

Buying experiences makes you more grateful, generous

14 November 2016, by Rebecca Valli



Credit: Bill Kuffrey/public domain

On Thanksgiving, many of us take a moment to reflect on what we're grateful for—and we get notable rewards for doing so. Feeling gratitude leads to important benefits, like increased happiness and social cohesion, better health outcomes, and even improved sleep quality.

But will you get more of such benefits from that antique sofa you bought, or the vacation you took? New research shows that we feel more gratitude for what we've done than for what we have - and that kind of gratitude results in more generous behavior toward others.

"Think about how you feel when you come home from buying something new," explains Thomas Gilovich, professor of psychology at Cornell University and co-author the new study published online in a recent issue of the journal *Emotion*.

"You might say, 'this new couch is cool,' but you're less likely to say 'I'm so grateful for that set of shelves.' But when you come home from a vacation, you are likely to say, 'I feel so blessed I got to go.' People say positive things about the

stuff they bought, but they don't usually express gratitude for it—or they don't express it as often as they do for their experiences."

In addition to experiments they conducted, the researchers found real-world evidence for this by looking at 1,200 online customer reviews, half for [experiential purchases](#) like restaurant meals and hotel stays and half for material purchases like furniture and clothing. Reviewers were more likely to spontaneously mention feeling grateful for experiential purchases than material ones.

Jesse Walker, a graduate student in the field of psychology and first author of the study says one other reason for this increased gratitude may be because experiences trigger fewer social comparisons than material possessions. Consequently, experiences are more likely to foster a greater appreciation of one's own circumstances.

The researchers also looked at how gratitude for experiences versus [material purchases](#) affected pro-social behavior. In a study involving an economic game, they found that thinking about a meaningful experiential purchase caused participants to behave more generously toward others than when they thought about a material purchase.

Amit Kumar, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Chicago and co-author of the paper, says this link between gratitude and altruistic behavior is intriguing, "because it suggests that the benefits of experiential consumption apply not only to the consumers of those purchases themselves, but to others in their orbit as well."

Gilovich, who is particularly interested in applying insights from modern social psychology to improving peoples' lives, says that this new research shows an approach that governments can take to both increase the well-being of their citizens and advance societal good. "If public policy encouraged people to consume experiences rather

than spending money on things, it would increase their [gratitude](#) and happiness and make them more generous as well," he says. Such policies might include funding for public parks, museums and performance spaces.

More information: Jesse Walker et al, Cultivating Gratitude and Giving Through Experiential Consumption., *Emotion* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0000242](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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