

Celebrate or Commemorate? A Material Purchase Advantage When Honoring Special Life Events

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ABSTRACT Special life events (e.g., graduations, promotions) are rare and meaningful. Consumers often honor these events with a purchase—either a celebratory experience or a commemorative material item. The authors propose that marking special life events with a material purchase provides a stronger connection to the past special event, allowing consumers to be transported back to their positive emotions experienced at the time of the event. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate this material advantage, while studies 3A–3C show that consumers’ predictions run counter to this finding, leading them to choose celebrations over commemorations. Studies 4 and 5 explore this misprediction and demonstrate that when consumers were encouraged to think about permanence, they more accurately forecasted a material advantage and were more likely to choose material purchases over experiences. The results suggest a potential exception to the widely accepted experiential advantage, while providing important implications for how purchases contribute to meaningfulness in life.

Moments that mark a life transition or a major accomplishment are rich in meaning and often inspire people to spend money in order to signify their importance. In doing so, consumers can either *celebrate*—making a purchase with the primary intention of creating an experience (such as a wedding reception, graduation party, or a trip to Europe)—or they can *commemorate*—making a purchase with the primary intention of acquiring a material object (such as a wedding or class ring, watch, or framed picture). Little is known about how these two purchase types might better aid achieving this goal of honoring a special life event.

Examining how consumers spend their money to honor special events highlights a pattern: consumers seem to favor celebrations over commemorations. For instance, the average amount spent on graduation celebrations in 2015 was \$985 (<http://www.graduationparty.com>), compared to the average \$230 spent on a class ring (Mask 2004). The average amount spent on a wedding reception/celebration was around \$15,000 (<http://www.theknot.com>), while the average spent on an engagement ring was \$6,000 (and even less for wedding bands for men: \$500; <http://www.theknot.com>; <http://www.weddingstats.org>). These figures suggest that the espoused wisdom is to celebrate with experiences—and often at large expense. When it comes to increasing hap-

piness, research supporting an *experiential advantage* seems to agree: celebrate because experiences lead to more happiness and hedonic well-being than comparable material goods (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Carter and Gilovich 2012; Pham 2015).

Despite the evidence suggesting an advantage for experiences in terms of maximizing happiness with a purchase (Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015), honoring a special life event is often not about maximizing happiness with a purchase. Instead, it might be more aimed at increasing meaning in life by connecting an important event in the past with the future. While happiness and living a meaningful life are related, a key difference between the two is connection over time. Whereas happiness is a present-oriented feeling signaling satisfaction with one’s current needs and goals, meaningfulness is about making connections across time (Deci and Ryan 2008; Baumeister et al. 2013; MacKenzie and Baumeister 2014). That is, utility from a meaningful life comes not from merely expressing oneself in the present but more from feeling connected with one’s past accomplishments and significant moments, like weddings, graduations, births, or promotions (Belk 1988; Leboe and Ansons 2006; Wildschut et al. 2006; Baumeister et al. 2013). As such, an important role of purchases that mark special occasions is to facilitate the connection between the past special

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event and one's future self. We suggest that this connection over time is crucial in understanding why the experiential advantage might not hold when honoring a special life event, to which we turn next.

MATERIAL GOODS: MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS OVER TIME

Material goods have properties that make them ideal candidates for facilitating the connection between a special life event and its meaning over time. Material items by definition are tangible, and thus consumers view them as more permanent and longer lasting than experiential purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Guevarra and Howell 2014; Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis 2016). In contrast, experiences are ephemeral, intangible, and often consumed in a single time period (Shu and Gneezy 2010). While consumers believe that they will often think and talk about their experiences in the future, they tend to overestimate the frequency with which they will retrospect and reminisce (Tully and Meyvis 2016). Furthermore, when experiences are remembered, the evoked emotions are often inconsistent, as the content is more variable over time (Belli and Loftus 1996; Levine 1997). Hence, experiences are not the same across time and do not remain constant like material goods.

Accordingly, we propose that marking a special life event with a permanent material purchase will contribute to a meaningful life more than an experiential purchase. That is, the permanent nature of material purchases provides a better connection between the feelings experienced at the time of the event and its associations in the future. At a very young age, humans learn the concept of object permanence and grow to internalize the notion that tangible objects remain in the environment for an extended period of time (Baillargeon 1986; Kersten, Mamassian, and Yuille 2004). Material items that remain in one's physical world provide a permanent and continuous connection between the past and the future (Piaget 1954). Thus, material items that are purchased to mark a special event would strengthen the connection between the event in the past and its associations in the future. Put differently, material purchases help mark events in time—recording them in one's book of life—by enabling consumers to be transported back to their positive emotions at the time of the special life event, thus connecting the emotions from a person's past self to his/her future self (Baumeister et al. 2013).

The positive emotions associated with a special event will naturally fade over time. Thus, we predict that the advantage material purchases have preserving these connections

will occur as time passes—once the meaning of the special life event starts to fade and the permanent nature of the material purchase has an opportunity to strengthen the connection. In fact, given that experiential purchases evoke more initial excitement (Nicolao et al. 2009; Kumar, Killingsworth, and Gilovich 2014), consumers may report a stronger connection with an experience initially (at time zero). Therefore, we do not expect a material advantage initially and only expect the advantage of purchasing material goods for special life events to occur as time passes. More formally, we predict a purchase type by time interaction, whereby connections with the special event will decrease over time for experiential purchases but not for material purchases.

WHY MAY CONSUMERS PREDICT AN EXPERIENTIAL ADVANTAGE?

We predict that material purchases will have an advantage as time passes from the special life event, but, do consumers predict such an advantage? There is evidence that consumers buy souvenirs and memorabilia that are related to an event to preserve their memory (Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009) or to prove that an accomplishment has been achieved (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). This line of work, however, does not compare or examine the choice between material and experiential purchases. Instead, they study either consumers' willingness to make any purchase at all or choices between different material items.

When comparing material and experiential purchases to mark a special occasion, however, there is reason to believe that consumers will predict an experiential advantage. Consumer research is filled with demonstrations of consumers making myopic predictions that do not fully account for long-term factors. Consumers neglect relevant contextual factors when predicting affective states that extend into the future, like adaptation (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999; Nelson and Meyvis 2008; Wang, Novemsky, and Dhar 2009), satiation (Kahneman and Snell 1992; Galak, Kruger, and Loewenstein 2013), and affective forecasting (Gilbert et al. 1998; Igou 2004; Finkenauer et al. 2007). Permanence, by definition, is a long-term construct that is about an object's stability over time (Atasoy 2016). Thus, to the extent that consumers fail to intuit that the permanent nature of material purchases will better facilitate meaning over time, they should also fail to predict a material advantage. Instead, consumers should focus on the initial hedonic value of purchases, in which case they will predict an advantage for experiential purchases over material purchases.

If consumers fail to predict a material advantage because they do not incorporate the greater permanence of material purchases, then making the concept of permanence salient should mitigate this (mis)prediction. Making permanence salient will help consumers better appreciate a material items' ability to connect the past special event with one's future self and meaning. This recognition, in return, should increase choice of material purchases. On the basis of this reasoning, we expect that when permanence is salient, consumers will more accurately predict a material advantage and be more likely to choose material purchases over experiential purchases when marking special life events.

In sum, we propose that when consumers are marking special life events or achievements, material purchases reveal an advantage over experiential purchases as time passes. Further, we propose that consumers do not predict this material advantage, as they fail to appropriately consider the permanent nature of material goods. Across six studies we (1) provide evidence for a material (i.e., commemorative) advantage over experiences (i.e., celebrations) when marking a special life event, (2) demonstrate that consumers do not accurately forecast such an advantage (and thus choose experiences), and (3) provide an explanation for this misprediction by demonstrating a way to mitigate the preference for experiential purchase (i.e., by making permanence salient). In the process, we not only examine the consequences of material and experiential purchases but also provide a better understanding of how consumers choose between material and experiential options, a topic that has seen much less attention (Dunn and Weidman 2015).

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that consumers who made material purchases to honor a past special life event indicate stronger connection to their emotions at the time of the event. Importantly, this effect unfolded as time passes. Studies 3A–3C examine whether consumers predict this material advantage. We found that participants predicted that experiential purchases will lead to stronger connections and make them happier than material purchases—both in the present and in the future—and thus tended to choose experiences when given the option. Testing our permanence explanation, studies 4 and 5 found that when permanence was salient, participants better appreciated the connective value of material items, diminishing the misprediction. When permanence was salient participants (correctly) predicted greater happiness from material versus experiential purchases (study 4), and they were more likely to choose material over experiential purchases (study 5) when marking a special life event.

STUDY 1: RINGS VERSUS RECEPTIONS

To provide an initial test of the material advantage when marking special life events, we asked married participants to describe either their wedding ring or their wedding reception. Both a ring and a reception are commonly purchased to honor one's love at the time of marriage (a special life event), and while rings are material and commemorative in nature, a reception/party is experiential and celebratory. The design allowed us to control for the type of purchase while keeping the life event constant. Since participants are highly likely to have made both the material and experiential purchase in this setting, this design allowed us to activate participants' connections between the purchase and the feelings associated with the past special event (the wedding). Thus, we predicted that thinking about their wedding ring (a material purchase) compared to their reception (an experiential purchase) would result in participants reporting a stronger connection to the special event, and this effect would be moderated by the amount of time passed since the wedding. In particular, we expected a material advantage to emerge only after participants had been married for several years—when the experiential connection has had time to fade and the material purchase connection has had an opportunity to be preserved.

Method

Participants. One hundred fifty-two Amazon Mechanical Turk workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 35$, 53% male, United States only, >95% approval) who reported that they were currently married completed the study. Participants were randomly assigned to either the material (i.e., ring) or experiential (i.e., reception) condition. Those who did not make the purchase of their assigned condition could not answer the remainder of the questions, which left us with 132 total responses.

Procedure. In the material condition, we asked participants whether they had received a ring on their wedding day and, if they had, to describe their ring. In the experiential condition, we asked participants whether they held a reception on their wedding day and, if they had, to describe their reception. After focusing on either the material or the experiential purchase, we measured their connection to the special event by asking them how well they currently remember their past feelings ($\alpha = .88$; "When you think about your wedding ring/reception, how much are you reminded of the feeling of love you felt at the time of your ceremony?" [1, very little; 7, a lot]; "How vividly do you remember the feeling of love you felt?" [1, not at all vivid; 7, extremely

vivid]; “How well do you remember the feeling of being in love?” [1, not well at all; 7, extremely well]). Participants next indicated the number of years since their marriage ($M = 8.41$, $SD = 7.88$). Finally, we asked how much they spent on the wedding ring/reception. We log transformed cost and marriage length for a more conservative test and to reduce the influence of outliers.

Results

To test whether material purchases have an advantage as the time since the event gets longer, we regressed connection to the event on purchase type (ring = 1; reception = -1), logged time since marriage, and their interaction. There was no main effect of purchase type ($b = .09$, $t(127) < 1$), and years married had a marginal negative main effect ($b = -.16$, $t(127) = -1.78$, $p = .077$). In other words, as one would expect, people’s connection to their wedding day declined as the time since their marriage increased.

More important, we found that this decline in connection to the wedding day depended on the type of purchase participants focused on (i.e., purchase type by time interaction; $b = .25$, $t(127) = 2.88$, $p < .01$). We found that thinking about the reception had a negative slope over time ($b = -.41$, $t(127) = -3.03$, $p < .01$), indicating that participants who focused on an experience reported a declining connection to the past event. But, thinking about the ring had a nonsignificant positive slope ($b = .1$, $t(128) < 1$; see fig. 1), indicating that material purchases were better able to facilitate the connection and keep it from fading over time compared to experiences. Further, the cost of the purchase cannot explain our effects: more expensive purchases did not lead to a significantly stronger connection ($b = .1$, $t(127) =$

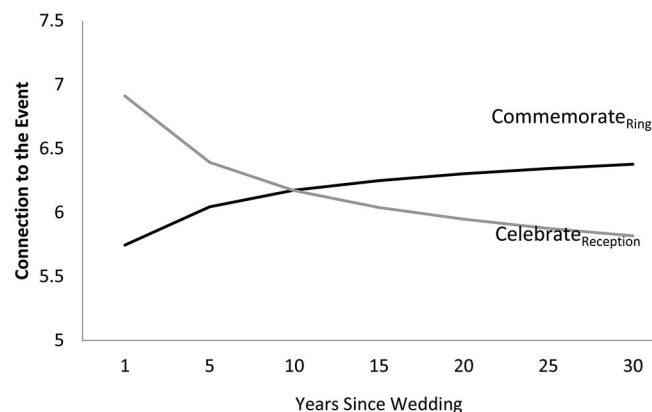


Figure 1. Study 1: Purchase type \times years since wedding on connection to the event.

1.58 , $p = .12$). To rule out alternative explanations related to cost, we also estimated the model using logged cost and gender as a covariate; controlling for these factors did not alter the estimate or the significance of the critical interaction ($b = .25$, $t(127) = 2.91$, $p < .01$).

Discussion

The results of study 1 provided initial evidence that commemorative material purchases have an advantage in connecting one’s experience in the past with the future. We found that material purchases are better than experiential ones by helping consumers connect to their emotions felt at the time of a special event. This advantage, however, only occurred over time, after the original connection started to decline and the permanent nature of material goods was able to strengthen these connections. While these results support our hypothesis, study 1 has an important caveat. In this study, we held the purchase type (i.e., wedding ring vs. wedding reception) constant, but this benefit came at the expense of a situation in which both purchases were likely made. Study 2 addresses this issue by using a different special occasion.

STUDY 2: COMMEMORATING VERSUS CELEBRATING GRADUATION

Our goal in study 2 was to further examine the material advantage when marking special life events. We tested our predictions by asking participants to think back to their most important graduation and indicate either an experience or a material purchase they made to mark this occasion.

Method

Participants. We recruited 242 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers ($M_{age} = 30$, 62% male, United States only, >95% approval) and randomly assigned each worker to either an experience or a material condition. A majority (51%) of Mechanical Turk workers have either graduated from a 4-year university or attended one, and a vast majority (over 90%) have graduated high school, making them an appropriate population for a study about graduations (Goodman, Cryder, and Cheema 2013).

Procedure. We asked participants to think back to their most important graduation. In the experience condition they indicated whether they “did something to celebrate the graduation,” and in the material condition they indicated whether they “purchased something to commemorate the graduation.” For clarity, we provided further instructions for each condi-

tion: “By a celebration, we mean that you did something enjoyable to honor and mark your important achievement,” and “By commemorating, we mean that you made a purchase to honor and mark your achievement.” Participants who indicated no were asked a few more questions (to discourage workers from communicating to other workers about a potentially easy study), excused from the study, and paid. Those who indicated yes were asked what they did to celebrate (purchased to commemorate), leaving us with 148 total responses.

We then asked participants how strongly they feel seven positive emotions “when you think about your achievement of graduating” (happy, proud, joyful, content, excited, peaceful, optimistic, where 1 = not at all, 5 = very strongly; $\alpha = .87$). We also measured the connective value of their purchases (“How much are you reminded of your achievement of graduating when you think about the celebration/commemorative purchase” [1, very little; 7, a lot]; “How vivid is your memory of graduation?” [1, not at all vivid; 7, extremely vivid]; $\alpha = .73$). Finally, participants indicated how much money they spent on the purchase and the number of years since graduation ($M = 9.05$, $SD = 8.55$). As before, time and cost have a log normal distribution, and thus we logged both variables for analyses.

Results

Connection to the Event. To examine how connected participants felt to the past special event, we regressed connection to the event on purchase type (material = 1; experiential = -1), logged time since graduation, and their interaction. There was no significant main effect of time since graduation ($b = .07$, $t(144) < 1$) or purchase type ($b = .12$, $t(144) < 1$). Importantly, we found the predicted interaction between purchase type and time on how connected participants felt to their graduation (i.e., time \times purchase type: $b = .33$, $t(144) = 2.31$, $p < .05$). In particular, participants who purchased material items indicated that they felt more connected to their graduation than those who made experiential purchases. Further examination of this interaction demonstrates that material purchases strengthened the connection over time ($b = .40$, $t(144) = 1.76$, $p = .08$), while experiences did not ($b = -.26$, $t(144) = -1.50$, $p = .14$; see fig. 2). Controlling for purchase cost did not affect the connection value of purchases ($b = .13$, $t(143) = 1.45$, $p = .15$), nor did it change the interaction ($b = .33$, $t(143) = 2.19$, $p < .05$).

Emotions toward the Event. We created an index score of the seven positive emotions experienced when participants

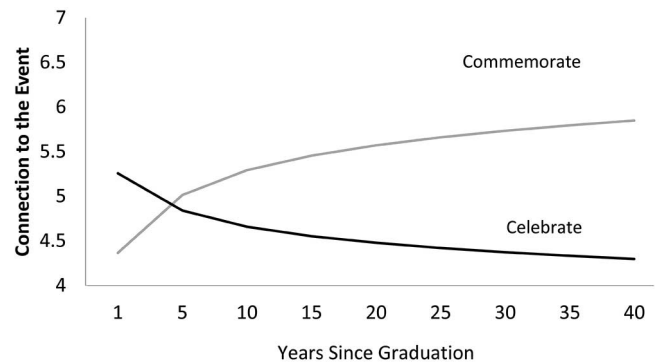


Figure 2. Study 2: Purchase type \times years since graduation on connection to the event.

thought back on their graduation. We then regressed this score on purchase type (material = 1; experiential = -1), logged time since graduation, and their interaction but did not find a significant direct effect ($t(139) < 1$). Note that our main prediction was about material purchases strengthening the connection over time, which then leads to more positive emotions associated with graduation when participants think back to it—namely, an indirect effect (i.e., mediation). Although there is not a significant direct effect, it is possible that there is a significant indirect effect working through participants’ connection to their graduation (Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). We tested this next.

Mediation. We conducted a mediation using Hayes (2013) model 7 to examine the indirect effect of the purchase type by time interaction on participants’ emotions toward their graduation, through their connection to the event (see fig. 3). Bootstrap estimates (5,000 samples) indicated that the indirect effect on emotions toward their graduation was significant (95% confidence interval [.0083, .1300]). Further, the effect was not mediated by the cost of the purchase (95% CI [-.0015, .057]), and the reverse causal path was not significant (95% CI [-.0565, .2327]). In sum, supporting our predictions, we found that over time material purchases enhance the connections to the special event (in this case graduation), which in turn led to greater positive emotions when participants thought back to the event.

Discussion

Studies 1 and 2 provided empirical support for our theorization, showing that over time material purchases provide stronger connections to past special events, which enhanced the feelings experienced when consumers thought back to their event. Importantly, this advantage unfolded over time,

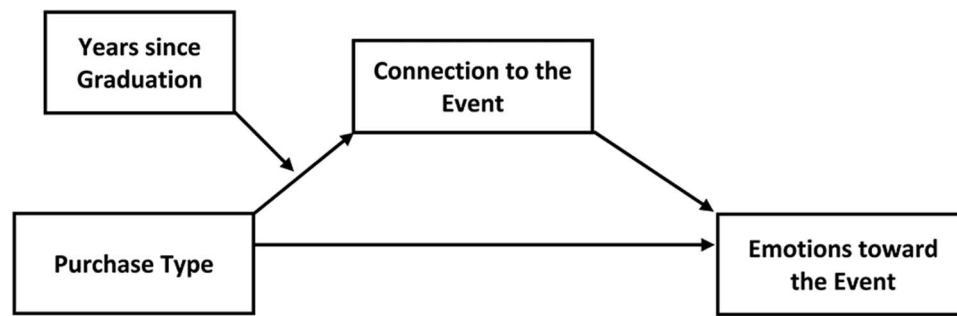


Figure 3. Study 2: Mediation model.

as the natural decay takes place and permanence of the material good enhanced the meaning extracted from the special life event.

In hindsight, one might believe that consumers will intuit the ability of material items to strengthen connections and meaning over time, which would suggest that our results are rather obvious. We, however, propose that consumers will predict the opposite—an experiential advantage. That is, consumers will fail to account for the role of permanence provided by material items; instead, their predictions will focus on the possible immediate hedonic benefits of experiences (Nicolao et al. 2009; Kumar et al. 2014). In the remaining studies, we test (a) whether consumers accurately forecast such a material advantage (and thus choose material goods over experiences) and (b) whether such a misprediction is due to consumers failing to appropriately consider the permanent nature of material goods.

STUDIES 3A, 3B, AND 3C: DO CONSUMERS PREDICT THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF MATERIAL PURCHASES?

The next three studies addressed whether consumers predict that marking a special event with a material purchase will better facilitate the connection between the emotions at the time of the event and their meaning over time. To that end, we tested predicted emotions (study 3A), memory (study 3B), and choices (study 3C).

Study 3A: Emotions toward the Event over Time

Study 3A examined whether participants predicted the ability of material purchases to connect the past special event to one's future positive emotions. If consumers accurately made this prediction, then we would see a purchase type by emotions interaction similar to what we found in studies 1 and 2. However, we expected that participants would predict (1) experiences to create more emotions and (2) emo-

tions to decline over time with both material and experiential purchases. Put differently, we expected to find a main effect of time but no interaction with purchase type.

Method. We recruited 506 Mechanical Turk Workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 33$, 60% male, United States only, >95% approval) in a 2 (purchase type: experiential vs. material) \times 2 (time: 1 year vs. 20 years) between-subjects design. We asked participants to imagine that they received a \$1,000 gift card to either a jewelry store or a vacation website as a way to honor graduation. The gift cards were chosen on the basis of a pretest of 65 spectators attending a college graduation ceremony who were asked what they had received or purchased to honor their graduation. The most common material purchase was jewelry (31%), and the most common experiential purchase was a vacation (50%). Thus, in the material condition, the gift card could be used toward any piece of jewelry, such as a watch, class ring, or any other piece of jewelry in the store. In the experience condition, the gift card could be used toward flights, transportation, or a hotel on any vacation of their choice. Then participants rated how strongly they would feel seven positive emotions (happy, proud, joyful, content, excited, peaceful, optimistic; $\alpha = .73$) when they think about the purchase and graduation (1, not at all; 7, very strongly) in either 1 or 20 years.

Results and Discussion. We found that participants predicted that they would have stronger emotions about their graduation in 1 year, if they had celebrated it with an experiential purchase ($M = 4.03$) than a material purchase ($M = 3.67$; $F(1, 503) = 10.82, p < .01$). In the 20 years condition, their predictions were not different: participants also predicted that experiences would lead to stronger emotions in the long run ($M = 3.86$) than material purchases ($M = 3.61$; $F(1, 503) = 5.29, p < .05$). As such, the interaction of purchase type and time was not significant ($F < 1$). Thus,

participants did not accurately predict that future emotions would change in any way because of a material purchase.

These results are consistent with our notion that consumers fail to incorporate how the permanent nature of material items helps facilitate the connections between the event and its meaning over time. If consumers fail to appropriately consider the permanence of material goods, then they should not predict any memory advantages for material purchases over time, which we test next.

Study 3B: Predicted Memory over Time

To examine whether consumers predict a material advantage in memory over time for a special life event, we asked participants to predict how well they would remember their graduation day in 1 year and in 20 years if they marked the occasion with either an experiential or a material purchase. We expected consumers to predict a decay in memory for both material items and experiences but not predict a difference in the rate of memory decay between the two types of purchases.

Method. We recruited 162 Mechanical Turk Workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 31$, 53% male, United States only, >95% approval) in a 2 (purchase type: experiential vs. material; between) \times 2 (time: 1 year vs. 20 years; within) mixed design. We asked participants to “Imagine that you have just reached the end of your college career and are about to graduate. Since this is a big life achievement, you would like to honor this day and have decided to spend \$300.” In the celebrate condition, they were then informed that they planned to spend the money on celebrating their graduation and asked how they would spend the \$300. In the commemorate condition, they were then informed that they planned to spend the money to commemorate their graduation and asked how they would spend the \$300. We defined celebrate and commemorate in the same fashion as study 3A. Once participants indicated how they would spend their money, they predicted their memory of graduation in both 1 and 20 years using two measures (“In 1/20 years, how vividly do you think you will remember your graduation day?” [0, not at all vivid; 100, extremely vivid], “In 1/20 years, how well do you think you will remember your graduation day?” [0, not well at all; 100, extremely well]; $\alpha = .84$). They completed memory measures for 1 year and then for their predicted memory in 20 years.

Results and Discussion. As expected, participants predicted that their memory of graduation day would decline over time ($M_{1\text{yr}} = 79.35$ vs. $M_{20\text{yr}} = 46.30$; $F(1, 159) = 368.34$,

$p < .001$), suggesting that people have an appropriate prediction about memory decline. However, there was not a significant time by purchase type interaction ($F(1, 159) < 1$), suggesting that participants did not predict that material purchases would have an advantage in preserving and reinforcing memories to help form connections. As such, there was not a difference of purchase type on predicted memory in 1 year ($M_{\text{mat}} = 77.54$ vs. $M_{\text{exper}} = 81.09$; $F(1, 159) = 1.36$, $p > .2$) or in 20 years ($M_{\text{mat}} = 43.22$ vs. $M_{\text{exper}} = 49.27$; $F(1, 159) = 2.55$, $p > .1$). The main effect of purchase type was not significant either ($F(1, 159) = 2.60$, $p > .1$). Despite these predictions about future emotions and memory, it is not clear whether consumers’ predictions would also be mirrored in choice. We examine this question next.

Study 3C: Choice

Study 3C examined whether consumers’ choices when marking a special event were in line with their predictions of happiness and memory in studies 3A and 3B.

Method. We asked 121 Mechanical Turk workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 30$, 68% male, United States only, >95% approval) to “Imagine that you have reached the end of your college career and are about to graduate. Since this is a big life achievement, you would like to honor this day and have decided to spend \$200.” Participants then made a choice between celebrating their graduation (e.g., celebratory dinner, party, concert ticket) and commemorating it (e.g., a piece of jewelry, school memorabilia, framed diploma). We then asked them to choose a specific purchase and rate it as more experiential or more material (“What is your primary intention in making this purchase?” [0, acquire a physical object; 100, acquire an experience you can live through]).

Results and Discussion. The results showed that a vast majority of the participants chose an experience (78.5%) rather than a material item (21.5%; $t(120) = 7.60$, $p < .001$), and they subsequently rated their purchase as more of an experience than acquiring a physical object ($M = 68.2$; $t(118) = 5.41$, $p < .001$). The results indicate that consumers preferred to purchase an experience when marking a special life event compared to a material item.

Taken together, results from studies 3A–3C demonstrate that consumers do not intuitively predict the results we found in studies 1 and 2. That is, when marking a special life event, consumers thought that experiential purchases would help create and maintain positive emotions toward the event in both the short and the long run. This prediction translates

into consumers choosing experiential purchases over material items. If consumers failed to appropriately consider the permanent nature of material goods and the advantages they create over time, then making permanence salient to consumers in the decision-making process should mitigate the extent of their mispredictions. We test this hypothesis next.

STUDY 4: GREATER PERMANENCE INCREASES PREDICTED HAPPINESS OF MATERIAL ITEMS

Our goal in study 4 was to test whether making permanence salient to consumers would draw consumers' attention to the longer-lasting nature of material products, which would in turn make them more likely to predict a material advantage over time. To test this process, we manipulated participants' concept of permanence to be more or less lasting and then asked participants to predict how happy they would be with a special event if they honored it with an experience or a material purchase. We expected that under high levels of permanence, participants will be more likely to incorporate this dimension in their judgments and predict more happiness with a material purchase compared to an experiential purchase, essentially moderating the preference for experiences observed in studies 3A–3C.

Method

Participants. Two hundred one Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 32$, 63% male, United States only, >95% approval) were randomly assigned to a condition in a 2 (purchase type: experiential vs. material) \times 2 (permanence: more vs. less) between-subjects design.

Procedure. We informed participants that they would be doing two unrelated studies. In the first study, participants answered an "opinion study," in which permanence was manipulated. In the more permanent condition, they wrote about a purchase that would last in their possession for a long time, and in the less permanent condition they wrote about a purchase that would last in their possession for a short time. Next, they were given an ostensibly unrelated study on achievements asking them to imagine they received a \$1,000 gift card as a way to honor graduation (similar to studies 3A–3C). In the material condition the gift card was from a jewelry store, and in the experiential condition the gift card was from a vacation website. Participants were informed that "graduating is a great accomplishment and many people honor great accomplishments by making a purchase" and asked to list their purchase and re-

spond to two happiness measures ("How happy do you think the purchase would make you?" [1, not at all; 7, very much]; "How much do you think the purchase would contribute to your happiness in life?" [1, not at all; 7, very much]; $\alpha = .86$).

Results

Consistent with our previous studies, we found a main effect for purchase type, such that participants expected to be happier with an experience ($M = 5.98$) compared to a material item ($M = 4.33$; $F(1, 197) = 84.50$, $p < .001$). There was no main effect of permanence on predicted happiness ($F(1, 197) = 1.42$, $p > .2$). More important, we found the predicted purchase type by permanence condition interaction, whereby the difference in predicted happiness between a material and experiential purchase was smaller in the more permanent ($M_{\text{diff}} = 1.18$) compared to the less permanent condition ($M_{\text{diff}} = 2.13$; $F(1, 197) = 6.85$, $p = .01$). This difference was driven by the material condition, whereby the predicted happiness from a material purchase was significantly greater when participants considered items to be more permanent ($M = 4.67$) compared to when they considered it less permanent ($M = 3.98$; $F(1, 198) = 6.40$, $p < .01$). Predicted happiness from an experiential purchase was not different across conditions ($M_{\text{more}} = 5.85$, $M_{\text{less}} = 6.11$; $F(1, 198) = 1.02$, $p > .3$; see fig. 4). This shows that highlighting the long-lasting nature of material goods increases the amount of happiness expected from a material purchase when marking a special life event, but it does not influence predicted happiness from an experiential purchase.

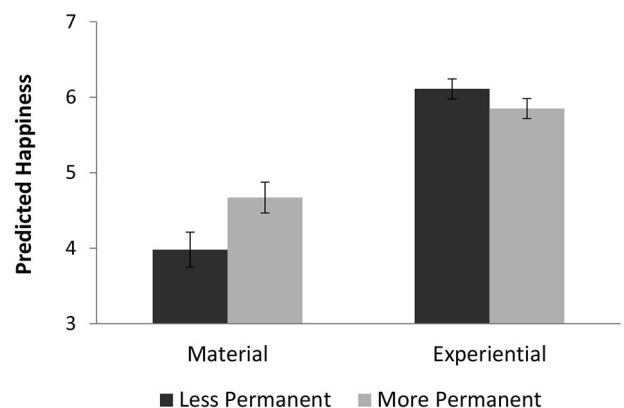


Figure 4. Study 4: Purchase type \times permanence on predicted happiness. Error bars represent 1 SE.

Discussion

The results provide evidence that consumers do not adequately consider the permanent long-lasting nature of material purchases, which leads to a preference for experiences over material items. This effect occurs despite consumers retrospectively reporting that material purchases led to stronger connections and positive emotions when thinking back to the special life event (studies 1 and 2). When high levels of permanence are salient, however, the difference in predicted happiness between experiences and material purchases is significantly diminished, and the predicted happiness from material purchases increased. Note, however, that we measured predictions and not choice. Furthermore, study 4 highlighted permanence using material items only. We address these issues in study 5, while also using a subtler permanence manipulation.

STUDY 5: GREATER PERMANENCE INCREASES PREFERENCE FOR COMMEMORATIVE ITEMS

In this final study, we examined whether making permanence salient would increase the choice of material items when making a purchase to honor a special life event. We expect that when permanence is salient, consumers would be more likely to choose a material purchase compared to when it is not salient. Furthermore, in this study we used a more practical and managerially relevant manipulation to make permanence salient, which was not related to purchase type: we provided participants a set of advertisements that highlighted either a permanent or a nonpermanent aspect of the advertised product.

Method

Participants. One hundred and fifty-seven Amazon Mechanical Turk Workers ($M_{\text{age}} = 33$, 59% male, United States only, >95% approval) were randomly assigned to either a permanence salience condition or the control condition.

Procedure. Workers participated in two seemingly unrelated studies. In the first study, they were told that they would see four advertisements and would be asked to describe the message that each ad is trying to convey. Participants were presented with four different advertisements in a randomized order. To avoid a confound by simply priming material items in general, all participants saw two material and two experiential purchases. Two of the advertisements were for material items (a ring and watch), and two of the advertisements were for experiences (golf lessons and a cruise). All partici-

pants saw the same visual advertisement; however, we manipulated the advertising copy on the basis of condition (see the appendix, available online, for stimuli). In the permanence condition, the copy read “a diamond is forever,” “stand the test of time,” “learn a skill that will last a lifetime,” and “memories that last forever”; the corresponding copy in the control condition read “a diamond is sincere,” “stand for something,” “learn something new,” and “create your own adventure.” After seeing each advertisement, participants were asked to write what the message on the advertisement conveyed. After writing about each advertisement, participants then moved on to an ostensibly unrelated study about achievements. Participants were asked to imagine that they were about to graduate from college and decided they wanted to spend some money to honor this big achievement. They then indicated the ideal way to spend money to honor graduation and the approximate cost.

Results

Two independent coders rated each purchase on whether the primary intent was to acquire a physical object or to acquire an experience (1 = acquire a physical object, 3 = a bit of both, 5 = acquire an experience). Fourteen participants were dropped from the analyses because their purchase was too vague to code (e.g., “spend it on something down the road to help with career”) or they indicated that they would save or invest the money. The coders’ ratings were averaged ($\alpha = .95$) to create a material/experiential purchase score.

As predicted, we found that permanence increased choice of material purchases. Participants who saw the permanence advertisements preferred to honor their graduation with a more material than experiential purchase ($M = 3.53$) compared to those in the control condition ($M = 4.09$; $F(1, 141) = 3.98, p < .05$). The cost of the purchase had a marginal effect on purchase type ($F(1, 139) = 3.07, p = .08$), but it did not mediate our results as the critical interaction remained significant ($F(1, 139) = 4.64, p < .05$).

Discussion

Consistent with study 4, these results showed that consumers did not readily incorporate the permanent long-lasting nature of material purchases into their predictions when they consider how to best mark a special life event. We tested this process by making permanence salient. When permanence was salient, consumers more appropriately accounted for the advantage of material goods to link past events with the future. Study 5 is particularly noteworthy because it was

enough to simply highlight permanence in general ad copy (ads were for both material and experiential purchases) to mitigate the effect and change preferences. Once consumers considered the permanent nature of purchases, they were more likely to prefer material purchases compared to experiential ones to honor a special life event.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across seven studies, we identified an instance (i.e., special life events) and a key moderator (i.e., time) when material purchases demonstrate an advantage over experiences; moreover, consumers do not predict this advantage, as they do not account for the permanent nature of material purchases. Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence for this material advantage. Study 1 showed that married individuals have stronger connection to their marriage when they think about a material purchase (i.e., wedding ring) versus an experiential purchase (i.e., wedding reception) that marked this special event. Study 2 extended this finding to graduations and again showed that material purchases attenuate the natural decay of one's connection to the past special event, which in turn increases the positive affect experienced when thinking back to this special life moment.

Studies 3A–3C, 4, and 5 explored whether and why consumers might (mis)predict such an advantage. The results showed that consumers did not predict a material advantage, as they failed to incorporate the permanence of material goods. Instead, consumers expected that experiences would lead to stronger connections and emotions with the special event in both the short and the long run (studies 3A and 3B), and thus they chose to mark such occasions with experiences (study 3C). Studies 4 and 5 showed that the mechanism underlying this effect is due to consumers failing to consider the permanent nature of material purchases. To that end, when permanence was salient, participants predicted greater happiness for material purchases (study 4) and preferred a material purchase instead of an experiential purchase (study 5) when honoring a special life event.

Contribution and Implications

Our findings have important implications for meaningfulness and hedonistic consumption, suggesting that perhaps consumers, researchers, and marketers should not completely give up on material goods just yet. Consumer researchers have known for some time the important role that possessions, especially material ones, play in consumers' lives (Belk 1988) and have discussed their potential advantages (Wong

et al. 2011; Shrum et al. 2014). Our findings suggest not only that material purchases play an important positive role in memory and happiness but that they can even trump the memories and happiness provided by experiential purchases when they are able to connect one's meaningful past with the future. The permanence of material objects allows them to make such deep and meaningful connections.

Our results show that consumers do not always predict that a material purchase will sustain connections, emotions, and meaning over a celebration; thus, it is beneficial for consumers to understand the benefits of material purchases, even if they are limited. Of course, some marketers are already keenly aware of these tendencies, which helps explain why jewelers advertise the long-lasting nature of their purchase (e.g., "a diamond is forever"). Similarly, retailers encourage consumers to make a material purchase at the time of a big event and highlight how this material item will remind them of great memories (e.g., Pandora's "unforgettable moments"), bringing meaning for years to come. Despite a material advantage, experiential marketers try to trumpet their ability to create long-term meaning too (e.g., Disney's "let the memories begin").

Extensions

Since the permanent nature of material purchases facilitates the commemorative material advantage, future studies could explore whether making experiences more permanent and long lasting (and thus giving them some of the qualities of a material good) may actually translate into stronger meaning for those who celebrate. For example, taking pictures, which increases engagement (Barasch, Diehl, and Zauberaman 2016), may make one's graduation dinner celebration more permanent in the sense that the graduate has a tangible reminder of the experience that connects the past to one's future. The opposite might hold too, as there is some evidence that there are advantages to hybrid purchases—material goods with experiential components (Guevarra and Howell 2014). Buying a souvenir on a vacation makes an experience more permanent, but it also connects an experience to a material good, which is exactly the focus of our studies. Similarly, a material good may be used to make an experience more extraordinary, which can lead to greater meaning as well (Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014). Thus, it seems that some people may intuitively know that material goods can help us remember meaningful occasions, events, and accomplishments, yet many are not able to connect that knowledge when considering a commemorative material purchase.

We should also note that there might be other processes—in addition to permanence—that may contribute to the advantage that material purchases have in strengthening connections and remembered emotions with a meaningful event. Since material purchases are acquired at one time, typically at the time of the event, perhaps a more distinct connection is made. For example, a watch is purchased at the time of a graduation, and thus it is strongly connected to graduation. Experiences, however, are further removed from the event and less able to connect the event with our future. For example, a consumer taking a European vacation to celebrate graduation might do so a few weeks (or months) after her graduation. Furthermore, the compilation of events that takes place during a vacation (e.g., sights visited, dinners) cannot be directly connected back to graduation. Thus, there is no exact moment that one makes a direct association with an event that is occurring and the remembered emotions of graduation. Since a connection between the special event and the purchase is necessary, it is important that the purchase is tied to the meaningful event. Thus, it would be interesting to further explore whether increasing the temporal proximity of the experiential consumption, or direct relevance of the activities involved, will increase connections with a special life event over time.

While we do not claim that simply buying more material goods would benefit society, our results do suggest that they play an important contributing role to meaningfulness and our hedonic well-being. Our goal was not to claim that experiences are bad for consumers or that consumers should simply buy more material goods. Rather, we hope our findings will begin a discussion about conditions under which material goods may have some advantages, why, and whether consumers predict such advantages. We are suggesting that people can increase their long-term happiness by giving themselves permanent reminders of special life events (which are often the very experiences that have been shown to increase happiness). When honoring a special occasion, material items create meaningful happiness with one's life by connecting past positive emotions from self-defining moments with one's future self. All too often, connections to meaningful life events fade, or they are blocked in memory by the creation of newer and often less important events (Quoidbach et al. 2015). Yet, our findings suggest that consumers can enhance their past special life events and accomplishments by creating a permanent and continuous connection between their past special events and their future selves, creating a meaningfulness in their lives for a many years to come.

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