

'Experiential products' provide same happiness boost as experiences, study finds

July 24 2014

Material items designed to create or enhance an experience, also known as "experiential products," can make shoppers just as happy as life experiences, according to new research from San Francisco State University.

Researchers found such products satisfy a different, but equally powerful, psychological need than experiential purchases. While life experiences help consumers feel closer to others, experiential products such as books, sporting goods, video games or musical instruments allow them to utilize and develop new skills and knowledge, resulting in similar levels of happiness.

The study sheds additional light on how consumers can best spend their discretionary income to improve their well-being and fills a crucial gap in previous research, which had not examined the effects of experiential products on happiness.

"This is sort of good news for materialists," said Ryan Howell, an associate professor of psychology at SF State and co-author of the study, who has researched extensively the link between shopping and happiness. "If your goal is to make yourself happier but you're a person who likes stuff, then you should buy things that are going to engage your senses. You're going to be just as happy as if you buy a [life experience](#), because in some sense this product is going to give you a life experience."

Years of research consistently have shown that purchasing life experiences, such as tickets to a play or a vacation, will make shoppers happier than material products such as clothes, jewelry or accessories. But by focusing on those two extremes, Howell said, psychologists have ignored the middle of the buying spectrum, leaving out a large number of items that are tangible but are nevertheless designed to engage users in some way.

He and lead author Darwin Guevarra, then a student at SF State, asked consumers about a recent purchase and how happy that purchase made them. Expecting that material items would provide the smallest happiness boost and life experiences the largest, with experiential products falling in the middle, they were surprised to find that experiential products actually provided the same level of happiness as experiences.

To learn why, they next looked at whether the purchases satisfied any of three key psychological needs: identity expression (the purchase reflects the consumer's true values); competence (the purchase allows the consumer to utilize skills and knowledge); and relatedness (the [purchase](#) brings the consumer closer to others). The results showed that, while experiential products and life experiences offered similar levels of identity expression, the former were best at providing competence and the latter best at providing relatedness.

"They are essentially two different routes to the same well-being," Howell said. "If you're not feeling very competent, the best way to alleviate that deprivation would be through the use of experiential products. On the other hand, if you're feeling lonely, you should buy life experiences and do things with others." The ideal products for happiness, he added, may be those that simultaneously satisfy both needs, such as a board game you play with others or going to the museum with friends.

Because increased happiness is linked to a variety of individual and societal benefits, including better health and longer life, Howell hopes to develop intervention methods that can help researchers steer individuals who have materialistic buying tendencies toward instead purchasing life experiences or experiential products.

More information: BeyondThePurchase.org.

Provided by San Francisco State University

Citation: 'Experiential products' provide same happiness boost as experiences, study finds (2014, July 24) retrieved 30 January 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-experiential-products-happiness-boost.html>

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