

I Am What I Do, Not What I Have: The Differential Centrality of Experiential and Material Purchases to the Self

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What kinds of purchases do the most to make us happy? Previous research (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) indicates that experiences, such as vacations and concerts, are more likely to do so than material possessions, such as clothes and electronic gadgets. The present research was designed to explore 1 potential explanation for this result, namely, that experiences tend to be more closely associated with the self than possessions. The authors first show that people tend to think of their experiential purchases as more connected to the self than their possessions. Compared with their material purchases, participants drew their experiential purchases physically closer to the self (Study 1), were more likely to mention them when telling their life story (Study 2), and felt that a purchase described in terms of its experiential, rather than its material, qualities would overlap more with their sense of who they are (Study 4). Participants also felt that knowing a person's experiential purchases, compared with their material purchases, would yield greater insight into that person's true self (Studies 3A–3C). The authors then show that the tendency to cling more closely to cherished experiential memories is connected to the greater satisfaction people derive from experiences than possessions (Study 5).

Keywords: experiential purchases, materialism, happiness, consumer-behavior, identity

“Look, nobody takes this more seriously than me. That condo was my life, okay? I loved every stick of furniture in that place. That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed, it was *me!*”

—Edward Norton, *Fight Club*

Early in the 1999 film *Fight Club* (Linson, Chaffin, Bell, & Fincher, 1999), starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, all of the protagonist's material possessions, along with a significant chunk of his apartment building, are destroyed in a tremendous gas explosion. When the police insinuate that he deliberately caused the explosion, Norton's character offers the defense quoted above. The sentiment that one's material possessions are important to self-definition is one that people frequently embrace (Belk, 1988), and it lends credence to the above defense—why would anyone deliberately destroy all of their worldly possessions? But the statement, although passionately spoken, is intended to be ironic; the film itself is devoted to refuting the idea that possessions make

any real contribution to a meaningful life. Indeed, the next line of dialog, delivered as a voiceover, has Norton's character congratulating himself on having convincingly said something so ludicrous.

The present studies were designed to examine a similar point (albeit one decidedly less violent and subversive) by building on previous findings that experiences tend to provide more enduring satisfaction than material possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; see also Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009). One of the explanations that has been offered for the greater happiness and satisfaction that people derive from experiential purchases—one that has been offered in the absence of supporting evidence—is that experiences come to constitute a greater part of the self than do material possessions. However much people might try to advance their public image or alter their sense of self through conspicuous consumption (Frank, 1999; Griskevicius et al., 2007; Heffetz & Frank, 2011), their possessions nonetheless remain “out there,” separate from the self. A person's experiences, in contrast, live on “in here,” in their memories and narratives. They become parts of our autobiography and, hence, part of us. We are quite literally the sum total of our experiences. We are not, however materialistic we might be, the sum total of our possessions. The present research examines this contention empirically—whether experiences are indeed more closely connected to the self and whether this is part of the reason that people derive greater and more enduring satisfaction from their experiential purchases. Although this is not the only mechanism responsible for the greater hedonic value people derive from their experiences (see Carter & Gilovich, 2010), it is one that has yet to be subject to empirical test.

Given the vast differences in people's interest in materialistic consumption, it is likely that personality variables related to materialism, such as that measured by the Material Values Scale

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(MVS; Richins & Dawson, 1992), might moderate the proposed tendency for people's experiences to constitute a greater part of their self-image. Indeed, Nicolao et al. (2009) obtained evidence that materialism moderates the relationship between purchase type and satisfaction; participants who scored low on the MVS were more satisfied with their positive experiences than their positive possessions, but participants who scored high on the MVS were equally satisfied with both. To explore the impact of a materialistic orientation further, we measured participants' materialism in most of the studies reported here.

Definitional Issues

One of the thorniest issues in this area of inquiry is the difficulty of defining and distinguishing material and experiential purchases. Following previous research (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), the intention behind the purchase provides a wedge. Material purchases are made with the intention of ownership and possession. They are typically physical objects, such as cars, clothing, jewelry, and various types of electronic gadgets, which endure in one's possession for an extended period of time. Experiential purchases, in contrast, are made with the intention of gaining some experience. They are intangible and impermanent, in the way of vacations, meals at restaurants, and music and theatre performances, and they endure primarily in memory. Crudely, material possessions are part of the manufacturing economy; experiences are part of the service economy. One purchases an experience to *do* and a material possession to *have*. Although the borderline between the two categories can be imprecise, with some purchases falling somewhere in the vague middle of the material-experiential spectrum, the categories nonetheless appear to be useful and readily intuited by participants (see Carter & Gilovich, 2010).

It should also be noted that material and *materialistic* purchases are, at least in theory, distinct concepts. Material purchases are the tangible objects purchased with an eye toward ownership, as described above. They exist on the opposite end of the spectrum from experiential purchases. Materialistic purchases, on the other hand, are purchases made with the intent of signaling wealth or status, either to others or to oneself. Materialistic people are those who (a) tend to make materialistic purchases, (b) derive much of their happiness from signaling their wealth, (c) measure their success by their wealth, and (d) define themselves and others based on their purchases, status, and wealth (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Accordingly, even some experiential purchases can be considered materialistic. Extravagant spa vacations and lavish parties signal status just as effectively as a Phillippe Patek watch or a luxury automobile. Conversely, a utilitarian material good (e.g., a coffee mug) is unlikely to be seen as materialistic. This is not to say that the price tag is the primary determinant of whether something is materialistic or not. An audiophile might buy a very expensive high-fidelity stereo system, but if the intention behind the purchase is to satisfy a well-honed ear, it would not be considered materialistic. In contrast, if the intention is to outdo or impress one's friends, then the purchase is firmly in materialistic territory. Similarly, a restful but expensive beach vacation can be just that: a chance to recharge the batteries while relaxing far from the stresses and responsibilities of home and work life. It only becomes materialistic when it becomes ostentatious, when the

additional utility one derives from the extra expense is less about the experience itself and more about the signal it sends (e.g., an oenological dilettante ordering a staggeringly expensive bottle of wine).

Although material and materialistic purchases are theoretically distinct, they are often confounded in practice (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010), for the simple reason that material possessions often serve the materialistic motive better than experiences. That is, because physical objects are more visible, they can better signal one's status and prosperity. This issue is discussed in more detail in the General Discussion.

The Role of Memories in Defining the Self

What constitutes "the self" has been of interest to scholars throughout the ages, with different accounts focused on very different features, some social, some cultural, and some individual (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Markus, 1977; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Nearly all accounts, however, grant importance to a person's memories of past experiences in his or her sense of self (see Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003; McAdams, 2001; A. E. Wilson & Ross, 2003). For example, some philosophers have described the self as a continuous stream of autobiographical memories, subject to frequent reflection over time (e.g., Grice, 1941; Locke, 1690/2000). Psychologists approaching the subject from a social cognition perspective have tended to focus on the self as a memory structure and have emphasized the bidirectional nature of the relationship between memory and the self-concept (e.g., Greenwald, 1981; Kihlstrom et al., 2003). That is, memories constitute a big part of the self-concept, but some concept of a "self" is necessary to give those memories coherence and to organize them as elements of a single entity, oneself (e.g., James, 1890; Klein, 2001).

Both elements of declarative memory—episodic and semantic—constitute important elements of the self-concept (Klein, 2001). Semantic memory, the storehouse of general knowledge about the world, is where summary beliefs about the self reside, such as the belief that one is an accomplished tennis player, the life of the party, or a hopeless romantic. Episodic memory, our firsthand recollections of experiences, constitutes the raw material that sparks and confirms such summary assessments of the self. Our previous experiences on the tennis court link to the node in semantic memory representing one's tennis ability, and when that ability is queried, those episodes are brought to bear as evidence to support that summary assessment. New experiences are used to revise the semantically based self-concept, but such episodic memories are subject to bias in both encoding and retrieval in light of, and in the service of, broader self-schemas (e.g., Markus, 1977) and generalized beliefs about one's abilities in a particular domain (Ehrlinger & Dunning, 2003).

It follows from this perspective that experiences constitute a more important part of the self-concept than possessions. Experiences, once enacted and "consumed," persist essentially as episodic memories that, by their very nature, are autobiographical and thus connected to the self-concept. Possessions, in contrast, reside primarily outside of memory, as tangible objects. One's memories of a possession, as well as the use of possessions as an "extended self" (Belk, 1988), can and do indeed connect material possessions to the self but, as we demonstrate, to a much lesser degree.

Self-Serving Biases, Satisfaction, and Regret

Why might experiences become especially satisfying as a result of their closer connection to the self? We believe there are several reasons. First, as part of the self, memories of purchased experiences are likely to be embellished as a consequence of the same sorts of self-serving biases that allow people to maintain positive self-views (e.g., Dunning, 2005), particularly over time. Indeed, people tend to take a “rosy view” of experiences over time, even when the actual experience is fraught with decidedly disappointing moments (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Sutton, 1992). Evaluating the quality of one’s experiences is, in essence, evaluating aspects of oneself.

Second, the intangible, subjective nature of experiences makes it easier to find positive dimensions of evaluation. Just as people take advantage of ambiguity in trait definitions to evaluate themselves highly (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989), people can take advantage of the ambiguity of most experiences to arrive at favorable evaluations. A rainy vacation might have led to the cancellation of a highly anticipated activity, but it might also have allowed a unique opportunity to bond with family and friends, even if it takes a while to come to that realization. A crash-prone laptop, in contrast, leaves little room for positive reinterpretation. Some latitude for interpretation is essential to the process of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) that serves the desire to protect and enhance the self (e.g., Dunning, Leuenberger, & Sherman, 1995).

Third, purchases seen as accomplishing a higher order goal typically take on special importance and are tied even closer to the self. Because experiences are thought of relatively abstractly, in terms of their purpose and what they accomplish, they are more likely than possessions to be construed at a high level (Trope & Liberman, 2003).

The incorporation of experiences into the self-concept might also have implications for the experience of regret and dissatisfaction. People tend to be dissatisfied with purchases that do not meet expectations and to regret purchases that are surpassed by unchosen options (Bell, 1982, 1985; Loomes & Sugden, 1982; Tsiros & Mittal, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 1999; Zeelenberg et al., 1998). And people may be reluctant to make unfavorable comparisons to unchosen options (i.e., feel regret) if the purchase they made is now a part of the self, for much the same reasons that people tend to reduce the amount of regret they experience over time for actions they have taken (Gilovich & Medvec, 1994, 1995; Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998). Note that this reluctance to make unfavorable comparisons is less likely to apply to material purchases than experiential purchases, because the former are less closely aligned with the self. In fact, other research suggests that people’s most common regrets about material goods are mistakes of action: buying things they now wish they hadn’t bought. Their most common regrets about experiential purchase decisions are mistakes of inaction: not purchasing experiences they now wish they had pursued (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012).

In sum, there are a variety of reasons to expect experiential purchases to be integrated more tightly to the self-concept and to expect this difference to constitute an important reason why experiences tend to be more satisfying than possessions. The research reported here explores this contention empirically, first by examining whether experiences are indeed more closely incorporated

into the self-concept than possessions (Studies 1 and 2). We then examine whether knowledge of a person’s experiences is considered a clearer window into their self-concept than knowledge of their possessions (Studies 3A–3C). Next, we explore the viability of some potential alternative explanations by examining whether the very same purchase tends to be seen as closer to the self when its experiential features rather than its material features are highlighted (Study 4). Then, in Study 5 we attempt to replicate the previous finding that experiences tend to be more satisfying than possessions and examine whether the greater satisfaction people derive from experiential purchases is partly attributable to their tighter connection to the self.

Study 1: Diagramming the Self

How closely do people associate their material and experiential purchases with their self-concept? Study 1 was designed to examine whether, in an almost literal sense, people think of their experiences as closer to the self than their possessions. The procedure borrows from work on different conceptions of the self in independent and interdependent cultures. To illustrate the idea that people in interdependent cultures tend to define themselves more in terms of their social and familial relationships than people in independent cultures, Markus and Kitayama (1991) represented the self and various significant others using a Venn diagram (see Figure 1 in Markus & Kitayama, 1991). The diagram depicts the self as a large circle at the center, with family and friends represented as smaller peripheral circles. Because the self is defined more in terms of relationships in interdependent than independent cultures, a person’s family and friends are depicted as overlapping more with the self circle in interdependent cultures than in independent cultures. A similar logic should apply with respect to purchases that are seen as more or less connected to the self. Accordingly, participants in this study were asked to describe several material and experiential purchases and then to depict their connections to the self using a Venn diagram, with the distance between each purchase and the self representing perceived closeness and importance. We predicted that people would place their experiential purchases closer to the self than their material purchases.

Method

Participants. Fifty-three Cornell University students (31 female, 21 male, 1 unspecified) completed the survey in exchange for a candy bar or as a filler survey during an unrelated experiment. Although one participant did not complete the materialism measure, her data are only excluded from the analyses involving that measure. Including or excluding her data from the other analyses does not alter the direction or significance of any of the findings.

Procedure. Participants were first asked to recall eight significant purchases they had made in the past 5 years (four material possessions and four experiences) and to list each purchase and its price. Spaces for the four material and four experiential purchases were provided on the same page, and participants were free to fill them out in whatever order they wished. They were then asked to represent each purchase as a circle, and to draw it in proximity to a central “self” circle to depict how close that purchase seemed to their “sense of self.” As an example, participants saw a repre-

sensation of how one might diagram one's familial relationships, with some closer and some further away from the central self-circle (shown in Figure 1). Finally, participants completed the revised 15-item version of the MVS (Richins, 2004), a common measure of materialistic value orientation.

Results and Discussion

For each purchase, we measured the distance between the center of the central self-circle and the center of each purchase circle in millimeters and then averaged the distances for each purchase type. Because the circles had to be large enough to accommodate the name of the purchase, which varied considerably in length, the circles also varied considerably in size. We thus used the center of each circle, rather than the closest edge, to prevent any artifacts resulting from any asymmetry in the size of participants' material and experiential circles.

As predicted, participants plotted their experiential purchases closer to the self-circle ($M = 30.0$ mm, $SD = 8.54$) than their material purchases ($M = 34.0$ mm, $SD = 12.73$), paired $t(52) = 2.48$, $p < .02$, $d = 0.340$. However, this effect was qualified by a significant interaction with participant gender, $F(1, 50) = 4.25$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. There was a pronounced difference in how closely the experiential and material purchases were depicted relative to the self-circle by female participants ($M_s = 29.2$ vs. 35.8 ; $SD_s = 7.0$ and 14.0), $t(30) = 3.18$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.57$, but no difference among male participants ($M_s = 31.6$ vs. 31.5 ; $SD_s = 10.4$ and 10.0 ; $t < 1$). Because this gender difference was not expected and, more important, does not replicate in the subsequent studies reported here, we defer a discussion of its significance to the general discussion.

Participants' experiential purchases were, on average, marginally more expensive than their material purchases,¹ $t(52) = 1.92$, $p < .10$, and so we performed a follow-up regression analysis to control for the impact of price on participants' depictions. Because there were multiple distances for each participant, the data were not independent, and so we performed a separate regression for each participant, predicting the distance of each purchase from the self-circle using the type of purchase (material or experiential) and the price of the purchase. This analysis revealed that the tendency of participants to draw their experiences closer to the self was not due to their experiences having greater monetary value: The mean coefficient of purchase type was significantly different from zero

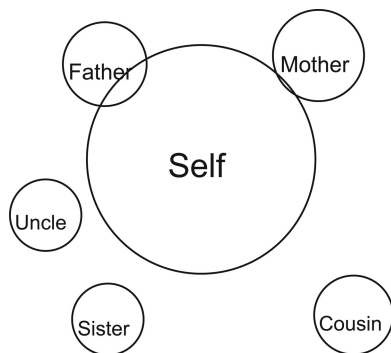


Figure 1. Example diagram given to participants.

in the predicted direction ($M_{\text{beta}} = .26$, $SD = .81$), $t(52) = 2.33$, $p < .03$, whereas the mean coefficient of price was not ($M_{\text{beta}} = -.08$, $SD = .40$), $t(52) = -1.49$, $p = .14$. Here, too, the effect was pronounced for women ($M_{\text{beta}} = .40$, $SD = .83$) but absent for men ($M_{\text{beta}} = -.01$, $SD = .71$).

The MVS did not correlate significantly with how close to the self-circle participants tended to draw their experiential purchases or their material purchases (both $ps > .10$). However, when we combined the two average distance measures into an index of the tendency to place material purchases further from the self than experiences, we found that this index (a simple difference score) was significantly negatively correlated with the MVS, $r(52) = -.32$, $p < .05$. Participants who depicted their experiences as physically closer to their "self" than material possessions also reported that their possessions were less central to their lives and happiness on a validated personality measure of materialism. However, it is important to note that, this correlation notwithstanding, the tendency to consider experiences as closer to the self than possessions was not reversed for those high in materialism. Indeed, over 70% of the participants drew their experiences closer than their possessions, and the trend we observed did not reverse for those who scored above the midpoint on the MVS ($n = 18$). These participants, who consider possessions to be extremely important in their lives, nevertheless depicted their possessions and experiences at an equal distance from the self ($t < 1$).

This study thus provides straightforward evidence that people do indeed consider their experiential purchases to be closer to their self-concept than their material purchases. Although the result was limited to female participants in this study (but not in the studies to follow), it was not qualified by the cost of the purchases they considered. Also, although this difference was negatively correlated with materialism, even the most staunch materialists did not place their possessions closer to their self-concept than their experiences. Thus, even if materialists are making material purchases with an eye toward managing their identity, their experiences end up being just as large a part of that identity.

Study 2: Telling One's Life Story

Participants in Study 1 were confronted with a novel task—to literally map their purchases onto their self-concept in physical space. To make sure that the results obtained in that study are not limited to such unorthodox assessments, in Study 2 we had participants engage in a considerably more familiar activity: talking about themselves. That is, participants were asked to recall and describe several material and experiential purchases and then to tell their life story, a form of self-definition crucial to one's overall identity (McAdams, 2001), incorporating some of the purchases they had previously described. We expected participants to incorporate more experiential than material purchases into their life narratives.

Method

Ninety-one Cornell University undergraduates (72 female, 18 male, 1 unspecified) completed this study online, along with a

¹ Because of significant skew, the cost of each purchase was subjected to a natural log-transformation in all analyses. This procedure was followed in all subsequent studies as well.

series of unrelated surveys, in exchange for course credit. Participants were first asked to recall 10 significant purchases they had made over the course of their lives—five material possessions and five experiences. To avoid any ambiguity in data coding, there were 10 entry fields, clearly marked as to whether a material or experiential purchase should be listed. Participants were asked to provide a brief description of each purchase and its cost.

One participant described five material purchases but no experiences and therefore was excluded from the analysis. Although other participants occasionally omitted one or two purchases, all remaining participants described at least three purchases in each category. Excluding participants who made any omissions of any sort changes neither the direction nor significance of the results.

After listing their material and experiential purchases, participants were asked to provide a narrative description of their lives. Specifically, participants were given the following instructions:

In the box below, write out a summary of your “life story.” Who are you? How did you get to be the way you are? What are you and your life about? We’d like you to incorporate some of the purchases that you listed above in your life narrative, but not all of them (of course). Choose whichever ones you feel it best to include, but be sure to include at least one.

Participants then completed the MVS (Richins & Dawson, 1992). One participant did not complete the MVS, and so her data were not included in the analyses using that measure. Including or excluding her other data does not change any of the findings.

Results

Two independent raters read each participant’s life narrative and coded whether each purchase listed earlier was included as part of the narrative (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0). Both raters were blind as to which purchases were listed as examples of material or experiential purchases, but only one of the raters was blind to the hypothesis. Because their ratings corresponded very highly, agreeing on 95% of the cases, awareness of the hypotheses does not appear to have tainted the nonblind coder’s ratings. As a precaution, a third coder, who was also blind to the hypothesis, resolved all of the cases in which the two main coders disagreed. We then calculated for each participant the proportion of material and experiential purchases that were included in his or her life narrative. As predicted, participants included more of their experiential purchases ($M = .42$, $SD = .28$) than their material purchases ($M = .22$, $SD = .24$), paired $t(89) = 5.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.626$. This effect was not qualified by gender, and the effect was significant for both men and women when analyzed separately (both $ts > 2.2$, $ps < .05$).

Because there was a marginally significant difference in how expensive the material and experiential purchases tended to be ($Mdn_{exp} = \$500$ vs. $Mdn_{mat} = \$250$),² paired $t(83) = 1.83$, $p = .07$, we conducted a supplementary regression analysis to control for price. Specifically, a separate regression was performed for each participant, predicting each purchase’s inclusion in the life narrative using the type of purchase (material or experiential) and the price of the purchase. The average coefficient for price was significantly different from zero ($M_{beta} = .11$, $SD = .28$), $t(81) = 3.68$, $p < .001$, indicating that participants were more likely to mention expensive purchases. This did not, however, explain the

greater inclusion of experiences in participants’ life narratives. The average coefficient of purchase type was significantly different from zero in the predicted direction ($M_{beta} = .22$, $SD = .57$), $t(81) = 3.28$, $p = .001$. That is, controlling for each purchase’s cost, participants were more likely to mention experiential than material purchases in their life narratives.

In addition to price, there are a number of possible dimensions on which participants’ material and experiential purchases might have differed. That is, participants may have used fundamentally different criteria when searching their memory for experiential and material purchases, differences that might not be reflected in price. Most important, participants may have recalled, even within the same price range, more exciting and consequential experiential purchases (e.g., a trip to Barcelona) than material purchases (e.g., a set of snow tires). And perhaps it is this difference, rather than whether the purchase was an experience or a material good, that was responsible for the observed difference in what participants chose to include in their life narratives. To examine this possibility, we had a pair of raters, blind to the hypothesis of the study, rate each purchase on three additional dimensions. First, they provided a simple dichotomous judgment as to whether it was a “big” or “small” purchase. Their ratings agreed 80.2% of the time; disagreements were averaged, creating a 3-point scale with a middle category of, in essence, “medium” purchases. Second, they rated the extent to which the purchase was substantial (e.g., laptop, trip to China) or trivial (e.g., book, meal at the student union) on a 7-point scale (1 = *trivial*, 7 = *substantial*; rater reliability $r = .82$). Finally, they rated how much satisfaction the “average person” would derive from the purchase (1 = *little satisfaction*, 7 = *a great deal of satisfaction*; rater reliability $r = .75$).

To ensure that our findings were not simply the result of participants selectively recalling highly satisfying experiences and only moderately satisfying possessions, we ran three separate regressions for each participant, using purchase type and one of these three dimensions to predict whether the purchase was included in the narrative. As expected, participants did indeed choose to include in their narratives purchases that were bigger ($M_{beta} = .09$, $SD = .16$), more substantial ($M_{beta} = .11$, $SD = .18$), and something that the average person would find more satisfying ($M_{beta} = .11$, $SD = .20$), all $ts(83) > 5.00$, $ps < .001$. However, this (predictable) effect did not account for the effect material/experiential purchase on what participants chose to mention in their narratives. Purchase type remained a significant predictor when controlling for purchase’s size ($M_{beta} = .16$, $SD = .41$), $t(83) = 3.66$, $p < .001$; substantiality ($M_{beta} = .13$, $SD = .40$), $t(83) = 2.93$, $p < .01$; and normative satisfaction ($M_{beta} = .10$, $SD = .45$), $t(83) = 1.95$, $p = .05$. Clearly then, there is something unique about the material/experiential dimension that determines, above and beyond a variety of other factors such as expense, “bigness,” and satisfaction, how central they are to a person’s identity.

² Some purchases were not accompanied by a quantifiable cost (e.g., “a lot”), which accounts for the lowered degrees of freedom. These purchases were also excluded from the within-subject regression analysis, although no participant’s data had to be discarded as a result of a large number of price omissions.

Participants' overall MVS scores did not correlate significantly with their tendency to include either their material or experiential purchases in their life narratives (both p s > .2). However, the life-centrality subscale of the MVS was (marginally) negatively correlated with the likelihood of including their experiential purchases in their life narratives ($r = -.19, p < .07$).³ Although those who consider material possessions to be more central to their lives were less likely to include experiential purchases in their life narratives, it is important to note that the main effect reported earlier was not reversed among these participants. Looking just at those who scored above the midpoint on the life-centrality subscale ($n = 39$), even these participants were more likely to include experiences ($M = .35, SD = .29$) than possessions ($M = .26, SD = .28$) in their life narratives, although not significantly so, paired $t(37) = 1.39, p = .17, d = 0.227$.

Discussion

Participants in this study were more likely to draw upon their experiential purchases than their material purchases when telling their life story. This effect held when cost and various other measures of the significance of the purchases were held constant. Even materialists exhibited this tendency, although not to a statistically significant degree.

One possible concern about the paradigms used in Studies 1 and 2 is that participants were required to list a number of material and experiential purchases, and there is no obvious way to determine whether the purchases participants described are representative of the purchases that they, or people in general, tend to make. Perhaps, in other words, participants were not "randomly sampling" from the population of purchases they have made over the course of their lives when generating examples of each type. To address this concern, we utilize two different paradigms in the next four studies, neither of which involves participants' recall of specific material and experiential purchases. One paradigm, used in Studies 3A–3C, investigates whether people believe that one can learn more about a person's true self (their own or someone else's) by knowing about their material purchases or their experiential purchases.

Studies 3A–3C: Need-to-Know Basis

In Studies 3A–3C, we wanted to examine the robustness of the connection between experiences and identity by using a very different measure of identity. Specifically, we asked participants to consider whether knowing about a person's material or experiential purchases would give someone else greater insight into the true nature of the person in question. If people are, in fact, the sum total of their experiences, then knowledge of one's experiences should be thought to yield greater insight.

Study 3A

In Study 3A, we asked participants whether a stranger would know more about their true self as a result of knowing their material or experiential purchase history. We also examined whether the sense that experiential purchases are more diagnostic

of the self is related to the satisfaction people derive from specific material and experiential purchases.

Method.

Participants and procedure. One hundred twenty-one participants (65 female) were recruited at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry to participate in a short survey about consumer purchases in exchange for candy. Participants represented a broad age range (min = 18, max = 72, $M = 37.79, SD = 14.90$) and hailed predominantly from the American Midwest, but with some visiting from as far away as Alaska and Switzerland.

Materials. The survey first described to participants the categories of material and experiential purchases, and then asked them to imagine two people: "one of whom knew about all of your material purchases (Person M), and the other knew about all of your experiential purchases (Person E), but neither knew anything else about you. Which person would better know the *real* you, your true, essential *self*?" Participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = *definitely Person M*, 5 = *both equally*, 9 = *definitely Person E*). The scale anchors and the order in which Person M and Person E were listed were counterbalanced. All responses scored such that higher numbers indicated greater belief that Person E would know them better.

Next, participants were asked to recall two significant purchases, one material and one experiential. They were instructed to select purchases from the past 5 years that had cost at least \$50. After providing a brief description and the cost of each purchase, participants indicated their satisfaction with each (1 = *not at all satisfied*, 5 = *somewhat satisfied*, 9 = *extremely satisfied*).

Finally, participants provided their age, gender, hometown, and native language before being debriefed and thanked.

Results. There was no significant difference in the cost of the two types of specific purchases participants recalled, $t(117) = 1.01, p = .31$, and there were no effects of the counterbalancing on any measure (t s < 1), so the different versions were collapsed.⁴

Did participants believe that knowing about their experiential purchases would give another person greater insight into their true selves? As predicted, participants reported that Person E would know them better than Person M ($M = 5.85, SD = 2.29$), one-sample t test against the scale midpoint $t(120) = 4.08, p < .001, d = 0.371$, an effect that was not qualified by gender, $t(119) < 1$. Indeed, a majority (62.8%) of participants expressed this belief, circling a response above the scale midpoint ($z = 2.91, p < .005$).

Consistent with previous research, participants were more satisfied with their experiential purchases ($M = 8.00, SD = 1.47$) than their material purchases ($M = 7.23, SD = 1.65$), paired $t(120) = 3.83, p < .001, d = 0.349$. This effect was stronger for women ($M_{\text{exp}} = 8.14$ vs. $M_{\text{mat}} = 6.95$), $t(64) = 4.14, p < .001$, than for men ($M_{\text{exp}} = 7.84$ vs. $M_{\text{mat}} = 7.55$), $t(55) = 1.07, ns$, resulting in a significant Gender \times Condition interaction, $F(1, 119) = 5.17, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04$. Note that although the difference

³ There was no relationship between the life-centrality subscale and the tendency to mention material purchases in their life narratives ($r = .09, p > .35$).

⁴ Three participants did not report a codable cost for their experiential purchase, hence the slightly lower degrees of freedom. The results do not change whether these participants are included or excluded from the analyses that follow.

in satisfaction derived from experiential and material purchases was not significant for the male participants, it was in the same direction as it was for female participants.

The tendency to rate a specific experiential purchase as more satisfying than a specific material purchase (measured as a difference score) correlated significantly with participants' general belief that their experiences provide more insight into their true selves ($r = .19, p < .05$). The magnitude of this correlation is not large, a result that is likely a consequence of the two very different measures used—a general sense that experiences represent the self on one hand and satisfaction with specific, individual purchases on the other. That the correlation between these measures (at very different levels of abstraction) was nevertheless significant points to the robustness of the connection between experiences and personal identity.

Study 3B

Study 3B was modeled after Study 3A but in reverse. That is, rather than ask participants whether a stranger who knew about their experiences or possessions would have greater insight into their own true selves, in Study 3B we asked participants which purchase history would give them greater insight about a stranger.

Method. One hundred one participants (61 female, 40 male) were recruited for a Web-based survey via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. After reading a brief description of the distinction between material and experiential purchases, participants were asked to "Imagine there were two people, strangers to you, and you know about all of one person's experiential purchases (Person E) and knew about all of the other person's material purchases (Person M) but know nothing else about either person. Which person do you think you would know better? Would you have greater insight into Person M or Person E's true, essential self?" Participants responded using an analog sliding scale (anchored at 0 = *I would have greater insight into Person M's personality* and 100 = *I would have greater insight into Person E's personality*). The order of the description and the scale anchors was counterbalanced. Finally, participants completed the 15-item version of the MVS (Richins, 2004) and provided basic demographic information (age, gender, and income).⁵

Results. There were no significant effects of order, so the two versions were collapsed. As predicted, participants thought that knowledge of a stranger's experiences would give them greater insight into the stranger's true self ($M = 61.34, SD = 29.56$), based on a one-sample t test against the scale midpoint, $t(100) = 3.85, p < .001$.

This belief was not significantly correlated with age or income ($r_s < .05, p_s > .70$) and was not significantly qualified by gender ($p > .10$), although the effect was significant for female participants separately ($M = 65.2, SD = 28.3, t(60) = 3.96, p < .001$, but not for the male participants ($M = 55.5, SD = 30.0, t(39) = 1.22, p = .26$). There was a marginally significant negative correlation with responses to the MVS ($r = -.17, p = .08$). That is, people who scored higher on trait materialism were less likely to believe that knowing a person's experiences provides more insight into that person's true self. They did not, however, express the opposite belief. Even those who scored above the midpoint on the scale showed the same trend, although it did not quite reach significance ($M = 57.76, SD = 29.68, t(36) = 1.59, p = .12$).

Study 3C

Study 3C was designed as a replication of Study 3B with slightly different measures. Rather than asking participants which of two strangers they would know better, we asked them to choose which type of purchase history they would rather know when meeting someone new.

Method. One hundred two participants (62 female, 40 male) were recruited via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk to complete a Web-based survey. After reading a brief description of the distinction between material and experiential purchases, participants were asked to "Imagine you are going to be meeting a new person who might be important in your life (such as a blind date, or maybe you've been assigned to work on a project together), and you can learn just one thing about this person beforehand, either about their material possessions, or about the experiences they've purchased." Participants were asked indicate which type of information would: (a) give them more insight into the other person's true, essential self; (b) be most useful upon meeting the individual in question; and (c) be more fun to talk about, using sliding analog scales anchored at 0 (*definitely their possessions*) and 100 (*definitely their experiences*). The scale anchors and the order in which the purchase types were listed were counterbalanced. Finally, participants completed the 15-item version of the MVS (Richins, 2004) and provided basic demographic information (age, gender, and income).

Results. There were no significant effects of order, so the two versions were collapsed. As predicted, participants indicated that they would rather learn about a person's experiences than their possessions to gain insight into the person's true self ($M = 72.09, SD = 28.20$), perhaps because doing so would be more useful ($M = 73.59, SD = 26.64$) and more fun to talk about ($M = 79.53, SD = 25.09$), based on one-sample t tests against the scale midpoint, all $t_s(101) > 7.50, p_s < .001$.

None of these measures were qualified by gender (all $t_s < .20$) or significantly correlated with age or income ($r_s < .10, p_s > .30$). The MVS did not correlate significantly with participants' rating of which type of purchase would provide the most insight about the person in question, nor with the type of purchase they thought would be useful to know (both $r_s < .14, p_s > .18$). But there was a significant negative correlation with participants' beliefs about which kind of purchase would be more fun to talk about ($r = -.22, p < .03$). However, even those relatively high on materialism (scoring above the midpoint) expressed the same general preference for experiential information, as even that restricted sample scored significantly above the midpoint on the question of insight into the self ($M = 68.44, SD = 28.83$), how useful the knowledge

⁵ Age and income were assessed as categories, rather than precise numbers (e.g., 25–34 years; \$25,000–\$50,000) in Studies 3B, 3C, and 4, making it impossible to provide precise descriptive statistics. We can at least report, in Study 3B for example, that a substantial portion of participants were at least well into adulthood (40% were at least 35 years old) and would generally be considered middle class (52% reported household incomes less than \$50,000 per year, and only 16% reported household incomes above \$100,000 per year). The ordinal nature of the categories, however, still allows for computing the correlation between these variables and the dependent measures.

would be ($M = 65.75$, $SD = 33.32$), and how fun it would be to talk about ($M = 71.72$, $SD = 31.89$), all $t(31) > 2.6$, all $ps < .02$.

Discussion. Studies 3A–C provide converging evidence that knowledge of a person’s experiential purchases is prized information—it is thought to yield much greater insight into the true selves of others and to give others a clearer window into our own selves. Study 3A also provided some initial evidence that the greater satisfaction people derive from their experiential purchases is related to their greater connection to the self. These three studies also sampled a more diverse population than the undergraduates used in Studies 1 and 2, helping to assuage any concern about whether this phenomenon is unique to a young, highly educated, and relatively affluent population.

Study 4: Material or Experiential Focus

In the studies presented thus far, we have used a few different approaches to distinguish material and experiential purchases. We provided a general definition of the two categories and had participants generate their own examples in Studies 1 and 2, and we asked participants in Studies 3A–3C to consider the categories in the abstract and make a variety of judgments about the categories as a whole. In Study 4, we used an approach that has proven useful in other research (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), one that takes advantage of the fact that some purchases fall somewhere in the middle of the material and experiential continuum. That is, we chose a particular example of a purchase that has both material and experiential elements and described it in a way that highlighted either its material or experiential nature. Specifically, we had participants imagine owning a new 3-D television and focused their attention on either its material qualities or the experiences it affords.

Method

Participants. Two hundred two participants (117 female, 85 male) were recruited via Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk for a short study about purchases. Three participants were excluded from the analyses because they had previously participated in a related study, although including them does not change the pattern or significance of results.

Materials and procedure. Participants were asked to imagine that they had just purchased a new 3-D television and to take a few moments to think about what that would be like. The description led participants to think about either its material elements (e.g., where it would go in their home, how well it would go with their other possessions) or its experiential elements (e.g., what it would be like to watch television “in a whole new way,” how it would fit with other activities). Participants were then asked to “consider that some of our purchases can feel rather close to our sense of self. That is, some purchases form a larger part of our self-definitions, of who we are, than others. How much would the purchase of a 3-D TV feel like it’s part of your true, essential self?” They were presented with five pairs of circles that varied in their degree of overlap, similar to those in the Inclusion of Others in the Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) and asked to “choose the set of circles below that best represents how much the purchase of a 3-D TV would seem to you like it would overlap with your sense of self.” Participants’ responses were scored as a 5-point scale,

with larger numbers indicating choosing a set of circles with more overlap. They were also asked to imagine how happy they would be with the television (1 = *somewhat happy*, 7 = *extremely happy*).

Finally, participants completed the 15-item version of the MVS (Richins, 2004) and provided basic demographic information (age, gender, and income).

Results

There were no differences between conditions on any of the demographic variables, including scores on the MVS. As predicted, participants in the experiential condition reported that the television would be more a part of their true self ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.07$) than participants in the material condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(197) = 2.27$, $p < .03$, $d = 0.314$. The same pattern was evident in participants’ responses to the happiness question, with participants anticipating greater happiness when the television was described as an experience ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.74$), rather than a possession ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.90$), although this difference did not reach statistical significance, $t(197) = 1.60$, $p = .11$, $d = 0.241$. These results hold, or even get stronger, when controlling for age, gender, income, and MVS, none of which significantly interacted with condition.

Discussion

Exploring the material/experiential distinction in very different manner, we again find that participants believe that an experiential purchase captures more of who they are than a possession. By using the same object and merely emphasizing its experiential or material aspects, this study also eliminates any potential confounds introduced by having participants recall purchases they have made. No recall was involved. This result was not qualified by individual differences in materialism, suggesting that even those relatively high in materialism embrace the experiential aspects of a purchase more than its material aspects. Consistent with past research (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), focusing participants’ attention on the experiential elements of the purchase led them to believe that they would enjoy it more, although the effect in this case was statistically significant. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the (nonsignificant) difference in anticipated enjoyment is closely tied to the difference in closeness to the self. In a mediation analysis, we found that the closeness-to-the-self measure explained the relationship between the type of purchase and forecasted happiness (Sobel $Z = 2.19$, $p < .03$), and the reverse mediation was not significant ($p > .11$). However, because the between-condition difference in anticipated enjoyment was not significant, we cannot place much stock in this result. Accordingly, Study 5 offers an additional, more sensitive test of this relationship, one in which the participants are asked to make judgments about material and experiential purchases, not the same object described in material or experiential terms.

Study 5: Memory Exchange

Once a purchase has been consumed, traded in, lost, destroyed, or is otherwise no longer physically present in our lives, it is the memories of the purchase that we consult to determine how happy

we are that we bought it. One consequence of experiences being a greater part of the self is that people should be less willing to give up those memories, as doing so would entail expunging a part of the self (Gilovich, 1991). Indeed, there is evidence that people take steps to protect memories they consider special (Zauberman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009). We maintain that the enduring satisfaction people derive from experiential purchases over time is directly related to the incorporation of experiential memories into the self-concept and to the concomitant belief that any alteration of their experiential memories would involve changing a part of the self.

Participants in the present study were therefore asked to imagine that they had been given the chance to delete the memory of either a material or experiential purchase from their autobiographies. Which one would feel like a bigger change to the self? It was predicted that participants would feel that deleting an experiential purchase from their memories would result in a bigger change to their self-concept (something they would be disinclined to consider) than deleting a material purchase and that this tendency would correlate with the greater satisfaction people derive from their experiential purchases.

Method

Participants. Sixty Cornell University undergraduates (35 female, 25 male) completed the survey as a filler task during unrelated experiments.

Procedure. Participants were first asked to recall and briefly describe either a significant material or experiential purchase they had made⁶ and to indicate its cost and how long ago they had made it. They then rated how important the purchase was to them and their satisfaction with the purchase on 9-point Likert-type scales (1 = *not at all important/satisfied*, 5 = *somewhat important/satisfied*, 9 = *very important/satisfied*).

Participants were then given the following instructions: "Imagine that you could go back in time for just an instant and make a different decision, choosing one of the alternatives instead, and then come back to the present. All of your current memories of that purchase would be replaced with new memories that were formed as a result of the different choice, but ultimately you have arrived back at the same place and time, right where you are now." The instructions were designed to ensure that participants were only considering the alteration of their memories of that particular purchase, and not a change in their current life circumstances. They were then asked whether they would be willing to make such an exchange (1 = *absolutely not*, 9 = *definitely*), how much happier they would be if they made such an exchange (1 = *much less happy*, 5 = *about the same*, 9 = *much more happy*), how important their current memories were to them (1 = *not at all important*, 5 = *somewhat important*, 9 = *very important*), and to what degree such an exchange would alter who they were (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *somewhat*, 9 = *a great deal*).

Results

There were no differences between conditions in how important the purchases were ($p > .23$) or how long ago the purchases were made ($p > .30$), but participants in the experiential condition reported purchases that were more expensive ($Mdn = \$275$) than

those reported by participants in the material condition ($Mdn = \$200$), $t(58) = 2.00$, $p < .05$. We therefore controlled for purchase price in the analyses below.

Consistent with previous findings, participants in the experiential condition reported that their purchases were more satisfying ($M = 8.13$, $SD = 1.20$) than those in the material condition ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(58) = 2.22$, $p < .04$, $d = 0.54$. This result was not qualified by gender ($p > .40$), and it remained marginally significant when controlling for how long ago the purchase was made and the cost of the purchase, $\beta = .471$, $t(56) = 1.80$, $p < .08$. One potential concern is that, because participants in the material condition were asked to recall a purchase they no longer possessed, they might have recalled purchases that they had gotten rid of *because* they were unsatisfying, creating an artifactual difference in satisfaction. The data suggest otherwise. None of the participants in the material condition reported satisfaction below the midpoint (which was not the case in the experiential condition), suggesting that the effect was not driven by a few dissatisfied customers. Furthermore, even if we look at the subset of data in which participants rated their satisfaction at least a 7 on the 9-point scale, their experiences were still more satisfying, $t(51) = 3.36$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.99$.

Responses to the four "exchange" questions were averaged to create an index of participants' willingness to exchange memories of the purchase, scored such that higher numbers indicated a greater willingness to make such an exchange ($\alpha = .72$). As predicted, participants in the material condition were more willing to exchange their memories ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.55$) than participants in the experiential condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(58) = 2.88$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.74$. This result was not qualified by gender ($p > .70$) and remained significant when controlling for how long ago the purchase was made and the cost of the purchase, $\beta = .629$, $t(56) = 2.44$, $p < .02$. Thus, by yet another metric (a relative reluctance to let go of an experience in exchange for something else), people consider their experiences to be more a part of who they are than their material goods.

Is the greater satisfaction people derive from experiential purchases connected to their conviction that such memories are an important part of the self? A series of regression analyses was conducted to see if the reported difference in satisfaction between conditions was significantly mediated by the willingness to exchange the purchase in question (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Having already established that both satisfaction with the purchase and the willingness to exchange the purchase were influenced by the type of purchase recalled, we examined whether the effect of the purchase type on satisfaction is a consequence of the relative willingness to exchange memories (see Figure 2). In a regression predicting participants' satisfaction with their purchase, the memory exchange index was indeed a significant predictor, $\beta = -.352$, $t(57) = -2.76$, $p < .01$, and the effect of purchase condition dropped to nonsignificance, $\beta = .307$, $t(57) = -1.21$, $p = .23$. A Sobel test confirmed that this drop was significant ($Z = 1.99$, $p < .05$). The reverse mediation, testing whether greater satisfaction with experiential purchases accounts for the unwillingness to ex-

⁶ To keep the physical presence of the purchase consistent across conditions, participants in the material condition were asked to recall a material purchase that they no longer possessed.

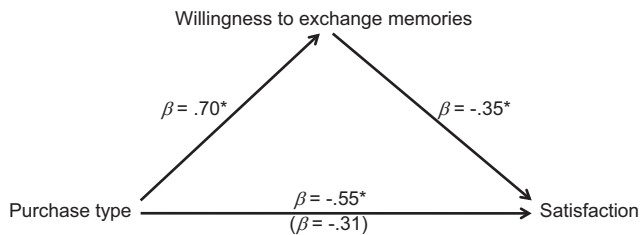


Figure 2. Mediation analysis: The impact of purchase type on satisfaction is mediated by the willingness to exchange memories of the purchase. * $p < .05$.

change one's memories, was only marginally significant ($Z = 1.73, p < .09$). Because we suspect that these processes (satisfaction with a purchase and feeling that it is part of one's identity) feed back on one another, this is not surprising. But what is critical to note is that at least part of the reason experiential purchases are ultimately more satisfying than material purchases is that memories of experiential purchases are held more dearly and constitute more important components of the self.

Discussion

As predicted, participants clung more firmly to their experiences than to their material possessions, claiming that their experiential memories were more important to them and that exchanging their experiential purchases would more significantly alter who they are. This tendency, furthermore, mediated the between-condition difference in participants' reported satisfaction with their purchases. People are thus made happier by their experiences than their possessions in part because their experiences are more central and more important to their self-concept.

General Discussion

In seven studies, we found that people tend to define themselves more in terms of their experiential purchases than their possessions. Experiences were plotted physically closer to the self than possessions in a Venn diagram (Study 1), experiences were more likely than possessions to be mentioned in participants' life stories (Study 2), and participants generally believed that knowledge of a person's experiential purchases (including their own) would convey more information about the person's true self than knowledge of his or her material purchases (Studies 3A–3C). Participants even thought that the very same purchase, when described in experiential rather than material terms, would feel closer to their sense of self (Study 4). Moreover, the tendency to cling more dearly to memories of experiences helps to explain why people report greater satisfaction with their experiential purchases than their material purchases, as evidenced by the mediation analysis reported in Study 5.

Potential Limitations and Concerns

It can be risky to make precise claims about fuzzy categories. And the distinction between material and experiential purchases is not always precise. Although replacing one handbag or one down comforter with another is clearly a material act and spending a

week in Hanalei or Obud is clearly experiential, what about a buying an mp3 player? Is it a material good or a means of having experiences one could not have otherwise? Despite some definitional difficulties when it comes to material and experiential purchases, it is unlikely that these difficulties call the current results into question for several reasons. First, we allowed the participants to generate their own examples of material and experiential purchases, and not only did they have no difficulty doing so, but previous work has shown that what participants generate aligns with the categorizations of independent raters (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). The distinction thus appears to be meaningful, consensual, and easy to make. Second, when an item at the ambiguous boundary between experiential and material purchases is described in either experiential or material terms, it evokes psychological processes that enhance or limit satisfaction, respectively. In Study 4, for example, participants rated the very same object as more reflective of their true self if their attention was drawn to its experiential properties instead of its material properties. Third, a variety of possible correlates of material and experiential purchases—such as cost, the rated magnitude of the purchase, and how much people in general could be expected to find it satisfying—did not account for the reported differences in participants' thoughts and feelings about what they had bought. It thus seems highly unlikely that the findings reported here are an artifact some other variable lurking in the less-than-sharp borderland between experiential and material purchases. Taken together, these studies fit into a growing body of literature indicating that the experiential and material categories are meaningful, with real consequences for people's satisfaction and well-being (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Nicolao et al., 2009; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Although we suspect that participants were mindful of self-presentational concerns when responding to our questions, it is unlikely that a desire to avoid appearing materialistic was responsible for our results (Fournier & Richins, 1991; Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). For one thing, one would expect those who score high on the MVS to be perfectly willing to admit that possessions are a central part of their existence and, hence, to be less subject to such self-presentational concerns. But even those scoring high on the MVS showed the same general pattern, albeit less powerfully. The pattern of results was not reversed for the most materialistic participants. More important, although it is possible that participants might not want the experimenter to know how materialistic they are themselves, such a concern would not influence how they would respond when asked about someone else. But as we saw in Studies 3B and 3C, participants showed the same preference for information about experiences when asked what would be most informative about another person.

Is the effect we have documented moderated by gender? There was a significant gender interaction in the first study, in which participants drew depictions of their experiential and material purchases at various distances to the self to capture how much a part of the self they were thought to be. Female participants drew their experiences closer to the self, but men did not. In Study 3B, a similar gender difference was reflected in participants' beliefs about how much they would learn about another person's true self from knowing about their experiential versus material purchases, but the Gender \times Type of Purchase interaction was not significant. Finally, in Study 3A, female participants reported a bigger difference in how much satisfaction they derived from their experiential

and material purchases than men did, but male and female participants did not differ in how much they thought others would know about them based on their experiential versus material purchases. No gender effects emerged in any of the other studies, and so one has to entertain the possibility that these are merely statistical anomalies. But maybe not. We cannot rule out the possibility that there is a tendency—not a robust one, clearly—for women to embrace their experiences as part of themselves a bit more than men or for men to embrace their material goods a bit more than women. However, even if that were so—something that can only be established through further research—the evidence reported here makes it clear that thinking of one's experiential purchases as more a part of the self than material purchases is a general tendency that applies to both men and women.

A final possible concern is that participants in the present studies were specifically asked to recall examples of purchases with which they were generally satisfied. Recent research suggests that differences in satisfaction between experiences and possessions may be limited to purchases that are rather satisfying (Nicolao et al., 2009). Although we would like to see this potential limitation explored further in future research, we believe that, even if this were the case, the advice that follows would not change. It is certainly fair to assume that, on average, the purchases people make end up being at least somewhat satisfying. That is, after all, the goal of making purchases in the first place. And although people may not be particularly good at predicting the impact or duration of their future happiness, they are quite good at predicting whether a given event will make them happy or not (T. D. Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Therefore, the overall recommendation that follows from research on experiential and material purchases remains: People would be well advised to tilt their purchasing decisions toward the experiential end of the spectrum, because experiences provide more enduring satisfaction.

Identity Signaling and Materialism

The focus of the present research has been on the connection between material and experiential purchases and the self, but it is worth thinking about the signaling intentions behind the two different kinds of purchases. It is certainly no surprise that people choose to make particular purchases to signal particular elements of their identity, such as wealth and social status (e.g., Schor, 1998; Veblen, 1899), and to differentiate themselves from others (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Whereas some research on identity signaling focuses on the detailed mechanics and subtle nature of much identity signaling (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008), many commentators have focused on what are seen as negative consequences of using purchases as identity signals, such as the impact of overconsumption on the physical, social, and economic environment (e.g., de Graaf, Wann, & Naylor, 2001; Frank, 1999; Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007; Schor, 1998).

A frequent presumption is that the use of purchases to signal identity or social status is ultimately detrimental to well-being (e.g., Kasser & Kanner, 2004). This has largely been attributed to the pursuit of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899; cf. Berger & Ward, 2010), which can spark competitive materialistic "arms races" (Frank, 1999) and hinder engagement in activities known to contribute to well-being, such as forming and attending to social

relationships (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Frank, 1999; Kasser et al., 2007; Sirgy, 1998).

Note that this analysis may apply more readily to material than experiential purchases for the simple reason that experiences, by their very nature, are less conspicuous than possessions. Conspicuously bronzed skin, evidence of a recent trip to Bali, will fade within a few weeks, but a BMW will signal one's ability to afford a luxury automobile for quite some time. Experiences may therefore be relatively poor choices for those hoping to convey wealth and status. Although over-the-top weddings, vacations, and coming-of-age celebrations do exist, and the ability to engage in leisure activities (rather than needing to spend one's time laboring) can be a powerful indicator of wealth (Veblen, 1899), on average, possessions are a more visible and more persistent signal.

Also, because experiences tend to be evaluated on their own merits (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), they are less likely to spark competitive spirals of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, in one study, Carter and Gilovich (2010) found that people were less concerned about negative social comparisons when it came to their experiential purchases than when it came to their material purchases. If people are unlikely to think ill of a vacation that falls short of someone else's, or even to make that comparison to begin with, what good is a superior vacation as a signal of status? Furthermore, even those experiential purchases made with the intention of being conspicuous are likely to involve other people. Because social connectedness is known to contribute to well-being (Myers, 2000), this feature of conspicuous experiential consumption may help offset the negative consequences of otherwise extrinsic goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996).

It should be noted that there is little reason to believe that participants in the present studies retrieved the examples of possessions that they did because of their identity-signaling value. The tendency to signal identity through one's purchases is a hallmark of a materialistic orientation, and the very modest correlations with trait materialism that we observed suggest that participants' identity-signaling intentions did little to factor into the pattern of results. Although the differences between purchase types were strongest amongst those low in materialism, the trend was never reversed for those high in materialism, similar to the findings of Nicolao et al. (2009). Even those who scored above the midpoint of the MVS placed their experiences and possessions equally distant from their self-concept (Study 1) and were nonsignificantly more likely to include their experiences in their life narratives (Study 2). This suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that there may be something of a disconnect between what materialists believe will be meaningful to them and what actually is.

Implications

Aside from the greater satisfaction it affords, what are some of the consequences of this tendency to hold experiential purchases closer to the self-concept? Ironically, the desire to protect memories that are closely associated with the self can lead people to choose not to repeat those experiences for fear of spoiling the sense that they're "special" (Zauberman et al., 2009). For example, you might be reluctant to return to the greasy spoon where, while waiting out a rainstorm, you and your spouse turned overcooked hash browns into a romantic evening, out of fear that whatever magic it possessed that night is now gone, leaving only mediocre

food and dusty ambiance in its place. This same process is unlikely to interfere with the desire to purchase the same model of vacuum cleaner next time around. Of course, special memories can become attached to material possessions as well (i.e., souvenirs), although these are typically tokens of the experiences attached to acquiring that possession.

As noted above, people's memories of their experiences may become more positive over time because, by virtue of being closely attached to the self, they are subject to the same kinds of motivational and cognitive forces that serve to bolster and protect self-esteem (e.g., Dunning, 2005). For example, the same defensive processes evident when the self is perceived to be under threat might operate when some threat to the memory of an experiential purchase is detected. The memory-protecting strategy noted above is one way to do so (Zauberman et al., 2009). People might also be more likely to make purchases that will buffer their identity when threatened. Work on terror-management theory, which presents participants with the ultimate threat to the self-concept by making the inevitability of death salient, suggests that this is indeed the case, although not quite in the manner one would expect from the present findings. That is, participants whose mortality has been made salient tend to be drawn to materialistic purchases and to engage in other behaviors that they believe will provide them wealth and status (for a review, see Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004). This suggests that although people are interested in making purchases that help to validate their identity when it is threatened, their naïve theories about which purchases will ultimately be most meaningful to them may be off the mark.

Note also that simply taking note of past experiential purchases might serve to buffer against identity threats. That is, thinking about an important experiential purchase and about its relationship to the self and the higher order goals it served, might constitute a form of self-affirmation (Steele, 1988). Because material purchases are less connected to the self, they are less suited to this purpose. This difference between experiential and material purchases, furthermore, points to a potential moderator of the present results. It might be that it is mainly people with high self-esteem who derive special pleasure from thinking about their experiential purchases. For those with low self-esteem, thinking about something closely associated with the self may not be particularly comforting. Note that the converse might also be true: People with low self-esteem or depressed individuals might be especially disinclined to incorporate positive experiences into their self-concept and, thus, may be less able to reap the positive benefits of experiential purchases. These are all potentially fruitful avenues for future research.

As demonstrated in Study 4, it may be possible to take advantage of the ambiguous nature of the material/experiential distinction. By focusing on the experiential aspects of a purchase that has both material and experiential elements, people appear to derive the same benefits they receive from more canonical experiential purchases. Episodic memories of the purchase, crucial to the incorporation of experiences into the self-concept, might play an especially important role in such reframing. That is, thinking about the experiential components of a given purchase might trigger the recollection of specific episodic memories and crowd out more purely semantic memories and, thus, help to forge new connections between the purchase and the self. Over time, this experien-

tial focus might allow even relatively material purchases to become more closely connected to the self.

Conclusions

The present studies replicate previous work demonstrating that experiences tend to be more satisfying than possessions and provide empirical support for one of the proposed mechanisms underlying that result, namely, that experiences are more closely connected to the self.

Although the police would not likely be swayed by a suspected arsonist's claim that he would never deliberately destroy his own possessions, they might very well believe that no one would deliberately destroy their memories, were it possible (and a crime) to do so. Indeed, the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Bregman, Golin, & Gondry, 2004), starring Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet, conjures a world in which neurosurgery has progressed to the point that specific memories can be erased from one's mind, not unlike the scenario we presented to participants in Study 5. Over the course of the film, the characters involved come to realize that their memories, even highly unpleasant ones, are still very much worth keeping. Our memories are what make us who we are. If we make purchases that contribute to our sense of self—that is, if we pursue experiences over material goods—there are likely to be more memories, more of *us*, to cherish and embrace.

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