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Experiences or stuff, what's the best buy for a happiness boost?

A decade of research that says buying experiences makes you happier than gaining possessions is being questioned. Is stuff king again, wonders **James Wallman**



Doing beats owning
Chris M. Rogers/Getty

By **James Wallman**

Ah, the joys of (social) science. You've been saying something for years, as publicly as possible, and then new research comes along that suggests you might have been wrong all along.

A few years back, I gave up a stable job and bet the proverbial farm on writing a book about what I believe is one of the most important social trends of our era: the move from materialism to experientialism. Instead of looking for pleasure, identity and status in material things, we're increasingly seeking them in experiences instead.

One of the principal reasons behind this trend and my belief that it'll take off is the fact that if you spend your money on experiences rather than things you're more likely to be happy.

This new truth, that experiences cause more happiness than material goods, was discovered in 2003 by psychologists Leaf Van Boven at the University of Colorado Boulder and Thomas Gilovich at Cornell University, New York.

The same relationship has been found in numerous studies since - at least seven by my count. Those findings have been informed by both small-scale experiments and nationally

representative surveys. Eight studies by reputable scientists with the same conclusion? That's enough for me to believe a thing.

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Under challenge

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But now a few recent studies are questioning this.

The latest involves work in Hungary that, *prima facie*, challenges the idea that experiences are more likely than material goods to make us happy.

Tamás Hajdu and Gábor Heltai at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences analysed 10,000 responses from a household survey and found that differences in how much people spent on experiences or material goods made no difference to their life satisfaction.

Elizabeth Dunn – who advocated that people spend on experiences not stuff in her book *Happy Money* – and Aaron Weidman, both at the University of British Columbia, Canada, went on to find that material goods can provide more frequent “momentary happiness” than experiences can.

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And Ryan Howell at San Francisco State University and Darwin Guevarra at the University of Michigan are investigating which specific material purchases rather than experiences might provide more happiness.

So there are a lot of social scientists investigating whether experiences or material things are more likely to lead to happiness. Long may this continue.

Feel-good spending

Thanks to an economic system whose success is based on us spending money, we live in an era with an unprecedented abundance of things to blow our cash on. But alongside that material abundance are rising stress, anxiety and depression. Because of this, it strikes me as essential to know how to spend in order to be happier.

What people need is some simple guidance based on clear reporting. They shouldn't have to carry nuances around in their heads. So, stuff or experiences, what's the winner in the smile-inducing stakes now?

Despite those recent doubts, the overwhelming evidence is that materialism is bad for you and bad for the planet, and that experientialism is better for happiness.

The Hungarian study, for instance? Correlation, not causation. To find out if Hungarians would be more likely to be happy if they spent on experiences rather than material goods, we'd have to randomly assign some people to spend more on experiences, others to spend more on material goods and then look at their happiness after – like the design of the bulk of previous experiments that found experiences triumphed.

The recent North American studies? There's no doubt that some material things are good, and some are better than some experiences. I'd rather have a TV than spend five years in jail. I'd rather get a new sofa than see some of the experimental theatre my wife drags me to.

I'm not persuaded that materialism deserves a comeback. When the facts change, my opinion changes. But when the core facts remain the same, I'll keep saying it: if you want to be happy, spend less on stuff and more on experiences.

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