (Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, 2015). This is in part due to the fact that experiences are more likely to be shared with other people—when we do things, we tend to do them with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Kumar et al., 2015). But experiences might also build social connections because they are more rewarding to talk about than material possessions. Indeed, Van Boven et al. (2010) found that parties to a conversation enjoy their conversation and each other more when discussing experiential rather than material purchases.

Talking to others also allows us to re-live experiences long after they have happened. In this sense, experiential purchases are gifts that keep on giving. In talking about and re-living certain experiences, furthermore, we shape parts of

our identity. The more we talk about the time we climbed Mt. Rainier, the more fully we become “a mountain climber.” Indeed, because our experiences become our memories, they are more likely than possessions to become truly a part of the self. As a result, people are more likely to draw upon their experiences than their possessions when constructing narratives of who they are (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). This difference is important, as narratives provide unity and purpose to people's lives (McAdams, 2001).

Finally, people literally re-create their experiences by talking about them. A pleasant experience often becomes even more pleasant as it is embellished vis-à-vis the stories it inspires. Even lackluster and downright unpleasant experiences can make for enjoyable stories to tell and retell and become transformed into something much more pleasant in the process (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Sutton, 1992). Unlike material possessions, which, befitting their name, continue to exist in time and space, previous experiences exist largely in the mind. This allows experiences, in Bartlett's (1932) memorable phrase, to be “continually . . . re-made, reconstructed in the interests of the present” (p. 309). Indeed, in their work on the “rosy view” phenomenon, Mitchell et al. (1997) found that people who had undergone a decidedly disappointing experience tended to change their earlier assessments (e.g., “I'm sick of the rain”) when later asked to recall and discuss it (e.g., “Maybe it was good that we had a lot of rain”; p. 438).

It is notable that all of the studies conducted by Mitchell and colleagues on the “rosy view” phenomenon involve experiences: a trip to Europe, a Thanksgiving vacation, and a 3-week bicycle trip in California. Further evidence for the “rosy view” hypothesis similarly focuses on experiential (but not material) purchases. In one article (Sutton, 1992), in-the-moment assessments of family visits to Disneyland were found to be greatly diminished by screaming children, unbearably warm weather, and massive crowds. But respondents' post-trip recollections were much more positive than their actual experience had been at the time. Many of us can relate to an awful family vacation that has since become our go-to story about family bonding. These transformations are aided by how we talk about the event to other people. People are inclined to choose the juiciest and most interesting parts of their experiences when telling others about them. We do not often completely make up experiences that we have never had, of course, but we sometimes fudge the details to make for a better story. In fact, one study found that when people construct narratives of their lives, the details are distorted about 60% of the time, a much higher rate of distortion than for descriptions of more general abstract truths (Tversky, 2004). In a sense, talking about our experiences makes them not only gifts that keep on giving but sometimes gifts that get better and better.

Although previous research has not investigated whether experiences tend to be talked about more than possessions, there is evidence that talking about experiences makes people

happy. Langston (1994) found that when people shared the news of a positive event with others, they experienced a level of positive affect that exceeded the level associated with the positive event itself, a process he termed *capitalization*. Other work has shown that discussing positive events with others is associated with increased daily positive affect and enhanced long-term well-being, above and beyond the impact of the positive event itself (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). Sharing the joy people get from their experiences seems to increase the joy those experiences bring, and the benefits of sharing stories about positive experiences goes beyond the pleasure that comes from simply talking to a friend about anything or from simply recalling the positive experience in question (Lambert et al., 2012).

The existing literature thus provides some evidence that sharing past experiences can boost happiness. Previous studies, however, have not examined whether there are hedonic benefits to talking about experiential *purchases* nor has any existing research examined whether the benefits of talking about a purchase are greater for experiential than material purchases. The studies presented below were conducted to provide such a comparison. More specifically, the present research was designed to examine whether people talk more about their experiential purchases than their material purchases and, if so, whether that contributes to the tendency for people to derive more satisfaction from the former than the latter. Note that a tendency to talk about experiences more than possessions is tightly connected to two of the mechanisms that have been offered to explain the enhanced utility that experiences provide. If people construct their identities more around their experiences than their possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), they are likely to talk about them more—something that not only serves to connect them more to others but also feeds back and makes their experiences even more important elements of their identity. Because experiences are more tied to people's identities, people are also more inclined to distort their experiences in the service of self-esteem maintenance and self-enhancement (Dunning, 2005; Taylor & Brown, 1988)—something that telling stories helps advance (Bruner, 2003). By their very nature, then, these processes are woven together, and it is typically in combination that they cause people to derive more long-term satisfaction with their experiential purchases.

Overview of the Present Research

In eight studies, we examined whether people are more interested in talking about their experiential purchases than their material purchases and what some of the downstream consequences of such a difference might be. In Study 1a, we tested whether *not* being able to talk about an experiential purchase would bother people more than being unable to discuss a material purchase. In Studies 1b and 1c, we examined whether, as a result, people would be willing to accept a lesser experience rather than have a more enjoyable experience they could

not talk about—a trade-off they would be disinclined to accept when it comes to material goods. Studies 2a and 2b examined whether people believe that talking about experiential purchases boosts their happiness more than talking about material purchases. In Study 3, participants listed several experiential and material purchases they had made and were given an opportunity to talk about them, and we examined whether they talked more about their experiences than their possessions. Study 4 then directly tested the mechanistic account we have posited; specifically, it explored whether people tend to talk more about experiential than material purchases, and whether this difference is linked to differences in post-purchase satisfaction. Finally, in Study 5, we tested whether the hypothesized tendency to talk more about experiences than possessions extends to future purchases as well, and whether this is one reason why experiential purchases tend to provide more anticipatory utility than material purchases.

Study 1a

One way to gauge the importance people attach to talking about their experiential and material purchases is to examine what happens when they cannot do so. That is, how much would *not* being able to talk about a purchase diminish the enjoyment of it, and is the amount of diminished enjoyment different for experiential and material purchases? To find out, we asked participants how upset they would be if they could not talk about a significant material or experiential purchase. We predicted that it would be more upsetting to participants if they were not allowed to talk about their experiential purchases.

Method

Participants. One hundred U.S. Mechanical Turk users (48 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.03$, $SD = 9.54$) participated in exchange for a small fee.

Procedure. Participants were provided with a definition of either experiential or material purchases from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) and asked to indicate (between-subjects) the most significant experiential or material purchase they had made in the past 5 years. Participants then read,

We get enjoyment from our purchases for a variety of reasons—we anticipate the happiness we are going to get from our purchases, we enjoy them in the here-and-now, and we derive happiness from our memories of them and from talking about them with other people. In this questionnaire, we'd like you to focus on the portion of happiness that comes from talking about purchases.

They were then asked to imagine that, for some reason, a friend or relative requested that they should not talk to anyone about the significant purchase they had listed. They were told that they would still get to have the experience or item, but they would

not be allowed to share stories about it or tell anyone about it. After considering this scenario, they were asked how much they would be bothered by this request on a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all bothered*) to 9 (*extremely bothered*), with the midpoint labeled *moderately bothered*. Participants then indicated approximately how much money was spent on their purchase and provided their age and gender.¹

Results

Experiential and material purchases did not differ in price ($p > .3$) but did differ in how much not being able to talk about them would be bothersome. Participants reported that being unable to talk about their experiential purchases would bother them more ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 2.58$) than being unable to talk about their material purchases ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.45$), $t(98) = 2.45$, $p < .02$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$. This difference remained statistically significant when analyzed in a regression that controlled for purchase price, $\beta = 0.61$ ($SE = 0.23$), $p < .02$. By this metric, then, storytelling seems to be a more important part of the hedonic benefits that come with experiential purchases than those that come with material purchases.

Study 1b

Might the tendency to be more bothered by not being able to talk about experiential purchases affect people's choices? To find out, we asked participants whether they would be willing to pay a price (i.e., to settle for a lesser purchase) for the privilege of being able to talk about a significant experiential or material purchase.

Method

Participants. Ninety-eight Cornell undergraduates (37 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.11$, $SD = 1.36$) served as participants.

Procedure. We described to participants a category of purchases—either beach vacations (experiential) or electronic goods and gadgets (material) that an independent group of raters deemed comparable in appeal ($t = 1.4$). Participants were then asked to list two purchases they would most want to make within that category (e.g., “if you were going to go on a beach vacation, what are the top two destinations you would like to go to?”). We then presented them with a hypothetical choice dilemma: They could either have their first choice but without being allowed to talk about it or they could have their second choice and be free to tell other people about it. After indicating their preference between these two options, participants provided their age and gender.

Results

In the experiential (beach vacation) condition, 67% of participants said they would rather have their second-favorite vacation

that they could talk about rather than their top-rated vacation they could not discuss with others. The corresponding percentage in the material condition (electronic goods and gadgets) was only 22%, a statistically significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 19.96$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.45$. There was also a significant effect of gender, with women more inclined to sacrifice their top choice in favor of a second choice they were free to discuss (59%) than men were (36%), $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 5.10$, $p < .05$, but gender did not interact with type of purchase, $p > .5$. It thus appears that people are willing to take a hedonic hit on an experiential purchase to be able to talk about it, something they are less willing to do for material purchases.

Study 1c

Study 1c was a conceptual replication of Study 1b, but instead of being restricted to the categories of beach vacations and electronic goods, participants made judgments about material and experiential purchases from their own lives. Participants first indicated their two most significant experiential or material purchases in the past 5 years and then were asked to imagine that they could only have one of them: either their most significant purchase, but without being able to talk about it, or their second-most significant purchase, with the freedom to discuss it. We predicted that participants would be more inclined for experiential purchases to switch their preference to their second-best option.

Method

Participants. Ninety-eight U.S. participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (57 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 31.14$, $SD = 11.32$) and paid a small fee.

Procedure. Participants were first given the definition of either experiential or material purchases from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). They were then asked to list their most significant and second-most significant experiential or material purchases in the past 5 years.

Participants were then told,

Imagine that, for some reason, you were never allowed to talk to anyone about your most significant experiential [material] purchase. You got to have the experience [item you bought], but you were not allowed to share stories about it or tell anyone about your experience [item]. If other people happened to talk about a similar experience [item], you would not be permitted to tell them about yours. Imagine further that this was indeed the case (you couldn't talk about #1 listed above), but that you *could* talk about experience [purchase] #2. Finally, imagine that you could only have one of these experiences [items]. Which would it be?

After indicating their preference between Purchase 1 (their most significant purchase that they could not talk about) and Purchase 2 (their second-most significant purchase that they *could* talk about), participants provided their age and gender.

Results

Participants' responses indicated that, as predicted, being able to talk about a purchase is more important for experiences than possessions. Forty-two percent of participants in the experiential condition indicated that they would settle for their second-most significant purchase if they could not talk about their *most* significant purchase, whereas only 23% of participants in the material condition expressed a similar preference, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 3.86, p < .05, \phi = 0.20$.

A possible objection to the findings of Studies 1b and 1c is that participants may have been more inclined to accept a second-best experience they could talk about than a second-best material good simply because the two experiences tended to be more similar in overall quality than the two material goods. To examine whether this concern has merit, we had two raters who were unaware of the purpose of the experiment rate how appealing each purchase was on a 1 (*not very appealing*) to 5 (*very appealing*) scale. They did so twice, once in terms of how appealing the purchase was to them and once in terms of how appealing they thought it would be to the average person. After averaging the two judges' ratings ($\alpha_s = .52$ and $.61$ for personal appeal, $\alpha_s = .63$ and $.72$ for assumed appeal to the average person), we found that there was no difference in the gap between the two experiential purchases and the two material purchases in either study, whether using the ratings of assumed appeal to the average person or personal appeal to the judges (t_s of 0.75, 1.49, 0.01, and 1.05).² Our results are therefore not an artifact of participant's top two experiences being more similar in value or appeal than their top two material goods.

Study 2a

As we told participants in Study 1a, people derive enjoyment from their purchases in many ways. Sometimes they enjoy the anticipation of the purchase (Kumar et al., 2014), they enjoy the item or experience in the here-and-now, and they enjoy reminiscing and talking about what they have bought. Do people believe that they are likely to get more enjoyment from talking about their experiential purchases? To test this idea, participants in this study were given a list of material and experiential purchases and asked what portion of the happiness they could expect to derive from each purchase would likely come from being able to talk about it after the fact. We predicted that participants would report that talking about a purchase would be a more important element of the enjoyment of experiences than material goods.

Method

Participants. One hundred four U.S. participants (55 female; $M_{age} = 34.98, SD = 11.85$) were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid a small fee.

Procedure. Participants were first told that people get enjoyment from their purchases for a variety of reasons (anticipation, here-and-now consumption, and retrospection). They were then told,

For each of the following purchases you could make, please indicate approximately what percentage of the happiness you derive from that purchase comes from talking about it with other people. Some of the purchases . . . are ones you may never have made in your life (or, perhaps, may never make). For these, estimate what percentage of your overall enjoyment you think you *would* derive from being able to talk about them with others.

Participants were then presented with 20 purchases, 10 experiential and 10 material, presented in a different randomized order for each participant. The 10 experiential purchases were tickets to a sporting event, a beach vacation, ski passes, a meal at a nice restaurant, concert tickets, a trip to the zoo, movie tickets, fees for an outdoor activity (e.g., hiking, rafting, skydiving), a cruise package, and a trip to New York City. The 10 material purchases were a jacket, a pair of jeans, a shirt, a television set, stereo speakers, an iPod, a wristwatch, a diamond necklace, a designer handbag, and a laptop computer. As we did for Studies 1b and 1c, we had two independent coders rate these 20 purchases, both in terms of appeal to them personally and likely appeal to the average person, on the same 5-point scales as before. The material and experiential purchases did not differ significantly on either rating ($t_s = 0.12$ and 1.24).

Participants indicated what percentage of their enjoyment they believed was (or would be) the result of talking about each purchase after it had been made. They were then asked whether or not they had actually made that particular purchase and indicated their age and gender.

Results

Participants reported that they thought significantly more of their enjoyment came from, or would come from, talking about the experiential purchases ($M = 37.40, SD = 21.53$) than the material purchases ($M = 30.18, SD = 22.77$), matched pairs $t(103) = 4.80, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.33$. This difference was more pronounced when examining only the purchases respondents had actually made ($M_{experiential} = 42.31, SD_{experiential} = 24.83; M_{material} = 32.88, SD_{material} = 26.35$), matched pairs $t(102) = 6.38, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.37$, but was also marginally significant for those items participants only imagined buying ($M_{experiential} = 27.92, SD_{experiential} = 23.91; M_{material} = 23.83, SD_{material} = 24.91$), matched pairs $t(94) = 1.79, p < .08$, Cohen's $d = 0.17$. Thus, it appears that the act of talking about their experiences is seen by consumers as a bigger part of the enjoyment that experiential purchases bring.

Study 2b

If a participant in Study 2a decided that a third rather than a quarter of the enjoyment of a given purchase came from talking about it with others, that implies that they think less enjoyment must have come from some other component of the purchase. Would the same difference in perceived enjoyment derived from talking about experiential and material purchases emerge on a measure that did not have this interdependence built in? We predicted that it would, a prediction we put to the test in Study 2b. Study 2b was a replication of 2a but instead of indicating the percentage of happiness that came from talking about each purchase, participants *rated* how much they believed talking about the purchase added (or would add) to their overall enjoyment.

Method

Participants. One hundred nine Cornell undergraduates (54 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.56$, $SD = 3.01$) were recruited in exchange for course credit.

Procedure. Study 2b used the same procedure as Study 2a, except that, for each of the 20 purchases, participants rated how much they thought talking about it with others afterwards added to their overall enjoyment of the purchase. If they had never made the purchase in question, they were asked to estimate the amount that talking about it afterwards would add to their enjoyment. These ratings were made on a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a whole lot*) scale.

Results

Participants reported that talking about the purchases with others after the fact added more to their enjoyment of experiential purchases ($M = 6.11$, $SD = 1.28$) than material purchases ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.51$), matched pairs $t(108) = 7.59$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.62$. This difference held when analyzing only those purchases respondents had actually made ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 6.18$, $SD_{\text{experiential}} = 1.28$; $M_{\text{material}} = 5.20$, $SD_{\text{material}} = 1.67$), matched pairs $t(108) = 6.30$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.64$, but was also significant for those items participants only imagined buying ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.86$, $SD_{\text{experiential}} = 1.91$; $M_{\text{material}} = 4.79$, $SD_{\text{material}} = 1.80$), matched pairs $t(101) = 5.66$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.59$. These results indicate that the greater enjoyment people say they get from talking about their experiential purchases need not come at the expense of any other component of the enjoyment they derive from their purchases (e.g., their anticipation of the purchase or their here-and-now enjoyment).

Study 3

The previous experiments indicate that participants *believe* that talking is a more important element of experiential than

material consumption, but in none of these studies did participants actually open their mouths and talk about a purchase. Do people actually choose to talk about experiential purchases more than material ones? Study 3 examined just this question. Participants listed several purchases of each type and were then given an opportunity to talk about whichever ones they wished. We predicted that they would be more inclined to talk about their experiences than their possessions.

Method

Participants. Seventy-four Cornell undergraduates (52 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.05$, $SD = 2.41$) participated in exchange for course credit.

Procedure. Participants came into the lab individually and were asked to recall 10 significant purchases they had made over the course of their lives. They were given definitions of both purchase types as per Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) as well as examples of broad categories that fit each purchase type (clothing, electronic goods, jewelry, and furniture for material purchases; tickets to events, trips, meals out, and fees paid for an outdoor activity for experiential purchases). Although they were given these general categories, they were told to list *specific* material and experiential purchases they had actually made, rather than simply mentioning these broad examples. Participants were asked to list 5 important experiential purchases and 5 important material purchases, with order (material or experiential first) counterbalanced.

After indicating their 10 significant purchases, they were asked to record a video in which they talked about the purchases they had listed. The video, they were told, would later be shown to another participant. They were told to incorporate some of the purchases they had listed in their video but not necessarily all of them. Participants were instructed to include whatever purchases they would like to talk about but that they had to be sure to include at least 1.

After completing their video, they were asked to suppose that they were limited to talking about just one of the purchases they had just talked about. In doing so, they would be able to provide more detail about the particulars of their purchase and what they enjoyed most about it. That is, if they could only discuss 1 of their 10 purchases in a face-to-face conversation with another participant, which one would choose to talk about? They then provided their age and gender.

Results

The videos made by participants were coded for which of the 10 purchases they talked about. In line with our prediction, participants discussed marginally more of their experiential purchases ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.18$) than their material purchases ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 1.23$), matched pairs $t(73) = 1.73$, $p < .09$, Cohen's $d = 0.20$. Moreover, when asked to choose only 1 of

their 10 purchases to talk about, 80% of the participants picked one of their experiences, a percentage significantly different from the null value of 50%, $\chi^2(1, N = 74) = 26.16, p < .0001, \phi = 0.59$. People are thus more likely to choose an experiential purchase to talk about, even when several different material and experiential purchases of each type are readily accessible as potential topics of conversation.

Study 4

Using a number of paradigms involving a number of different measures, the experiments described thus far indicate that people want to talk more about their experiential purchases than their material purchases—and they get more enjoyment from talking about their experiential purchases as well. Are these differences part of the reason that people tend to get more enduring satisfaction from purchasing experiences instead of possessions (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015; Gilovich et al., 2015a; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003)? We designed Study 4 to shed light on this question. We asked participants to list their most significant material or experiential purchase over the past 5 years and asked them how much they had talked about it since. We also asked participants to rate how much happiness their purchase has given them and then examined whether the amount participants said they talked about their experiential and material purchases played a mediating role in how much enjoyment they got from them.

Method

Participants. One hundred two U.S. participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (25 female; $M_{age} = 26.93, SD = 9.56$) for a small fee.

Procedure. Participants were first randomly assigned to read a definition of either material or experiential purchases, as per Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). After indicating their most significant experiential or material purchase during the past 5 years, they were asked to rate how often they had talked about it on a 9-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *quite a bit* (9). They were then asked,

Suppose you were in a situation in which you had to make small talk and it wasn't going well, with each of you having a difficult time finding suitable things to discuss. In a situation like this, how comfortable or inclined would you feel to talk about this particular purchase?

Participants responded on a similar 9-point scale, ranging from *not inclined* (1) to *extremely inclined* (9). All participants then answered three questions taken from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) about how satisfied they were with their purchase. Specifically, participants responded on 9-point scales to the following questions: "When you think about

this purchase, how happy does it make you?" "How much does this purchase contribute to your happiness in life?" and "To what extent would you say this purchase is money well-spent?" (1 = *not happy/not at all/not well-spent*, 9 = *extremely happy/very much/very well-spent*). Participants then provided their age and gender and indicated approximately how much they spent on their purchase.

Results

Experiential and material purchases did not differ in reported price ($t = 1.4$). They did, however, differ in the predicted direction on both talking measures. As hypothesized, participants indicated that they had talked significantly more often about their experiential purchases ($M = 6.91, SD = 1.79$) than their material purchases ($M = 6.00, SD = 2.18$), $t(100) = 2.25, p < .03$, Cohen's $d = 0.46$. They also indicated that they would be more inclined to make small talk by talking about their experiential purchases ($M = 5.34, SD = 2.45$) than their material purchases ($M = 4.19, SD = 2.11$), $t(100) = 2.55, p = .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.50$. Once again, it appears that people are more inclined to talk about their experiential purchases than their material purchases.

To conduct the crucial mediational analysis, we collapsed across our two talking measures, which were highly correlated ($\alpha = .7$). Using this index, participants were significantly more inclined to talk about their experiential purchases ($M = 6.13, SD = 1.84$) than their material purchases ($M = 5.09, SD = 1.87$), $t(100) = 2.78, p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.56$. Furthermore, we replicated the satisfaction findings from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). After collapsing across our three happiness questions ($\alpha = .8$), we found that experiential purchases led to greater satisfaction than material purchases ($M_{experiential} = 7.36, SD_{experiential} = 1.38, M_{material} = 6.77, SD_{material} = 1.53$), $t(100) = 1.99, p = .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.40$. These results remain significant when monetary value was included as a covariate: When price was put into a model with experimental condition, condition remained a statistically significant predictor of both the talking composite ($\beta = 0.55, p < .01$) and the satisfaction composite ($\beta = 0.29, p = .05$). Price did not significantly predict either composite, $ps = .18$ and $.95$.

To examine whether participants' inclination to talk more about their experiential purchases mediates the greater satisfaction participants derived from them, we regressed purchase satisfaction onto purchase condition and the talking composite and found that condition was no longer a significant predictor of purchase satisfaction, $\beta = 0.12, p = .40$, while talking about the purchase did predict purchase satisfaction, $\beta = 0.34, p < .0001$. This mediational relationship was confirmed by a significant Sobel test, $Z = 2.42, p < .02$. In other words, participants reported that experiential purchases made them happier than material purchases, and this difference is due, in part, to the fact that experiential purchases are more likely to be talked about (see Figure 1).

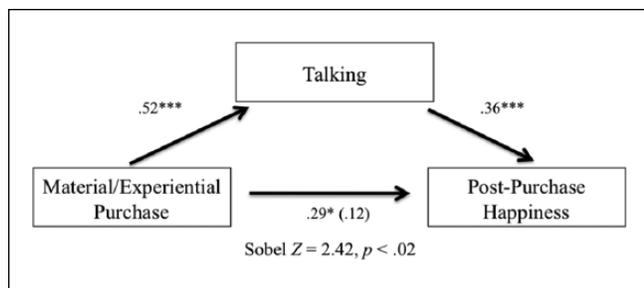


Figure 1. The mediating role of talking about a purchase on the relationship between type of purchase and post-purchase satisfaction.

Note. The beta weight in parentheses reflects the effect of type of purchase when the mediator is included in the regression.

* $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Study 5

To further test the greater hedonic value that people get from talking about experiential rather than material purchases, we examined the impact of talking about purchases in prospect, not after they have been made. Elsewhere, we have shown that people enjoy the anticipation of experiential purchases more than material purchases (Kumar & Gilovich, in press; Kumar et al., 2014). That is, thinking about future experiential consumption tends to be more pleasant and more exciting than thinking about future material consumption, and those looking forward to experiential purchases report being happier than those anticipating a material purchase. Might the tendency to talk more about experiences play a role here, too? To find out, we asked participants how much they had talked about an upcoming material or experiential purchase, and examined whether the amount they had done so might mediate the predicted tendency for them to say that they were enjoying the prospect of an upcoming experiential purchase more than the prospect of a material purchase.

Method

Participants. Ninety-nine Cornell students and affiliates (67 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.33$, $SD = 4.68$) served as participants.

Procedure. Participants were first given a definition of either experiential or material purchases (between-subjects), as per Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). Then, rather than recalling a significant past purchase they had made in the given category, they were asked to describe an experiential or material purchase they intended to make “in the very near future.” They were then asked how often they had already talked about this purchase on a 9-point scale ranging from -4 (*I haven't talked about it at all*) to 4 (*I've talked about it a whole lot*). Next, they completed two measures taken from Kumar et al. (2014): First, they rated the extent to which their anticipation felt more like impatience or excitement on a 9-point scale from -4 (*much more like impatience*) to 4

(*much more like excitement*) and then rated how pleasant their anticipatory state was on a similar 9-point scale from -4 (*extremely unpleasant*) to 4 (*extremely pleasant*.) They then reported how much the purchase cost and provided their age and gender.

Results

The experiential purchases participants were planning to make ($M = \text{US}\$560.00$, $SD = 1,451.21$) were significantly more expensive than the material purchases ($M = \text{US}\$151.35$, $SD = 219.65$), unequal variances $t(53.81) = 2.00$, $p = .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.39$. We therefore included purchase price as a covariate in the analyses below to rule out any concern that our results are driven by differences in the cost of participants' anticipated purchases.

As expected, participants who were anticipating a future experiential purchase had already talked about it ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 1.63$) more than those who were anticipating a future material purchase ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 2.43$), unequal variances $t(74.60) = 2.56$, $p = .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.53$. The effect remained significant when price was included as a covariate ($p = .04$), and purchase price was not a significant predictor of how much participants reported having talked about their upcoming purchase ($p > .5$).

Replicating previous research (Kumar & Gilovich, in press; Kumar et al., 2014), participants anticipating an experiential purchase appeared to be in a better hedonic state than those anticipating a material purchase. They rated their anticipation as more exciting/less impatient ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.45$) than those anticipating a future material purchase ($M = 0.91$, $SD = 1.82$), unequal variances $t(83.49) = 4.63$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.94$. They also indicated that waiting for their experiential purchase was more pleasurable ($M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.49$) than did those in the material condition ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 1.46$), $t(97) = 3.41$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.68$.

To perform the mediation analysis, we collapsed the two hedonic state measures ($\alpha = .8$) into a composite index of anticipatory utility.³ When the composite index of anticipatory utility was regressed onto both the talking measure and experimental condition, the beta weight for condition fell from .64 to .52 ($SE = 0.14$), and the extent to which the purchase had already been talked about remained a significant predictor of anticipatory utility ($\beta = .21$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .01$). Talking thus appears to partially mediate the effect of type material/experiential purchase on anticipatory utility, which was confirmed by a significant Sobel test, $Z = 2.16$, $p = .03$ (see Figure 2). Experiential purchases are more likely to be talked about than material purchases even before the purchases have been made. Moreover, this difference in the amount people talk about these two types of purchases partly explains the already documented differences in the anticipatory utility they provide. It appears, then, that talking about experiences rather than possessions contributes to the greater hedonic benefits we get from them, both in prospect and in retrospect.

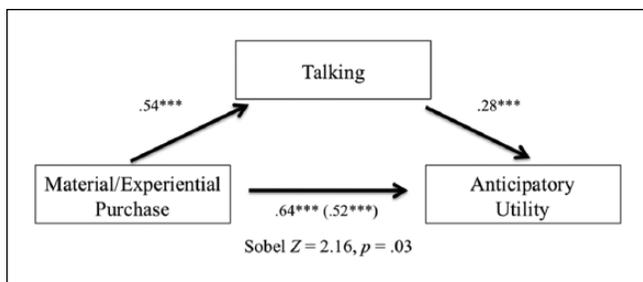


Figure 2. The mediating role of talking about a purchase on the relationship between type of purchase and anticipatory utility.

Note. The beta weight in parentheses reflects the value of type of purchase when the mediator is included in the regression.

* $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$.

General Discussion

Previous research has found that experiential purchases bring more happiness than material purchases. Early work on the topic suggested three possible explanations for this difference: Experiences are more open to positive reinterpretation, they become more a part of one's identity, and they contribute more to successful social relationships (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The work reported here was based on the contention that these elements are connected to and often work alongside another difference between experiences and possessions: People tend to talk more about their experiences and derive more satisfaction from doing so.

The eight studies reported here found that people are more invested in talking about their experiences than their possessions—both before and after they have purchased them—and that their greater investment in talking about their experiences increases the satisfaction they derive from them. Our results were obtained with college and national online samples, dispelling any concern that they are the result of unusual buying habits on the part of college students. Moreover, our results were not an artifact of differences in purchase price or the subjective appeal of experiential and material purchases. Together, these studies indicate that experiences lead to more enduring happiness than possessions in part because people talk about them more.

Beyond furthering our understanding of the differential hedonic benefits of experiential and material purchases, this research also adds to the (underdeveloped) literature on storytelling and conversation. For a field dedicated to understanding social life, it is remarkable how little time social psychologists have spent talking about, well, talking. Conversation is an inherently social activity, the very core of social interaction. It is notable, then, that people tend to enjoy this quintessentially social activity more when it involves a discussion of experiences than when it involves a discussion of possessions (Van Boven et al., 2010). Although Van Boven and colleagues found that people liked their (assigned) conversations and their (assigned) conversation partners more when they were talking about experiential

pursuits, the present research shows that people are also, to their benefit, more likely to converse about experiential consumption than material consumption.

Indeed, as soon as travelers return from a vacation, they often whip out their photos and start talking about the trip; a stellar party is not fully enjoyed until the attendees have shared their escapades with friends. It seems wise, then, not only to distinguish between “experienced utility,” “decision utility,” and “remembered utility,” (Kahneman, 2000) but also to add something like “story utility” to the mix. Story utility captures the increased happiness people achieve when given an opportunity to talk to others about their experiences.

Although these studies were designed to examine the contribution of storytelling to the existing finding that experiences provide more enduring satisfaction than possessions, the results raise a number of additional questions about conversation and storytelling. For example, is the effect we have documented likely to be the same for positive and negative experiences (Nicolao et al., 2009)? The experiences that participants reflected on in these studies were all positive. Do people receive the same benefits from talking about negative experiences? Sometimes they do, as the work on “rosy views” makes clear (Mitchell et al., 1997). Even the negative components of an experience (like rainy days on a cycling trip) were viewed more positively in hindsight, after they had been woven into a narrative. More generally, Pennebaker (1990) has shown that one way people come to feel better about negative experiences is by putting them in the broader context of one's life, which conversation facilitates. It seems, then, that talking may improve the hedonic experience of both positive and negative events, although the mechanisms responsible for the improvement are likely to be different.

It would also be worthwhile to explore some of the substantive dimensions of the stories people tell, with an eye toward examining whether some dimensions might prompt more remembered enjoyment than others (see Moore, 2012). For example, Wilson and Gilbert (2008) maintained that the more easily people can understand and explain an event, the more quickly they adapt to it. Thus, talking about a positive experience may be most beneficial when people talk mainly about the experience itself, or how they felt during parts of the experience, rather than *why* they liked the experience. This might play some role in the differential hedonic impact of talking about experiences versus possessions. When people buy a new television, it may be that they spend much of their time talking about why it is so great: its size, its resolution, how much better it is than the old set (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). Upon returning from a night out or trip to Rome, on the other hand, perhaps they spend less time talking about why they liked it and more time simply relating what they did, the places they saw, and the food they ate. Of course, it is a fine line between a description of the positive features of an experience or possession that serves to explain one's enjoyment and one that simply describes that enjoyment. But perhaps even that slight difference in emphasis might

contribute to the pronounced difference in the benefits of talking about a purchase that we observed here.

Another obvious question is whether the particular person to whom we talk about our experiences is likely to influence the benefits we get from doing so. Does it matter if we talk to a close friend or a perfect stranger? And what if the person to whom we talk about our purchase has had a similar experience or owns the same material good? We have shown elsewhere that people feel more connected to someone who has had the same experience than to someone who owns the same material possession (Kumar et al., 2015). This sense of connection is reinforcing, and it may contribute to the greater hedonic benefit people derive from talking about their experiences, at least to some audiences.

What about the passage of time and the repeated experience of talking about a treasured material or experiential purchase? There are likely to be diminishing returns from repeating the same story, as there are from repetitions of all sorts. But is that equally true of all purchases? Or might it be more socially acceptable—and more personally rewarding—to repeatedly discuss an exceptional experience than an exceptional possession?

Finally, does talking about experiences boost the hedonic value people derive from them more than simply reflecting on the purchases, or is talking just one type of reminiscing? We have obtained preliminary evidence that this is not the case and that talking about experiences boosts their hedonic value over and above that derived from private reflection (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). More specifically, we found that a brief conversation about an experiential purchase led participants to report greater enjoyment of the experience itself compared with those who simply thought about the experience. Moreover, no such beneficial effect of storytelling was found for participants' material purchases.

This result raises the obvious question of *why* talking about experiences tends to be more gratifying than talking about possessions. The existing research on experiential and material consumption points to some likely answers. For one thing, it is easier for people to find a receptive audience for talking about their experiences, and such conversations tend to be more socially rewarding (Van Boven et al., 2010). Also, because people tend to think of their experiences as more important parts of their identities (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), sharing them with others tends to be a richer, more meaningful experience.

Although this research was designed to achieve a deeper understanding of existing findings on the differential hedonic benefits of experiential and material purchases, it suggests some practical applications as well. First, this research reinforces the idea that well-being is likely to be enhanced by shifting the balance of spending in our consumer society away from material goods and toward experiences (Belk, 1985; Gilovich & Kumar, 2015; Gilovich et al., 2015a; Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Understanding the hedonic benefits of experiential consumption can be a first step toward a happier society. And a happier

society is a healthier society, as research has shown that positive affect is correlated with better physical health (Petit, Kline, Gencoz, Gencoz, & Joiner, 2001) and that happy people tend to be less vulnerable to disease (Myers & Diener, 1995). There is also evidence that considerable health benefits come from narrating one's personal experience, although much of that work has focused on narrative writing rather than talking (Pennebaker, 1990). The present research suggests that there are benefits to be had not only by nudging people to choose experiences over possessions (through, for example, the provision and maintenance of public parks, bike paths, and hiking trails, and funding for the arts) but also by encouraging people to share stories about their experiences.

This research also has implications for marketing. Research on autobiographical marketing has shown that campaigns designed to highlight a customer's personal connections to a product can increase the customer's recall of the product and produce strong feelings of nostalgia for it (Braun, Ellis, & Loftus, 2002). By highlighting the experiential elements of their products, and by giving people the opportunity to create their own product narratives (through product review sites, online forums, and "make a video" campaigns), marketers may increase how much enjoyment their customers derive from their products. In a similar vein, charitable organizations might effectively recruit and retain volunteers by highlighting the experiential elements of their activities and by giving them an opportunity to talk about their experiences. Such efforts would support recent calls to encourage people to invest in others rather than themselves and, in so doing, to increase overall well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008).

Conclusion

It may not be obvious that experiences bring people more utility than material goods (Pchelin & Howell, 2014). After all, vacations last only a week or 2, but iPads, sweaters, and vases endure. Materially, that is. Psychologically, it is the reverse. Although our material goods "disappear" through habituation, our experiential purchases live on in the memories we cherish and, as we have shown here, in the stories we tell.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. We included age and gender as factors in all analyses, but very few significant differences were uncovered, and they never interacted with experimental condition. For simplicity, then, we report the results for gender only when a significant difference emerged, and the reported results are otherwise collapsed across male and female participants. For this and all studies reported below, we have reported all conditions and analyzed all dependent measures, and no data were excluded from any of our analyses except where noted.
2. We repeated the analyses reported above with these ratings of subjective appeal as covariates. In Study 1b, the difference in subjective appeal between Purchase 1 and Purchase 2 to the rater was not a significant predictor of choice, $\beta = 0.05$, $p = .87$, but experimental condition was (after controlling for appeal), $\beta = -0.98$, $p < .0001$. When appeal to the average person was used as the covariate, appeal was not a significant predictor of choice, $\beta = -0.13$, $p = .68$, but condition remained statistically significant, $\beta = -0.99$, $p < .0001$. The same pattern held in Study 1c: When appeal to the rater was used as the covariate, it was not a significant predictor of choice, $\beta = -0.05$, $p = .80$, but condition was still a marginally significant predictor, $\beta = -0.43$, $p = .06$. When appeal to the average person was used as the covariate, appeal was not a significant predictor, $\beta = -0.27$, $p = .26$, but condition remained a statistically significant predictor of choice, $\beta = -0.44$, $p = .05$.
3. The effect of experimental condition on this composite measure was also significant, $t(97) = 4.59$, $p < .0001$, and remained so with purchase price included as a covariate ($p < .0001$), but purchase price was not a significant predictor of anticipatory utility ($p > .9$).

Supplemental Material

The online supplemental material is available at <http://pspb.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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