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COMMENT 19 July 2017

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**

Ref on Hungarian study??? => see the complete NS article

Author correlates strange conclusion of the hungarian study to well known error: correlation is not causation!!!

An explanation of that this issue would be solved with random experience (double avaugle)... is it sufficient? I'm not sure of that!!!



Andrzej Krauze

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 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 core reason is that if you spend your cash on experiences you're more likely to be happy. This advantage was shown in 2003 by psychologists Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich. At least seven studies since have backed that up, via 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.

But a few new studies are questioning this. The latest is work in Hungary that, *prima facie*, challenges that conclusion. It analysed 10,000 responses from a household survey and found that differences in spending on experiences or material goods had no impact on life satisfaction.

Canadian researchers have also found that goods can provide more frequent "momentary happiness" than experiences can, while in the US, researchers are taking a nuanced

approach and identifying material purchases that beat experiential ones.

James Wallman is the author of *Stuffocation* (Penguin)

Thanks to an economic system whose success relies on the spending of money, we live in an era with an unprecedented abundance of things to blow our cash on. But amid rising stress, anxiety and depression, it strikes me as essential to know how to spend in order to be happier.

Want more? Read the extended version of this article.

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What people need is simple guidance rather than nuances. So, stuff or experiences? Despite the 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? Correlation, not causation. To truly find out if Hungarians are happier spending on experiences, we would have to randomly assign some to spend more on experiences and others more on material goods – like the design of the bulk of experiments that found experiences triumphed.

Those other recent studies? *There's no doubt* some material things are good, and some are better than some experiences. I'd rather have a TV than spend five years in jail, or a new sofa than see some of the experimental theatre my wife takes me to.

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

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This article appeared in print under the headline "How to spend it"

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