

The Aptly Buried “I” in Experience:
Experiential Purchases Foster Social Connection

Amit Kumar^a, Thomas C. Mann^b and Thomas Gilovich^c

^aUniversity of Texas at Austin

^bHarvard University

^cCornell University

AUTHOR NOTE

This research was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation through the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley awarded to Thomas Gilovich, National Science Foundation fellowships awarded to Amit Kumar and Thomas C. Mann, and a gift to Cornell University by Dan and Lisa Zelson.

Amit Kumar is Assistant Professor of Marketing and Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, Thomas C. Mann is a Postdoctoral Fellow at Harvard University, and Thomas Gilovich is the Irene Blecker Rosenfeld Chair of Psychology at Cornell.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amit Kumar, Department of Marketing, University of Texas at Austin, McCombs School of Business, Austin, TX 78712.

E-mail: amit.kumar@mcombs.utexas.edu

**The Aptly Buried “I” in Experience:
Experiential Purchases Foster Social Connection**

ABSTRACT

Experiential purchases (focused on *doing* rather than *having*) provide more enduring satisfaction than material goods. Here we examine an important downstream consequence of spending money on experiences: fostering social connection. In an initial experiment, consumers report feeling more kinship with someone who has made a similar experiential purchase than someone who has made a similar material purchase (or no similar purchase). This result is tied to the greater centrality of experiential purchases to the consumer’s identity. A follow-up experiment explores whether the greater sense of social connection that experiences provide applies even in situations in which someone else has made a similar, but superior purchase—when negative comparisons to others are brought to mind. Next, we find that people feel more connected to others in general, not just those who have made the same purchase, when they reflect on their experiential consumption. We then demonstrate that these feelings of connection are behaviorally expressed in a greater desire to engage in social activities when participants are primed about their experiences than when primed about their possessions.

Keywords: Experiential consumption; Materialism; Social Connection; Well-being

Textbooks, trade books, review articles, and newspaper essays all trumpet the claim that humans are an inherently “social species.” Evidence of our deep-seated sociality comes in many forms. Group living has been, and continues to be, a nearly universal feature of human life (Brown 1991). Indeed, the impressive size of the human brain has been characterized as an adaptation for group living (Dunbar and Shultz 2007). Social connection appears to be so central to what it means to be human that behavioral researchers both past and present have labeled it a basic human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Maslow 1968). And for good reason: Positive social relationships are among the most powerful contributors to human happiness (Diener and Seligman 2002, 2004; Myers 2000) and they have been linked to better health and increased longevity (e.g., Berkman and Syme 1979; Luo, Hawkley, Waite, and Cacioppo 2012; Uchino, Cacioppo, and Kiecolt-Glaser 1996). On the flip side, a large body of work has documented the perils of loneliness (Cacioppo et al. 2008; Cacioppo and Patrick 2009) and social exclusion has been shown to result in depression, cognitive decline, poorer self-regulation, and increased aggression (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, and Twenge 2005; Baumeister, Twenge, and Nuss 2002; Cacioppo and Hawkley 2009; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, and Stucke 2001; Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister 2002; Williams 2007).

Dovetailing with these findings, social scientists have devoted considerable attention to the study of social capital—the resources people accumulate through their relationships (Adler and Kwon 2002; Bargh and McKenna 2004; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Coleman 1988; Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Putnam 2000; Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen 2004). The accumulation of social capital is also associated with enhanced physical and mental well-being. For example, using data from the World Values Survey, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) find that well-being is linked to social capital in many forms: marriage, civic engagement, and social ties

to friends, neighbors, and colleagues all independently predict life satisfaction, both directly and indirectly through their impact on health.

What about that more commonly-discussed form of capital, money? Does it provide similar benefits? Financial wealth is associated with a host of favorable life outcomes and physiological benefits (Adler et al. 1994; Backlund, Sorlie, and Johnson 1996; CDC 2013; Chen, Cohen, and Miller 2010; Chen, Mathews, and Boyce 2002; Ecob and Davey Smith 1999; National Center for Health Statistics 2012), but it does not appear to deliver as much in terms of improved happiness and psychological well-being as does social connection (Aknin, Norton, and Dunn 2009; Argyle 1999; Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2008; Diener, Lucas, and Napa Scollon 2006; Easterlin 1974, 1995, 2003; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Seligman 2002).

This result may seem surprising because having ample financial resources gives people the ability to purchase all sorts of things to advance their self-interest and that of their friends, family, and acquaintances. But across-the-board gains in material wealth appear to do little to improve overall well-being (Easterlin 1974). This stems in part from the fact that the impulse to “keep up with the Joneses” robs consumers of the happiness they might otherwise enjoy as a budget-stretching purchase fails to impress when juxtaposed with the hot new product of their neighbors (Frank 1999, 2004; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Solnick and Hemenway 1998). These sorts of materialistic arms races promote a competitive orientation that can undermine the social connections that do so much to enhance consumer satisfaction, consumer welfare, and ultimately, psychological well-being. Moreover, research has shown that those who focus most on the items that money can buy – more materialistic people – tend to report lower life satisfaction (Belk 1985; Kasser 2002; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Richins and Dawson 1992). This raises the question of whether financial capital might contribute more to happiness and well-

being if it were used more wisely. That is, could money do more to increase happiness if consumers were induced to spend it differently (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011; Dunn and Norton 2013; Gilovich and Ross 2015)?

Material and Experiential Consumption

Recent research indicates that consumers get more enduring satisfaction from their *experiential purchases* (like concert tickets, restaurant meals, sports or music lessons, vacations, and so on) than their *material purchases* (new clothes, furniture, jewelry, televisions, and so on) (Bastos and Brucks 2017; Caprariello and Reis 2013; Carter and Gilovich 2010, 2012, 2014; Howell and Hill 2009; Guevarra and Howell 2015; Kumar and Gilovich 2015, 2016; Kumar, Killingsworth, and Gilovich 2014, 2019; Mann and Gilovich 2016; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Pchelin and Howell 2014; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Yamaguchi, et al. 2016). The greater hedonic return that people tend to receive from experiential over material consumption has been credited to three distinct causes (Gilovich and Kumar 2015; Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol 2015a, 2015b): (1) Experiences contribute more to a consumer's identity than material possessions (Carter and Gilovich 2012); (2) Experiences are less likely than material goods to spark deflating social comparisons (Carter and Gilovich 2010); and (3) experiences tend to foster a greater sense of social connection than material goods. The first two mechanisms have received extensive support, whereas the third—although hinted at by the results of a number of prior studies—has yet to receive a direct empirical test.

Those previous studies have focused on the inherently social nature of experiences as a mediator of the hedonic benefits they provide (Caprariello and Reis 2013; see below). But they have not examined whether experiential consumption *fosters* feelings of connection. Other research (Yamaguchi, et al. 2016) has documented a positive relationship between experiential

spending and pre-existing social relationships, but used a correlational approach, limiting any conclusions about causality.

In this paper we report the results of 7 studies designed to examine whether experiential consumption tends to promote social connection more readily, consistently, and deeply than material consumption. Specifically, we investigate *how* and *why* material and experiential investments differ in their likelihood of making consumers feel connected to one another—and to people more generally. We also explore how these feelings of broad-based connection lead to differences in downstream behavioral intentions.

Why might experiential purchases be more likely than material purchases to promote a sense of social connection? For one thing, experiential purchases tend to be more social than material purchases (Caprariello and Reis 2013). We're more likely to go to a show, dine at a restaurant, or go hiking with others than we are to consume our watches, designer handbags, and iPads with other people. After all, the distinction between experiential and material consumption is, at its core, one between money spent on *doing* and money spent on *having*. And when we do things, we very often do them with other people.

Experiential purchases might also create greater feelings of social connection because consumers are more likely to talk to others about their experiences than their possessions (Kumar and Gilovich 2015), and it tends to be more rewarding when they do (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010). Finally, because experiential purchases tend to be more central to a person's sense of self, telling stories about experiences is likely to feel more substantial and meaningful to both the speaker and listener, thereby fostering more of a bond between them. Listeners, after all, tend to like those who are willing to disclose more central elements of who they are (see Collins and Miller 1994, for a review).

There are several reasons, then, that experiential consumption might promote a sense of connection to others. In addition, the literature on material consumption suggests that material consumption can sometimes *inhibit* feelings of kinship with others. A focus on materialism can often get in the way of the pursuit of positive relationships with friends and family and can dampen contributions to the community (Kashdan and Breen 2007; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Richins and Dawson 1992; Pieters 2013). Kashdan and Breen (2007), for instance, found that an excessive emphasis on materialistic values was linked to social anxiety, depressive symptoms, and less concern for others. Similarly, Pieters (2013) argues that materialism fosters social isolation, and that the loneliness that results often increases, in turn, people's acquisitive yearnings. Indeed, part of the validation of the Material Values Scale, which measures the importance people place on obtaining "things" (Richins and Dawson 1992), involved showing that those who score high on the scale tend to have less of an interest in personal relationships. The pursuit of material goods, then, seems to crowd out the pursuit of connecting with others.

Though it has yet to be directly examined, the existing literature is at least consistent with our claim that experiential purchases are more likely than material purchases to promote social connection. It remains unclear, however, whether experiential consumption is particularly likely to facilitate connectedness, whether material consumption inhibits it, or whether both tendencies hold and therefore both types of consumption should differ from an appropriate control group. The present research investigates these alternatives empirically.

Overview of the Present Research

We begin by investigating whether consumers feel more connected to someone who has shared the same experience as they have than to someone who has shared the same material possession—or someone with whom they have no purchase in common (Experiment 1a). We

then examine whether this greater sense of connection is a consequence of the fact that sharing an experience involves sharing something more essential to the self (Experiment 1b). Experiment 1c examines whether the enhanced sense of social connection that comes with experiential consumption extends to situations in which another person has made a similar, but “better” experiential purchase. That is, when negative social comparisons are made explicit, do the social benefits that come with experiential purchases—feelings of connection, similarity, and kinship—still arise? We explore the breadth of experience-induced social connection in Experiments 2a-2b by examining whether reflecting on past experiential purchases leads participants to feel more affinity with others in general, not just with those who’ve made the same purchase. Finally, in Experiments 3a-3b, we examine some behavioral consequences of the enhanced sense of connection that follows from experiential consumption. Specifically, we investigate whether people are more inclined to pursue social rather than solitary activities after reflecting on experiential rather than material purchases.

EXPERIMENT 1A

People tend to like and feel a sense of kinship with similar others (Burgess and Wallin 1953; Buss 1984; Byrne 1961; Byrne, Clore, and Smeaton 1986; Byrne, Griffitt, and Stefaniak 1967; Chartrand and Bargh 1999; Newcomb 1956, 1961; Tan and Singh 1995). Making the same purchase as someone is one type of similarity and so people are likely to feel at least some kinship with those who make the same purchases as they do. We hypothesized that this would be especially true for shared experiential purchases and we conducted Experiment 1a to find out. Do people tend to feel more connected to someone who has made the same experiential purchase than someone who made the same material purchase? After giving participants a brief definition of either experiential or material purchases, we asked them to list their most significant purchase

within the given category during the past five years. Then, after having them imagine that another person they had just met had made the same purchase as they had, we asked how similar and how much kinship they would feel toward that person. The amount of connection felt by participants in these two conditions was also compared to that felt by participants in a control condition who reported how connected they would feel to someone they had just met and had a conversation with. We predicted that participants would feel the strongest connection to those with whom they shared the same experiential purchase.

Method

Participants. One hundred fifty students at a large university in the northeastern United States were recruited at various locations around campus and asked to participate in a short study. Ten participants did not complete the experiment and were therefore not included in our analyses, leaving a final sample of 140 (80 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.51$, $SD = 2.32$).

Procedure. Participants were first given a definition of either experiential or material purchases, as per Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). Experiential purchases were defined as those “made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through.” Material purchases were defined as those “made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one’s possession.” Participants in the experimental conditions were asked to list either the most significant experiential or material purchase they had made in the past five years (between-subjects), and then to imagine they had met someone who had made the very same purchase. They were then asked how similar they would feel to that person if that were one of the first things they learned about him or her. They did so on a nine-point scale, ranging from 1 (“*Not at all Similar*”) to 9 (“*Extremely Similar*”). They also indicated how much kinship they would feel toward that person on a scale anchored at

(1) “None at All” to (9) “A Whole Lot.” Participants in the control condition were asked to imagine they had just met someone and found themselves in a conversation with him or her. These participants were then asked how similar and how much kinship they would feel towards this person on the same nine-point scales (that is, without any specification about shared purchases). Finally, all participants listed their age and gender. We asked about age and gender in all studies and included them as factors in our initial analyses, but because no significant differences were found, we do not discuss these variables further. For this and all studies reported below, we have reported all conditions and analyzed all dependent measures, and data were not excluded from any of our analyses except where noted.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of variance revealed an omnibus effect on the similarity measure, $F(2, 137) = 16.68, p < .0001$. Examined more closely, participants reported that they would feel significantly more similar to someone who had made the same experiential purchase ($M = 6.57, SD = 1.46$) than someone who had made the same material purchase ($M = 5.06, SD = 2.39$), $F(1, 137) = 15.56, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.76$. Those in the experiential purchase condition also anticipated a greater sense of connection than those in the control condition ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 137) = 31.33, p < .0001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.39$, while the difference between those in the material purchase and control conditions was only marginally significant, $F(1, 137) = 2.72, p = .101$, Cohen’s $d = 0.31$.

An analysis of the kinship measure yielded a similar omnibus effect, $F(2, 137) = 12.72, p < .0001$. Participants reported that they would feel significantly more kinship toward someone who had made the same experiential purchase ($M_{\text{exp}} = 5.86, SD_{\text{exp}} = 1.81$) than someone who had made the same material purchase ($M_{\text{mat}} = 4.61, SD_{\text{mat}} = 2.40$), $F(1, 137) = 9.46, p = .003$,

Cohen's $d = 0.59$. Participants in the experiential condition also anticipated feeling more kinship with the target person than those in the control condition ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.64$), $F(1, 137) = 24.85$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 1.18$, but responses in the material purchase condition were only marginally higher than those in the control condition, $F(1, 137) = 3.60$, $p = .060$, Cohen's $d = 0.38$.

Knowing that another consumer has made the same experiential purchase thus appears to have a notable social benefit: it creates feelings of closeness and kinship that shared material purchases can't match. In fact, when participants imagined that another person made the same material purchase as they had, this prompted only marginally more feelings of connection and kinship than when they merely imagined meeting and conversing with the other person in question. Although it can seem a striking coincidence to learn that one owns the same t-shirt as someone else, consumers are likely to feel more connected to one another if they both, say, happened to have been at the same concert.

EXPERIMENT 1B

Why do consumers feel more of a sense of similarity and kinship with someone who has made the same experiential purchase? We sought to investigate one potential mechanism in Experiment 1b. Carter and Gilovich (2012) established that experiences tend to be more closely linked than material possessions to an individual's identity. It stands to reason, then, that sharing a more important aspect of oneself with another person should lead to more of a sense of similarity and kinship with that person. To test this idea, we asked participants to recall either a material or experiential purchase they had made, indicate how much that purchase constituted a part of their sense of self, and complete the same social connection measures used in Experiment 1a. We then conducted a mediation analysis to determine whether sharing an experiential

purchase with someone fosters more of a sense of similarity and kinship than sharing a material purchase because experiences are more tightly linked to a consumer's identity.

Method

Participants. One hundred college students were recruited at various campus locations and asked to participate in a short study. Four participants did not complete the experiment, leaving a final sample of 96 (56 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.05$, $SD = 2.14$).

Procedure. Participants were given the same definition of either experiential or material purchases as in Experiment 1a and then asked to list their most significant purchase of that type in the past five years. They then rated the extent to which they thought this purchase represented the “real” them—their true, essential self—on a scale ranging from 1 (“*Not at all*”) to 9 (“*A whole lot*”). They were then asked to imagine meeting someone who had made the same purchase as they had, and filled out the measures of similarity and kinship from Experiment 1a. Upon completion of these measures, participants also reported how much they paid for the purchase they had listed. Experiment 1a did not include a measure of cost, and so including this item allowed us to test whether the experiences and possessions participants provided differed in reported purchase price. We did not expect purchase price to account for our results.

Results and Discussion

Experiential and material purchases did not differ in purchase price ($t < 1.8$). Replicating the results of Carter and Gilovich (2012), participants indicated that their experiential purchases ($M = 7.21$, $SD = 1.24$) constituted more of who they are than their material purchases ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 2.53$), unequal variances $t(68.20) = 3.17$, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = 0.65$. When we examined this difference with purchase price as a covariate, experiential purchases remained more central to participants' sense of self than material purchases ($p = .015$). Our results, then, were not

driven by any difference in the price of the material and experiential purchases participants recalled.

Replicating the findings from Experiment 1a, participants in the experiential condition indicated that they would feel significantly closer to someone who had made the same purchase as they had ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 1.97$) than did participants in the material purchase condition ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 2.42$), $t(94) = 2.36$, $p = .020$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$. Participants in the experiential condition also reported that they would feel significantly more kinship with someone making the same purchase ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.88$) than did participants in the material condition ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 2.40$), unequal variances $t(88.81) = 2.37$, $p = .020$, Cohen's $d = 0.48$.

To examine whether this difference in perceived social connection was mediated by the tendency of experiential purchases to constitute more of a person's identity, we first averaged participants' similarity and kinship ratings to create a composite index of social connection ($\alpha = 0.9$). The effect of material/experiential condition on this composite measure was also significant ($p = .014$), and remained so when purchase price was included as a covariate ($p = .040$). Purchase price was not a significant predictor of perceived social connection ($p = .619$). When the social connection index was regressed onto both experimental condition and the measure of self-identity, the effect of condition fell to non-significance ($\beta = 0.26$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .202$), while the degree to which the purchase reflected one's sense of self remained a statistically significant predictor of feeling connected to the target person ($\beta = 0.41$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .0001$). This mediational relationship was confirmed by a significant Sobel test, $Z = 2.53$, $p = .011$. Furthermore, in a bootstrapped analysis (1,000 bias-corrected samples), the 95% confidence interval for the estimate of the indirect effect was [0.16, 1.02], which excludes zero (see Figure 1).

It is worth noting that in an additional study ($N = 94$), we conceptually replicated this finding using a different measure of identity, one used by Carter and Gilovich (2012). On this measure, participants indicated how much their purchases felt like a part of their sense of self by selecting a pair of circles that differ in their degree of overlap. One circle represented their sense of self and the other represented the purchase they listed. In this study, too, experiential purchases were rated as more reflective of the self than material purchases, $t(92) = 2.69$, $p = .009$, Cohen's $d = 0.56$. Having made the same experiential purchase also produced higher scores on our index of social connection ($\alpha = 0.9$), unequal variances $t(90.97) = 4.35$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.89$. A Sobel test provided marginally significant evidence for the mechanistic account we have laid out, $Z = 1.83$, $p = .068$, but the more robust bootstrap mediation analysis (1,000 bias-corrected samples) supported the account more strongly, as the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was $[.02, .75]$, which excludes zero. That is, having the same experience as another consumer produces more of a sense of kinship than having the same possession because experiences are seen as a bigger part of one's identity.

Like most everything people do, what they buy can influence their connections to others. Because experiential purchases are more central than material possessions to people's identities (Carter and Gilovich 2012), this influence tends to be much stronger for experiential than material purchases. That is, part of the reason consumers are apt to feel more connected to those who've had the same experience than those who've purchased the same material good is that what overlaps between self and other is something much more integral to their sense of who they are.

EXPERIMENT 1C

We wanted to push the boundaries of the results observed in Experiments 1a and 1b and investigate how broadly the greater impact of shared experiential purchases applies. To do so, we asked participants to think about another consumer who had not simply made the same purchase as they had, but someone who had made a similar, but better or “upgraded” purchase. We were interested in whether experiences boost social connection more than material purchases even under conditions that might promote envy—that is, even when the other person made a *better* purchase of the same type. We also added an additional dependent measure in this study, one that specifically focuses participants’ attention on their anticipated feelings of long-term kinship with someone who had made a similar purchase. We predicted that participants would feel more connected, both initially and in the long term, to someone who had made a similar but better experiential purchase than someone who made a similar but better material purchase.

Method

Participants. One hundred students were recruited at various locations around campus and asked to participate in a short study. Three participants did not complete the study, leaving a final sample of 97 (46 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.84$, $SD = 1.56$).

Procedure. After participants were given a definition of either experiential or material purchases, they were asked to list the most significant experiential or material purchase they had made from the category in question during the past five years. They were then asked to imagine that someone had made an “upgraded” version of the same purchase. Examples of upgraded purchases were provided to help participants understand what we had in mind (“if your purchase was ‘concert tickets,’ imagine you met someone who went to the same concert, but had better seats;” “if your purchase was ‘a necklace,’ imagine you met someone who also purchased a necklace, but a fancier one”). Participants were then asked to rate the degree of similarity and

kinship they would feel toward the consumer making the better purchase using the same scales as before. Participants additionally rated how much kinship they would feel towards the target person “more generally, over time,” also on a 9-point scale (from *None at All* to *A Whole Lot*).

Results and Discussion

Replicating the results of the two previous studies, participants in the experiential purchase condition indicated that they would feel more similar to someone who had made a similar, but superior purchase ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.50$) than did those in the material purchase condition ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 2.02$), $t(95) = 2.47$, $p = .015$, Cohen’s $d = 0.51$. Participants in the experiential condition also reported feeling more kinship toward the other consumer ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.82$) than did participants in the material condition ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 2.06$), $t(95) = 2.03$, $p = .045$, Cohen’s $d = 0.42$, and more long-term kinship as well ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.31$, $SD_{\text{experiential}} = 1.50$; $M_{\text{material}} = 4.35$, $SD_{\text{material}} = 2.35$), unequal variances $t(87.90) = 2.44$, $p = .017$, Cohen’s $d = 0.52$.

It seems, then, that even when a notable difference between oneself and another person who made a similar purchase is made apparent, experiential purchases nevertheless foster more of a sense of social connection than do material purchases. Knowing that another person has a better version of what you have can sometimes be off-putting and create a sense of social distance. The results of this study, however, indicate that this is less likely to be the case when it comes to experiential purchases. When it comes to being “outdone” on an experiential purchase, the similarities between one purchase and the other appear to be given more weight than the differences. The differences, in contrast, loom larger when it comes to material goods (Carter and Gilovich 2010). At the risk of overusing our earlier example, it’s not hard to imagine the unpleasant feelings that may arise when a neighbor has a better wardrobe than one’s own. But

those unpleasant feelings are less likely to arise, or arise less intensely, when it comes to, say, someone with better seats at a concert. Social comparisons appear to be less problematic when it comes to experiential purchases, and so feelings of similarity, kinship, and connection are more likely to still be forged.

EXPERIMENT 2A

Our first three studies provide consistent evidence that people feel more connected to someone with whom they share an experiential purchase than someone with whom they share a material purchase. Might the social benefits of experiential consumption extend beyond a sense of connection to the particular person (or persons) who made the same purchase and apply to people in general? That is, do people feel more connected to humankind after being primed with a gratifying experiential purchase than after being primed with a significant material purchase? Intuitively, it seems likely that they would: visiting a tourist destination often makes one think of the people throughout history who made the location the special place that it is, an enjoyable dining experience can make one grateful to those who created the meal, and backpacking, surfing, or concert experiences can make us feel connected to the broader community of backpackers, surfers, or indie music fans.

To be sure, some material purchases can have the same effect. Holding a Stradivarius in one's hands can make one appreciate the craftsmen who have plied their trade throughout the ages. Those who jumped on the Apple bandwagon early on no doubt feel a connection to other early adopters as well as the Silicon Valley pioneers who made Apple products possible. But in an age of automated production, the consumption of material goods is generally less likely to spark a sense of connection to others. We therefore predicted that making people aware of a

significant experiential purchase would make them feel more connected to others in general than making them aware of a significant material purchase.

We tested this hypothesis by having participants think about either a previous experiential or material purchase they had made and then fill out a measure of social connection. We expected that thinking about experiential purchases would foster a greater sense of connection to others.

Method

Participants. Two hundred university students, staff members, and visitors were recruited from various locations around campus. Because we asked about their sense of connection to others in general, not to someone who had made the same purchase as they had, it seemed likely that any observed effect would be less strong than those documented in Experiments 1a-1c. We therefore doubled the target sample size in this study. Three participants did not complete the experiment, leaving a final sample of 197 (111 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.59$, $SD = 3.06$).

Procedure. Participants were given a definition of either experiential or material purchases and asked to think about their most significant purchase in the relevant category during the past five years. To ensure that the purchase in question was on top of participants' minds, we asked them to reflect on their purchase by imagining it as vividly as they could, writing down some of their thoughts about the purchase, and indicating the specific emotions the purchase in question aroused in them. Participants then filled out the Social Connectedness Scale (SCS; Lee and Robbins 1995). The SCS is an eight-item scale that measures feelings of distance between the self and others, containing such items as "I feel disconnected from the world around me," and "I feel so distant from people." Participants indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with the eight statements on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 6 (*Strongly Disagree*).

Because all of the items are worded to reflect a sense of disconnection from others and higher numbers reflect *disagreement* with each statement, higher scores indicate a greater sense of social connection.

Results and Discussion

Responses to the eight items on the SCS were highly inter-correlated ($\alpha = 0.9$), so we summed them to create an index of perceived social connection. In line with our hypothesis, participants reported higher levels of generalized social connection after reflecting on an experiential purchase ($M = 37.74$, $SD = 7.07$) than a material purchase ($M = 35.48$, $SD = 8.37$), $t(195) = 2.05$, $p = .042$, Cohen's $d = 0.29$.

One might wonder whether participants in the experiential condition reported feeling more connected to others simply because they recalled more fundamentally social purchases than participants in the material condition. Indeed, experiential purchases have been shown to be more likely to involve other people than material purchases (Caprariello and Reis 2013; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Van Boven 2005). To examine whether this was responsible for our reported effect, we had two coders who were unaware of the purpose of this research rate each purchase provided by participants on how likely it was to involve other people (on a scale where 1 represented *rarely used/experienced with other people*, 2 represented *sometimes used/experienced with others*, and 3 represented *nearly always used/experienced with others*). Their ratings were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.8$) and so we averaged them to create a measure of the inherent sociality of each purchase. The experiential purchases listed by participants were indeed more social than the material purchases, replicating earlier findings ($M_{\text{experiential}} = 2.36$, $SD_{\text{experiential}} = 0.54$; $M_{\text{material}} = 1.90$, $SD_{\text{material}} = 0.63$), $t(195) = 5.55$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.79$. However, this difference in the sociality of the purchases listed by participants in the two

conditions did not mediate the relationship between type of purchase and social connection. When social connection was regressed onto both the sociality of the purchases and experimental condition, the effect of experimental condition was (marginally) significant, $\beta = 1.10$, $p = .065$, while sociality was not, $\beta = 0.11$, $p = .907$. The lack of a meaningful mediational relationship was further evidenced by a nonsignificant Sobel test, $Z = 0.12$, $p = .907$. Moreover, the 95% CI for the estimate of this indirect effect in a bootstrap analysis (1,000 bias-corrected samples) included zero [-0.84, 1.04]. Thus, whether or not one directly shares a given material purchase with other people, thinking about one's experiential purchases tends to foster a broad sense of social connection: Doing so leads consumers to feel more connected to others in general, not just those who've made a similar purchase.

EXPERIMENT 2B

Experiment 2a did not account for potential differences in the cost of the purchases participants made, and so we sought to replicate its results in an experiment that also included a measure of purchase price. Although we addressed this alternative explanation earlier, in Experiment 1b, more stock can be placed in the previous result if we control for how expensive the purchases were here as well. The present study did precisely that, while also sampling from a different population of participants (thereby examining the robustness of this result).

Method

Participants. To sample from a different population than those in the earlier experiments, 202 U.S. participants (106 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.83$, $SD = 11.55$) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk in exchange for modest monetary compensation. We again targeted a sample size of 200, and two additional participants completed the online study.

Procedure. The procedure followed that of Experiment 2a exactly, with two exceptions. In addition to the definitions of material and experiential purchases used in the earlier studies, participants in Experiment 2b were given examples of purchases within each category (computer, item of clothing, and TV in the material condition; dinner out, vacation, and ticket to a concert in the experiential condition). Given the broader age range of participants in these studies, those in the material condition were specifically asked not to list a house as one of their purchases (out of concern that such a purchase would heavily skew the average purchase price in this condition). In addition, after completing the SCS, participants were asked to indicate the cost of the purchase they had recalled, in dollars.

Results and Discussion

Participants in the material condition reported that their purchases were significantly more expensive on average ($M = \$6,280.21$, $SD = 11,275.73$) than participants in the experiential condition ($M = \$2,408.08$, $SD = 6,643.64$), $t(200) = 4.09$, $p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 0.57$. Given that the distribution of purchase price was positively skewed, our analyses were based on (natural) log-transformed data, although untransformed means are reported for ease of interpretation. The difference in purchase price remains significant if the untransformed data are analyzed instead, unequal variances $t(178.98) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, Cohen's $d = 0.42$. The following results are therefore reported both with and without price as a covariate.

As described in Experiment 2a, a social connectedness score was calculated by summing the responses to items in the SCS ($\alpha > 0.9$). Replicating the earlier result, participants in the experiential condition reported feeling significantly more connection to people in general ($M = 37.02$, $SD = 10.44$) than those in the material condition ($M = 32.60$, $SD = 12.37$), unequal variances $t(199.98) = 2.76$, $p = .006$, Cohen's $d = 0.37$. This difference remained significant

when controlling for (log-transformed) average purchase price ($F = 9.03, p = .003$). Price did not predict levels of social connection ($p = .167$).

EXPERIMENT 3A

When people feel connected to others, they often want to go out, partake in social activities, and further their sense of social connection. In contrast, when people feel disconnected from others, the prospect of engaging with others can seem challenging, unpromising, even painful. Accordingly, and in light of the results of the previous studies, we examined some possible behavioral consequences of the greater feeling of social connection that experiential purchases promote. More specifically, in the next two studies we examined whether consumers have a greater desire to engage in social activities after reflecting on their experiential purchases than after reflecting on their material purchases. Participants in Experiment 3a indicated their relative preference for a variety of activities, some social and some not, after having thought about one type of purchase or the other. We expected that having participants think about their experiential purchases would make the social activities seem more appealing.

Method

Participants. 80 U.S. participants (47 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.21, SD = 13.76$) were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid a small fee for their efforts. As is sometimes the case when recruiting online samples, some respondents began the study but did not complete it ($n = 19$), and their incomplete responses are not analyzed.

Procedure. After providing informed consent and indicating their age and gender, participants were randomly assigned to either the material or experiential condition. They were then asked to list either the top five experiential or material purchases they had made in the past five years (participants were given the same description of material and experiential purchases

used in the previous study). After participants had entered their purchases, a banner at the top of the screen showed the five purchases entered by each participant, their age and gender, and their country (always U.S.) and state (taken from their IP address), ostensibly as a record-keeping display. The banner remained at the top of the screen throughout the session as a constant background reminder of their purchases.

Participants then entered the approximate price of each purchase and were asked to spend at least 1 minute writing about why their purchases were so satisfying to them. Participants were required to enter at least 100 characters into the text box and they spent an average of 3.29 minutes ($SD = 4.70$) writing about their purchases. Participants then completed a nine-item questionnaire gauging their relative preference for social over nonsocial activities, adapted from Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006). Specifically, they were given a series of nine pairs of activities and asked which they would prefer if offered a choice between them. In each pair, one activity was inherently social (e.g. “hanging out at a café with a friend”) and the other was not (e.g. “reading a favorite book alone”). The order in which the nine pairs were presented was randomized for each participant. Finally, participants completed a number of unrelated scales being pretested for a separate investigation, were probed for suspicion about the hypothesis, and were thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Participants in the material condition again recalled/estimated that their purchases were significantly more expensive on average ($M = \$3,130.73$, $SD = 6,511.31$) than participants in the experiential condition ($M = \$783.82$, $SD = 1,322.86$), $t(78) = 3.53$, $p = .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.79$. Due to the positive skew in the distribution of purchase price, our analyses were based on log-transformed data, although the untransformed means are presented to aid interpretation. The

difference between material and experiential purchase price remains significant if the untransformed data are analyzed instead, unequal variances $t(43.46) = 2.26, p = .029$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$. The following results are reported both with and without price as a covariate.

A single score representing participants' preference for social activities (vs. nonsocial activities) was obtained by summing the number of social options selected out of the nine pairs. As predicted, participants in the experiential condition selected significantly more social activities ($M = 5.64, SD = 1.71$) than participants in the material condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 1.79$), $t(78) = 2.07, p = .041$, Cohen's $d = 0.47$. This difference remains significant in an ANCOVA that controlled for (log-transformed) average purchase price, $F(1, 77) = 6.87, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .082$. This result was replicated in another study ($N = 51$, with 10 additional participants beginning but not finishing the study) in which participants completed the identical procedure. In this sample too, a preference for social activities was significantly higher in the experiential condition ($M = 5.28, SD = 1.57$) than in the material condition ($M = 4.08, SD = 1.90$), $t(49) = 2.46, p = .017$, Cohen's $d = 0.69$. Combining the results of these two studies meta-analytically using Stouffer's method (Mosteller and Bush 1954; Rosenthal 1978), the tendency for people reminded of past experiential purchases to seek out more social activities than people reminded of their past material purchases was highly significant, $Z = 2.72, p = .003$.

As discussed in Experiment 2a, one possible explanation of this between-condition difference in preferences for social activities is that experiential purchases are more likely to involve other people, and thinking about spending time with others might increase the inclination to engage in additional social activities. To examine this possibility, four judges read each participant's descriptions of why their purchases were so satisfying, and coded each description for whether the participant described using or experiencing the purchase with other people (0 =

no; 1 = yes). There was a good deal of agreement among the coders ($\alpha = 0.9$), and their ratings were summed to create an index of the inherent sociality of the purchases. Regressing participants' (summed) activity preferences onto purchase condition and the coded sociality of their purchases showed that condition was no longer a significant predictor of activity preferences, $\beta = 0.12$, $p = .293$, whereas the sociality of their purchases did predict activity preferences, $\beta = 0.29$, $p = .016$. This mediational relationship was confirmed by a Sobel test indicating a significant indirect effect of condition on social activity preferences through purchase sociality, $Z = 1.98$, $p = .048$. A significant mediational result was also obtained via the bootstrap method (bias-corrected; 1,000 samples): The 95% confidence interval on the indirect effect was [.12, .87], a CI that excludes zero. Figure 2 displays this mediation effect.

Although the effect of experiential vs. material consumption on people's sense of social connection has been consistent across all six studies reported thus far, the apparent driving force behind this effect has not been. In Experiment 2a, whether the material and experiential purchases that participants recalled were experienced alone or with others was not responsible for the tendency of experiential purchases to foster a greater sense of generalized social connection than material purchases. In Experiment 3a, however, whether or not participants reported enjoying their purchases with others was a significant mediator of the tendency of people reminded of previous experiential purchases to be more interested in social activities than people reminded of previous material purchases. We return to this issue in the General Discussion, but for now the pattern of results obtained in Experiment 3a supports the idea that because experiential purchases tend to involve other people more than material purchases do, experiences better stoke the motivation to connect with others. That is, the greater feeling of social connection that comes from thinking about gratifying experiences than from thinking

about significant possessions (and that we explored in the earlier studies) tends to promote an enhanced desire to engage in further social activity.

EXPERIMENT 3B

It appears from Experiment 3a that experiential purchases foster more of a desire for social activity than material purchases, but is that because experiences enhance such a desire or because material goods suppress it—or both? We added a control condition to Experiment 3b to find out. In addition, although the results of Experiment 3a provide evidence that the involvement of others that is part and parcel of so many experiences may be why thinking about experiential purchases fosters a desire for further social activity, our measure of whether the purchases recalled in that study involved other people was based on the assessments of coders. Greater stock could be placed in this mediational result if the assessments of the purchases' inherent sociality were made by the participants themselves. We therefore had respondents in this study do precisely that.

Method

Participants. One hundred thirty-five U.S. participants were recruited on Mechanical Turk (73 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 32.36$, $SD = 11.70$) in exchange for a small fee. Twenty-five additional participants began the study but did not complete it.

Procedure. Participants completed the same tasks as in Experiment 3a, with a few modifications. First, the banner displaying participants' demographic data, location, and purchases was removed. Second, to ensure that any differential cost of the material and experiential purchases would not result in greater money priming (see Vohs et al. 2006, 2008) in the material condition, we moved the questions about purchase price to after participants completed the activity preferences questionnaire (although note that purchase price was not

responsible for the effect of condition in Experiment 3a). Most important, we added a control condition in which participants did not list any purchases at all, but instead completed a control task in between the demographic questions and the dependent measure. Whereas those in the material and experiential conditions were asked to spend at least one minute writing about why their purchases were so satisfying, the control participants spent one minute listing as many colors as they could think of in that time.

After completing the writing task, all participants filled out the same social versus nonsocial activity questionnaire from Experiment 3a. After doing so, participants in the experiential and material conditions were presented with a list of the purchases they had recalled earlier and asked to indicate the degree to which they enjoyed their purchase with other people on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (*Enjoyed primarily by me alone*) to +3 (*Enjoyed primarily with other people*). They also reported/estimated the approximate price of each of their purchases, and, along with control participants, were probed for suspicion, thanked, and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

We calculated participants' interest in social activities in the same manner as in the previous study, summing the number of social activities selected out of the nine pairs. An aggregate score of the inherent sociality of the purchases each participant listed was computed by averaging his or her self-reported sociality of each of the five purchases. Neither raw nor transformed average purchase price differed across material and experiential conditions, respective $t_s = 1.44$ and 1.20 , respective $p_s = .158$ and $.232$.

A one-way ANOVA of mean social activity preference in the material, experiential, and control conditions did not reveal an omnibus effect, $F(2, 132) = 1.95$, $p = .146$, $\eta_p^2 = .029$.

Inspecting the means, however, revealed a greater preference for social (vs. nonsocial) activities in the experiential ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.97$) and control ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.54$) conditions relative to the material condition ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 2.03$). Consistent with this pattern, a contrast comparing the experiential and control conditions to the material condition was significant, $F(1, 132) = 3.90$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .029$. These results thus suggest that thinking about material purchases tends to *inhibit* the desire for social connection.

We once again sought to examine whether the greater preference for social activities among participants in the experiential condition relative to those in the material condition might be partially attributable to differences in the inherent sociality of participants' experiential and material purchases. Unlike in Experiment 3a, we used participants' own ratings of the sociality of their purchases as the potential mediator. Although the contrast comparing the material and experiential conditions on social activity preferences was only marginally significant, an indirect effect of condition on social activity preferences, mediated by purchase sociality, can still be estimated (e.g., see MacKinnon and Fairchild 2009; Zhao, Lynch, and Chen 2010). Again, the Sobel test for mediation was significant, $Z = 3.35$, $p < .001$, indicating that the extent to which a purchase is enjoyed with other people is a significant mediator of the effect of purchase condition on activity preferences. A bootstrap analysis (bias-corrected; 1,000 samples) estimating the size of the indirect effect similarly confirmed this mediational result, as the 95% confidence interval did not include zero [.28, .90]. Figure 3 illustrates this mediation model.

These results thus lend further support to the finding in Experiment 3a that experiential purchases, relative to material purchases, foster greater interest in engaging in activities that involve other people. When the results of this study, Experiment 3a, and the direct replication of 3a (mentioned above) are combined meta-analytically, the tendency for people who have

reflected on experiential purchases to seek out more social activities than those who have reflected on material purchases is significant, $Z = 2.91, p = .002$.

Interestingly, the inclination of participants in Experiment 3b to engage with others was very similar in the experiential and control conditions, indicating that thinking about possessions makes consumers unusually *disinclined* to pursue social connection. People's baseline interest in social engagement may be relatively high whether they reflect on past experiences or not, but interest in social pursuits may be lowered when "things" are called to mind (see also Kashdan and Breen 2007; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Pieters 2013). This effect appears to be due to the relatively non-social nature of a great many possessions (Caprariello and Reis 2013), a possibility supported by the significant mediational role of purchase sociality on activity preferences. In addition, thinking about possessions may encourage people to think of others as competitors in the quest for material abundance and in the race to "keep up with the Joneses" (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Frank 1999, 2004; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011; Solnick and Hemenway 1998). Happily, the results from the control condition in this study suggest that this competitive tendency is something that needs to be stoked: The default appears to be thinking of others as companions to go out with rather than competitors to out-buy.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Research has shown that talking about experiences is more enjoyable than talking about possessions and this leads people to like their conversation partners more as a result (Bastos and Brucks 2017; Kumar and Gilovich 2015; Van Boven, et al. 2010). The present studies take this a step farther and demonstrate that experiences foster social connection more broadly and deeply as well. Whether it prompts conversation or not, consumers tend to feel closer to others who have made the same or similar experiential purchases, and closer to others in general after

reflecting on significant experiential purchases. This enhanced feeling of closeness, furthermore, leads people to be more interested in seeking out the company of others.

In Experiment 1a, we found that participants felt closer to someone who had made the same experiential purchase than to someone who did not make the same purchase or someone who made the same material purchase. Experiment 1b demonstrated that this is because experiences tend to represent a bigger part of a consumer's identity than material goods. We then found in Experiment 1c that this effect holds even when another consumer has made a similar, but clearly superior experiential purchase. Experiments 2a-2b provided evidence that thinking about significant experiential purchases makes people feel closer to humanity in general than thinking about significant possessions. Finally, in Experiments 3a and 3b we explored how the enhanced sense of social connection that comes from experiential consumption might impact subsequent behavior: Reflecting on past experiential purchases makes people more inclined to seek out the company of others than does reflecting on past material purchases.

Some of our findings appear to result from experiences being more likely to be consumed with others (Caprariello and Reis 2013). But is that the sole reason that experiences facilitate social connection? We believe there are reasons to be cautious before over-generalizing from the mediational results of Experiments 3a and 3b. The particular dependent measure used in those studies (participants' preferences for social over solitary activities) is more likely to be affected by the inherent sociality of the purchase in question than other measures of social connection, such as how similar one feels to those who've made a similar purchase or how close one feels to others in general. Indeed, as we found in Experiment 1b, the kinship one feels with those who have made a similar experiential purchase is due to the two parties sharing a more central element of their sense of self. Moreover, the social nature of participants' purchases did not

mediate the results of Experiment 2a, in which participants reported feeling a stronger sense of connection to humanity writ large. Note that there are many entirely solitary consumption experiences—a hike in a state forest, a walk on the beach, or a moving piece of music—that can make people feel closer to others or to “something bigger” than themselves (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, and Keltner 2015; Rudd, Vohs, and Aaker 2012).

It is worth noting that we also obtained intriguingly inconsistent results with respect to how the responses of participants in our material and experiential conditions compared to those in a no-purchase control condition. Participants in Experiment 1a indicated that they would feel more kinship with someone who had made a similar experiential purchase than someone who made a similar material purchase or someone who did not make a similar purchase of any kind. The latter two conditions did not differ from one another. When it comes to a sense of kinship with others, then, it appears that having a similar experience boosts people above a neutral baseline. But in Experiment 3b the opposite pattern was obtained, with control participants responding the same as those in the experiential condition, and participants who had just thought about material purchases being less inclined than either of those groups to pursue social activities. Yet another pattern of results was obtained in a study in which participants were randomly assigned to think about an important experiential purchase, an important material purchase, or a non-purchase control activity and then served as the “dictator” in a standard dictator game paradigm (Walker, Kumar, and Gilovich 2016). The responses of control participants in that study (how much money they gave their counterparts in the dictator game) fell in between those of participants in the experiential and material conditions, but were not significantly different from either.

As we noted in the introduction, the existing literature can support the prediction that experiential purchases should make people feel more socially connected due to their inherently social nature (Caprariello and Reis 2013) and by fostering more enjoyable communication about more central aspects of oneself (Carter and Gilovich 2012; Kumar and Gilovich 2015; Van Boven, et al. 2010). The literature also supports the prediction that material purchases might make consumers feel less socially connected by heightening preoccupation with the solitary and even competitive accumulation of things, to the detriment of social pursuits (Frank 1999, 2004; Kashdan and Breen 2007; Pieters, 2013; Richins and Dawson 1992). We obtained support for both predictions in the present studies, but neither was confirmed consistently. Whether experiential consumption enhances a sense of social connection, or material consumption tends to diminish it, is likely to depend on the particular measures of social connection used to assess it, the particular context in which the purchases are made, the particular people with whom the purchases are shared, and, of course, the particular material and experiential purchases that are made.

With respect to the extent to which different experiential purchases foster more or less of a sense of social connection, recent research has documented a paradoxical downside to a type of experience one would expect to yield especially large hedonic benefits: extraordinary experiences (Cooney, Gilbert, and Wilson 2014). Although people tend to enjoy experiences that are better than those experienced by others, the investigators noted that these sorts of extraordinary experiences can also undermine future social interactions. That is, the participants in these studies who had enjoyed an experience superior to one enjoyed by their interaction partners (watching a more highly-rated video clip) underestimated how uncomfortable and difficult it would be to talk with them about it. Participants who had been assigned to have an

ordinary experience enjoyed that experience less, but had subsequent social interactions that were more gratifying.

Note, however, that the studies reported by Cooney and colleagues (2014) involved a specific context in which participants who had a “better” experience were forced to converse with a group of people who had all shared a “lesser” one. The participants were not free to choose with whom they could talk and describe their experience. In that context at least, it was difficult for the extraordinary experiencers to fit in with the rest of the group, and they did not foresee the social costs of describing how much they enjoyed themselves to the rest of the pack. In most everyday circumstances, however, consumers can avoid making waves by describing their extraordinary experiences only to those who, for whatever reason(s), are unlikely to be envious.

Moreover, the results of Experiment 1c indicate that people are not always envious of those who have had experiences that are better than their own. More specifically, participants in that study were able to feel a sense of connection to those who had purchased better versions of the very experiences they had purchased themselves, at least in comparison to those who had purchased material goods. This suggests that it may not be so difficult for people who’ve had greater and lesser experiences to find common ground. The differences between a baseball fan squirming to get comfortable in the bleachers and one relaxing in a luxury box are notable and apparent to each. But these two experiential consumers may nonetheless find it easier to feel connected than a consumer of material goods squirming to get comfortable in the seat of her compact sedan and another relaxing in her luxury vehicle. The feelings of social connection felt by the baseball fans with very different seats are likely to result from the common ground the two individuals can establish as, say, sports fans—that is, by thinking about the shared aspects of

their identities, as we explored in Experiment 1b. This type of common ground may be able to override the obvious, unpleasant social comparison they might otherwise make. It may be harder for the drivers of the compact and the luxury car to feel a similar sense of comradery.

In fact, with an eye toward facilitating harmonious intergroup relations, it might be informative to investigate how learning about shared experiential versus material purchases can impact feelings of similarity when the purchases are made by members of relevant in-groups and out-groups. Experiment 1c found that shared experiences can facilitate a sense of connection to those who are notably different from us in one way (their experiences were superior), and the question is whether other gaps can be similarly bridged by knowledge of shared experiences. Would an Israeli and Palestinian, an environmentalist and industrialist, or a Democrat and Republican feel more connected if they knew they both enjoyed consuming the same sorts of experiences?

Our findings fit also with the results of research on gift giving. Chan and Mogilner (2017) have found that recipients feel closer to their benefactors when the gifts they receive are experiential rather than material. Our findings further suggest that the feelings of connection that experiential purchases induce can extend quite broadly: Consumers can feel connected to others simply when reflecting on experiences they have bought for themselves, and the “others” can consist of people in general. And, as we found in Experiments 3a and 3b, thinking about past experiential purchases leads people to prefer social activities over solitary pursuits. This is a notable result because, despite the considerable psychological benefits that come with social connection (Baumeister and Leary 1995), people often fail to seek it out (Epley and Schroeder 2014).

Indeed, the enhanced tendency to seek out social activities may be the one of the most beneficial behavioral consequences of experiential consumption. The inherent sociality of many experiential purchases appears to be an important driver of this effect, which suggests that buying experiences can lead to a sort of virtuous cycle—a positive feedback loop whereby social experiences cause consumers to feel connected to others, which in turn leads them to pursue social experiences even more, furthering a sense of connection, and so on. Over two decades ago, Baumeister and Leary (1995) maintained that people are fundamentally social creatures, and since that time it has become clearer and clearer that meaningful social relationships contribute a great deal to human happiness (Diener and Seligman 2002, 2004; Myers 2000). What we have found in our studies is that purchasing experiences rather than material goods can initiate this kind of virtuous cycle: in contrast with material purchases, experiential consumption produces feelings of social connection that lead people to want to connect further.

By inspiring people to seek out the company of others, experiential purchases are likely to have a host of benefits beyond the purchase itself. Do the secondary benefits of such purchases apply only to the experiencer, or do they flow outward to reach others as well? Might the greater interest in social connection that comes on the heels of experiential consumption lead people to treat others better? Recent work has found that this is indeed the case (Walker et al. 2016). In a pair of studies, participants who had recalled an experiential purchase were more generous to an anonymous partner when assigned the role of allocator in a dictator game (Forsythe, Horowitz, Savin, and Sefton 1994; see Camerer 2003 for a review). Given that reflecting on experiential purchases decreases the perceived social distance between oneself and others, it is not surprising that those who had just thought about an experiential purchase kept a

smaller portion of an endowment for themselves. It seems, then, that the benefits of experiential purchases apply not only to the purchasers themselves, but extend to others in their orbit.

CODA

Research on the hedonic benefits of experiential and material consumption can help us better understand what causes individuals to be happier, healthier, and closer to one another. A growing body of evidence has demonstrated that experiences tend to produce more enduring happiness than material possessions—and, as we show here, enhanced feelings of social connection. The results of these experiments suggest that when consumers buy experiences rather than “things,” they are not only investing in themselves, but in each other as well. Although there *is* an “I” in experience, it is aptly buried in the middle of the word. Even when pursued individually or thought about in the abstract, our experiences connect us to others.

REFERENCES

- Adler, Nancy E., Thomas Boyce, Margaret A. Chesney, Sheldon Cohen, Susan Folkman, Robert L. Kahn, and S. Leonard Syme (1994), "Socioeconomic Status and Health: The Challenge of the Gradient," *American Psychologist*, 49, 15–24.
- Adler, Paul S. and Seok-Woo Kwon (2002), "Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept," *Academy of Management Review*, 27(1), 17-40.
- Aknin, Lara, Michael I. Norton, and Elizabeth W. Dunn (2009), "From Wealth to Well-Being? Money Matters, but Less than People Think," *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4, 523–7.
- Argyle, Michael (2001), *The Psychology of Happiness*, New York: Routledge.
- Backlund, Eric, Paul D. Sorlie, and Norman J. Johnson (1996), "The Shape of the Relationship between Income and Mortality in the United States: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Mortality Study," *Annals of Epidemiology*, 6, 12–20.
- Bargh, John A. and Katelyn Y. A. McKenna (2004), "The Internet and Social Life," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 573-90.
- Bastos, Wilson and Merrie Brucks (2017), "How and why conversation value leads to happiness for experiential and material purchases," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(3), 598-612.
- Baumeister, Roy F., C. Nathan DeWall, Natalie J. Ciarocco, and Jean M. Twenge (2005), "Social Exclusion Impairs Self-Regulation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(4), 589-604.
- Baumeister, Roy F. and Mark R. Leary (1995), "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497-529.
- Baumeister, Roy F., Jean M. Twenge, and Christopher K. Nuss (2002), "Effects of Social

- Exclusion on Cognitive Processes: Anticipated Aloneness Reduces Intelligent Thought,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(4), 817-27.
- Belk, Russell W. (1985), “Materialism: Trait Aspects of Living in the Material World,” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 265-80.
- Berkman, Lisa F. and S. Leonard Syme (1979), “Social Networks, Host Resistance, and Mortality: A Nine-Year Follow-Up Study of Alameda County Residents,” *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 109(2), 186–204.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic J. D. Wacquant (1992), *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Brown, Donald E. (1991), *Human Universals*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Burgess, Ernest W. and Paul Wallin (1953), *Engagement and Marriage*, Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Buss, David M. (1984), “Toward a Psychology of Person-Environment (PE) Correlation: The Role of Spouse Selection,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, 361-77.
- Byrne, Donn (1961), “Interpersonal Attraction and Attitude Similarity,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 62, 713-5.
- Byrne, Donn, Gerald L. Clore, and George Smeaton (1986), “The Attraction Hypothesis: Do Similar Attitudes Predict Anything?” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1167-70.
- Byrne, Donn, William Griffitt, and Daniel Stefaniak (1967), “Attraction and Similarity of Personality Characteristics,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5, 82-90.
- Cacioppo, John T. and Louise C. Hawkey (2009), “Perceived Social Isolation and Cognition,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(10), 447-54.

- Cacioppo, John T., Louise C. Hawkley, Ariel Kalil, Marie E. Hughes, Linda Waite, and Ronald A. Thisted (2008), "Happiness and the Invisible Threads of Social Connection: The Chicago Health, Aging, and Social Relations Study," in *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*, ed. Michael Eid and Randy J. Larsen, 195-219, New York: Guilford.
- Cacioppo, John T. and William Patrick (2009), *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Camerer, Colin (2003), *Behavioral Game Theory: Experiments in Strategic Interaction*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Caprariello, Peter A. and Harry T. Reis (2013), "To Do or To Have, or To Share? Valuing Experiences over Material Possessions Depends on the Involvement of Others," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(2), 199-215.
- Carter, Travis J. and Thomas Gilovich (2010), "The Relative Relativity of Experiential and Material Purchases," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, 146-59.
- Carter, Travis J. and Thomas Gilovich (2012), "I Am What I Do, Not What I Have: The Centrality of Experiential Purchases to the Self-Concept," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(6), 1304-17.
- Carter, Travis J. and Thomas Gilovich (2014), "Getting the Most for the Money: The Hedonic Return on Experiential and Material Purchases," *Consumption and Well-Being in the Material World*, ed. Miriam Tatzel, 49-62, Netherlands: Springer.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), "CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Report — United States, 2013," *MMWR* 2013, 62(Suppl 3), 1-186.
- Chan, Cindy and Cassie Mogilner (2016), "Experiential Gifts are More Socially Connecting than Material Gifts," Working Paper, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 2E8.

- Chartrand, Tanya L. and John A. Bargh (1999), "The Chameleon Effect: The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76(6), 893-910.
- Chen, Edith, Sheldon Cohen, and Gregory E. Miller (2010), "How Low Socioeconomic Status Affects 2-Year Hormonal Trajectories in Children," *Psychological Science*, 21(1), 31–7.
- Chen, Edith, Karen A. Matthews, and W. Thomas Boyce (2002), "Socioeconomic Differences in Children's Health: How and Why Do These Relationships Change with Age?" *Psychological Bulletin*, 128, 295–329.
- Clark, Andrew E., Paul Frijters, and Michael A. Shields (2008), "Relative Income, Happiness and Utility: An Explanation for the Easterlin Paradox and Other Puzzles," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46(1), 95-144.
- Coleman, James S. (1988), "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Collins, Nancy L. and Lynn C. Miller (1994), "Self-Disclosure and Liking: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(3), 457-75.
- Coney, Gus, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Timothy D. Wilson (2014), "The Unforeseen Costs of Extraordinary Experience," *Psychological Science*, 25(12), 2259-65.
- Diener, Ed, Richard E. Lucas, and Christie Napa Scollon (2006), "Beyond the Hedonic Treadmill: Revising the Adaptation Theory of Well-Being," *American Psychologist*, 61(4), 305-14.
- Diener, Ed and Martin E. P. Seligman (2002), "Very Happy People," *Psychological Science*, 13(3), 81-84.
- Diener, Ed and Martin E. P. Seligman (2004), "Beyond Money: Toward an Economy of Well

- Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5(1), 1-31.
- Dunbar, Robin I. M. and Susanne Shultz (2007), “Evolution in the Social Brain,” *Science*, 317, 1344-7.
- Dunn, Elizabeth W., Daniel T. Gilbert, and Timothy D. Wilson (2011), “If Money Doesn’t Make You Happy, Then You Probably Aren’t Spending It Right,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 21(2), 115-25.
- Dunn, Elizabeth W. and Michael I. Norton (2013), *Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Easterlin, Richard A. (1974), “Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot?” in *Nations and Households in Economic Growth: Essays in Honor of Moses Abramovitz*, ed. Paul A. David and Melvin W. Reder, 89-125, New York: Academic Press.
- Easterlin, Richard A. (1995), “Will Raising the Incomes of All Increase the Happiness of All?” *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35-47.
- Easterlin, Richard A. (2003), “Explaining Happiness,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 100(19), 11176-83.
- Ecob, Russell and George Davey Smith (1999), “Income and Health: What is the Nature of the Relationship?” *Social Science and Medicine*, 48, 693–705.
- Epley, Nicholas and Juliana Schroeder (2014), “Mistakenly Seeking Solitude,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(5), 1980-99.
- Forsythe, Robert, Joel L. Horowitz, Nathan E. Savin, and Martin Sefton (1994), “Fairness in Simple Bargaining Experiments,” *Games and Economic Behavior*, 6(3), 347-69.
- Frank, Robert H. (1999), *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Frank, Robert H. (2004), "How Not to Buy Happiness," *Daedalus*, 133(2), 69-79.
- Frey, Bruno S. and Alois Stutzer (2002), "What Can Economists Learn from Happiness Research?" *Journal of Economic Literature*, 40, 402-35.
- Gilovich, Thomas and Amit Kumar (2015), "We'll Always Have Paris: The Hedonic Payoff from Experiential and Material Investments," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 51, ed. Mark Zanna and James Olson, 147-87, New York: Elsevier.
- Gilovich, Thomas, Amit Kumar, and Lily Jampol (2015a), "A Wonderful Life: Experiential Consumption and the Pursuit of Happiness," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(1), 152-65.
- Gilovich, Thomas, Amit Kumar, and Lily Jampol (2015b), "The Beach, the Bikini, and the Best Buy: Replies to Dunn and Weidman, and to Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(1), 179-84.
- Gilovich, Thomas and Lee Ross (2015), *The Wisest One in the Room: How You Can Benefit from Psychology's Most Powerful Insights*, New York: The Free Press.
- Guevarra, Darwin A. and Ryan T. Howell (2015), "To Have in Order to Do: Exploring the Effects of Consuming Experiential Products on Well-Being," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(1), 28-41.
- Helliwell, John F. and Robert D. Putnam (2004), "The Social Context of Well-Being," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B*, 359, 1435-46.
- Howell, Ryan T. and Graham Hill (2009), "The Mediators of Experiential Purchases: Determining the Impact of Psychological Needs Satisfaction and Social Comparison," *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4, 511-22.
- Kashdan, Todd B. and William E. Breen (2007), "Materialism and Diminished Well-Being:

- Experiential Avoidance as a Mediating Mechanism,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 26, 521-39.
- Kasser, Tim (2002), *The High Price of Materialism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kasser, Tim and Richard M. Ryan (1993), “A Dark Side of the American Dream: Correlates of Financial Success as a Central Life Aspiration,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 410-22.
- Kumar, Amit and Thomas Gilovich (2015), “Some ‘Thing’ to Talk About? Differential Story Utility from Experiential and Material Purchases,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(10), 1320-31.
- Kumar, Amit and Thomas Gilovich (2016), “To Do or To Have, Now or Later? The Preferred Consumption Profiles of Material and Experiential Purchases,” *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 26(2), 169-78.
- Kumar, Amit, Matthew A. Killingsworth, and Thomas Gilovich (2014), “Waiting for Merlot: Anticipatory Consumption of Experiential and Material Purchases,” *Psychological Science*, 25(10), 1924-31.
- Kumar, Amit, Matthew A. Killingsworth, and Thomas Gilovich (2019), “Spending on Doing Promotes More Moment-to-Moment Happiness than Spending on Having,” Working Paper, The University of Texas at Austin, McCombs School of Business, Austin, TX.
- Lee, Richard M. and Steven B. Robbins (1995), “Measuring Belongingness: The Social Connectedness and the Social Assurance Scales,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 42(2), 232-41.
- Luo, Ye, Louise C. Hawkley, Linda J. Waite, and John T. Cacioppo (2012), “Loneliness, Health, and Mortality in Old Age: A National Longitudinal Study,” *Social Science & Medicine*,

74(6), 907–14.

MacKinnon, David P. and Amanda J. Fairchild (2009), “Current Directions in Mediation Analysis,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(1), 16-20.

Mann, Thomas C. and Thomas Gilovich (2016), “The Asymmetric Connection Between Money and Material vs. Experiential Purchases,” *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(6), 647–58.

Maslow, Abraham H. (1968), *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed.), New York: Van Nostrand.

Mosteller, Frederick M., and Robert R. Bush (1954), “Selected Quantitative Techniques,” in *Handbook of Social Psychology: Volume I. Theory and Method*, ed. Gardner Lindzey, Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Myers, David G. (2000), “The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 56-67.

National Center for Health Statistics (2012), *Health, United States, 2011: With Special Feature on Socioeconomic Status and Health*, Hyattsville, MD: CDC, National Center for Health Statistics.

Newcomb, Theodore M. (1956), “The Prediction of Interpersonal Attraction,” *American Psychologist*, 1, 575-86.

Newcomb, Theodore M. (1961), *The Acquaintance Process*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Nicolao, Leonardo, Julie R. Irwin, and Joseph K. Goodman (2009), “Happiness for Sale: Do Experiential Purchases Make Consumers Happier than Material Purchases?” *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(2), 188-98.

- Ordabayeva, Nailya and Pierre Chandon (2011), "Getting Ahead of the Joneses: When Equality Increases Conspicuous Consumption Among Bottom-Tier Consumers," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38(1), 27-41.
- Pchelin, Paula and Ryan T. Howell (2014), "The Hidden Cost of Value-Seeking: People Do Not Accurately Forecast the Economic Benefits of Experiential Purchases," *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 9(4), 322-34.
- Pieters, Rik (2013), "Bidirectional Dynamics of Materialism and Loneliness: Not Just a Vicious Cycle," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(4), 615-31.
- Piff, Paul K., Pia Dietze, Matthew Feinberg, Daniel M. Stancato, and Dacher Keltner (2015), "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 883-99.
- Putnam, Robert D. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Putnam, Robert D., Lewis Feldstein, and Donald J. Cohen (2004), *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Richins, Marsha L. and Scott Dawson (1992), "A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and its Measurement: Scale Development and Validation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 303-16.
- Rosenthal, Robert R. (1978), "Combining Results of Independent Studies," *Psychological Bulletin*, 85(1), 185-93.
- Rudd, Melanie, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker (2012), "Awe Expands People's Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-being," *Psychological Science*, 23, 1130-6.

- Seligman, Martin E. P. (2002), *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, New York: Free Press.
- Solnick, Sara J. and David Hemenway (1998), "Is More Always Better? A Survey on Positional Concerns," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 37(3), 373-83.
- Tan, Diana Tze Yeong and Ramadhar Singh (1995), "Attitudes and Attraction: A Developmental Study of the Similarity-Attraction Dissimilarity-Repulsion Hypothesis," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 21, 975-86.
- Twenge, Jean M., Roy F. Baumeister, Dianne M. Tice, and Tanja S. Stucke (2001), "If You Can't Join Them, Beat Them: Effects of Social Exclusion on Aggressive Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81(6), 1058-69.
- Twenge, Jean M, Kathleen R. Catanese, and Roy F. Baumeister (2002), "Social Exclusion Causes Self-Defeating Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(3), 606-15.
- Uchino, Bert N., John T. Cacioppo, and Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser (1996), "The Relationship between Social Support and Physiological Processes: A Review with Emphasis on Underlying Mechanisms and Implications for Health," *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(3), 488-531.
- Van Boven, Leaf (2005), "Experientialism, Materialism, and the Pursuit of Happiness," *Review Of General Psychology*, 9(2), 132-42.
- Van Boven, Leaf, Margaret C. Campbell, and Thomas Gilovich (2010), "Stigmatizing Materialism: On Stereotypes and Impressions of Materialistic and Experiential Pursuits," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 36(4), 551-63.
- Van Boven, Leaf and Thomas Gilovich (2003), "To Do or To Have? That is the Question,"

- Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(6), 1193-1202.
- Vohs, Kathleen D., Nicole L. Mead, and Miranda R. Goode (2006), "The Psychological Consequences of Money," *Science*, 314(5802), 1154-6.
- Vohs, Kathleen D., Nicole L. Mead, and Miranda R. Goode (2008), "Merely Activating the Concept of Money Changes Personal and Interpersonal Behavior," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(3), 208-12.
- Walker, Jesse T., Amit Kumar, and Thomas Gilovich (2016), "Cultivating Gratitude and Giving through Experiential Consumption," *Emotion*, 16(8), 1126-36.
- Williams, Kipling D. (2007), "Ostracism," *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58(1), 425-52.
- Yamaguchi, Mana, Ayumi Masuchi, Daisuke Nakanishi, Sayaka Suga, Naoki Konishi, Ye-Yun Yu, and Yohsuke Ohtsubo (2016), "Experiential Purchases and Prosocial Spending Promote Happiness by Enhancing Social Relationships," *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 480-8.
- Zhao, Xinshu, John G. Lynch, and Qimei Chen (2010), "Reconsidering Baron and Kenny: Myths and Truths about Mediation Analysis," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(2), 197-206.

FIGURE 1

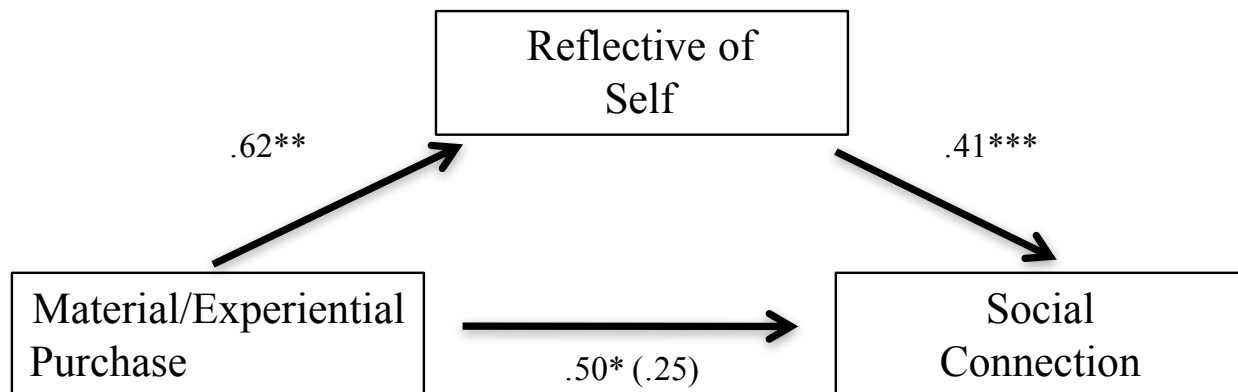


Figure 1. The mediating role of identity on the relationship between type of purchase and social connection in Experiment 1b. The regression weight in parentheses reflects the effect of type of purchase when the mediator is included in the regression. Purchase type is coded 0 = material and 1 = experiential, and identity and social connection are both standardized. *** $p \leq .001$ ** $p \leq .01$ * $p \leq .05$

FIGURE 2

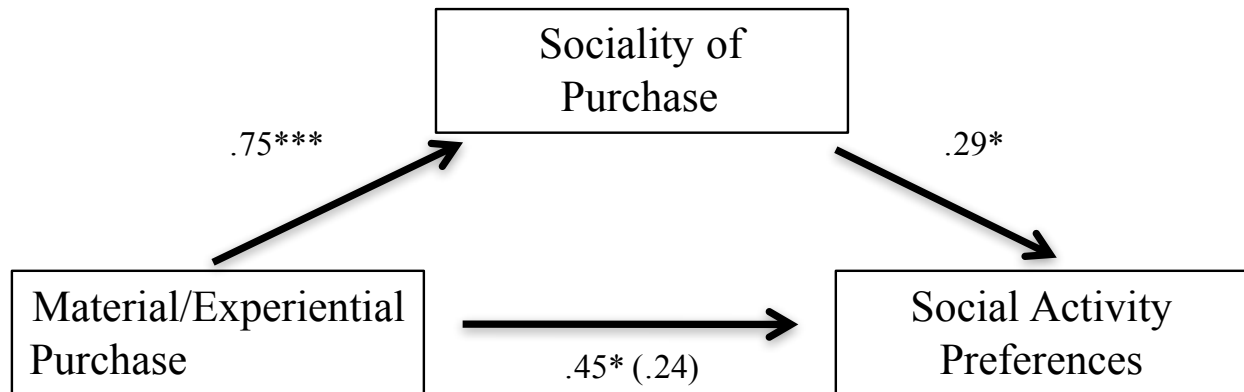


Figure 2. The mediating role of purchase sociality (coded) on the relationship between type of purchase and preference for social over nonsocial activities in Experiment 3a. The regression weight in parentheses reflects the effect of type of purchase when the mediator is included in the regression. Purchase type is coded 0 = material and 1 = experiential, and sociality and activity preferences are both standardized. *** $p \leq .001$ * $p \leq .05$

FIGURE 3

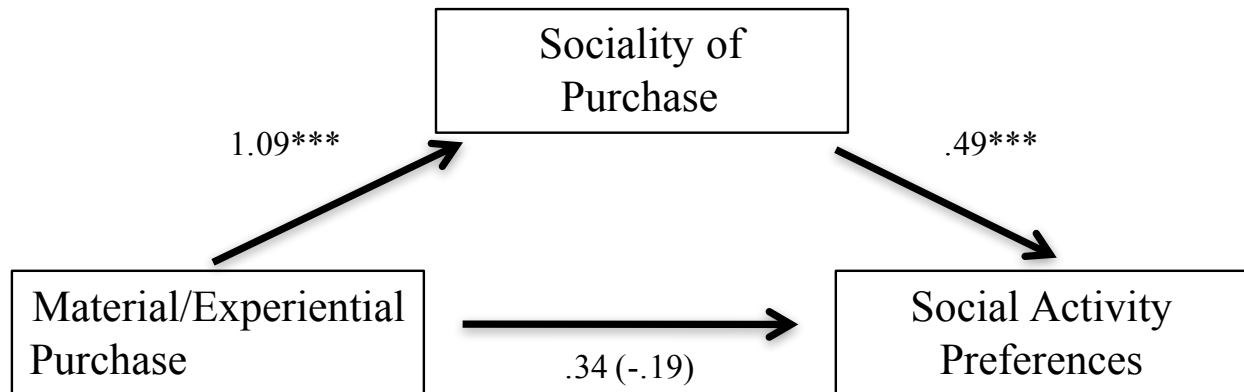


Figure 3. The mediating role of purchase sociality on the relationship between type of purchase and preference for social over nonsocial activities in Experiment 3b. The regression weight in parentheses reflects the effect of type of purchase when the mediator is included in the regression. Purchase type is coded 0 = material and 1 = experiential, and sociality and activity preferences are both standardized. *** $p \leq .001$