

# Cultivating Gratitude and Giving Through Experiential Consumption

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Gratitude promotes well-being and prompts prosocial behavior. Here, we examine a novel way to cultivate this beneficial emotion. We demonstrate that 2 different types of consumption—material consumption (buying for the sake of having) and experiential consumption (buying for the sake of doing)—differentially foster gratitude and giving. In 6 studies we show that reflecting on experiential purchases (e.g., travel, meals out, tickets to events) inspires more gratitude than reflecting on material purchases (e.g., clothing, jewelry, furniture), and that thinking about experiences leads to more subsequent altruistic behavior than thinking about possessions. In Studies 1-2b, we use within-subject and between-subjects designs to test our main hypothesis: that people are more grateful for what they've done than what they have. Study 3 finds evidence for this effect in the real-world setting of online customer reviews: Consumers are more likely to spontaneously mention feeling grateful for experiences they have bought than for material goods they have bought. In our final 2 studies, we show that experiential consumption also makes people more likely to be generous to others. Participants who contemplated a significant experiential purchase behaved more generously toward anonymous others in an economic game than those who contemplated a significant material purchase. It thus appears that shifting spending toward experiential consumption can improve people's everyday lives as well as the lives of those around them.

*Keywords:* gratitude, altruism, experiential consumption, materialism

"I've got a perfect body but sometimes I forget

I've got a perfect body 'cause my eyelashes catch my sweat"

Regina Spektor, *Folding Chair*

Not everyone is as grateful as Regina Spektor, as that particular function of eyelashes, like most anatomical miracles, is typically taken for granted. But the psychological literature on gratitude makes it clear that people would be better off if they were. The experience of gratitude leads to all sorts of positive outcomes. Emmons and McCullough (2003), for instance, found that gratitude increases well-being, reduces visits to the doctor, enhances feelings of social connection, and improves sleep quality. Other research has shown that gratitude is associated with lowered depression (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003), decreased envy (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), an in-

creased sense of meaning in life (Kashdan, Uswatte, & Julian, 2006; Lambert, Graham, Fincham, & Stillman, 2009), higher positive affect and life satisfaction (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010; Emmons & Mishra, 2011), and an increased ability to delay gratification (DeSteno, Li, Dickens, & Lerner, 2014; Dickens & DeSteno, 2016).

The desirable effects of gratitude extend beyond well-being and positive affect. Gratitude can also facilitate social cohesion by motivating people to repay benefactors and pay forward benefits to anonymous others (McCullough, Kimeldorf, & Cohen, 2008). Generally conceptualized as a prosocial emotion, gratitude is said to serve the evolutionary function of fostering reciprocal altruism (McCullough et al., 2008). Feeling grateful for a benefit received is what motivates individuals to be generous to the person who provided it. Indeed, gratitude inspires giving toward a benefactor even when it comes at personal cost to the individual (Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann, & DeSteno, 2012; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno, Bartlett, Baumann, Williams, & Dickens, 2010). In addition, Bartlett and DeSteno (2006) have shown that feeling grateful, as opposed to feeling general positive affect, makes people more likely to help even those who had no hand in the original benefit received.

Given the pronounced personal and social benefits that come from the experience of gratitude, it is not surprising that psychologists have devoted considerable energy to finding ways to elicit it. Much of this work has focused on writing exercises designed to get people in touch with what they have to be grateful for. Emmons and McCullough (2003), for example, asked participants to keep a

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weekly record, for 10 weeks, of five things they were grateful for that week, five daily hassles from that week, or five events that affected them in some way. Relative to those in the hassles and events conditions, participants in the gratitude condition reported greater well-being, more optimistic feelings about the future, and having exercised more. In a second study, participants wrote about the same sorts of events on a daily basis over a 2-week period and experienced the same benefits. Other researchers have found that asking participants to write letters of gratitude to specific individuals also leads to increased well-being (Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2012). These gratitude interventions have been employed broadly, with school teachers (Chan, 2010), adolescents (Froh, Selfick, & Emmons, 2008), and younger children (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski, & Miller, 2009) all experiencing improvements in well-being from being asked to write letters of gratitude and to count their blessings.

Although these manipulations have proven effective, there is some question about whether they would continue to be effective over extended periods of time. First, like nearly everything else, the feelings aroused by these manipulations may be subject to adaptation (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999; Kahneman, 1991). Expressing gratitude to an important figure in one's life may be emotionally evocative in the short term, but over time the exercise might become stale and lose its impact. Second, these sorts of writing exercises require consistent effort, something people may find harder and harder to exert on a consistent basis, even when they are fully aware of their benefits (Fishbach, Friedman, & Kruglanski, 2003; Hofmann, Friese, & Strack, 2009). Finally, these sorts of gratitude interventions could backfire if, over time, people's ability to quickly and fluently recall sources of gratitude begins to degrade. Just as having to recall 12 instances of having acted assertively can lead to the conclusion that one is less assertive than if one had been asked to recall six instances (Schwarz et al., 1991), having to repeatedly recall things to be grateful for can be a challenge, leading to the conclusion that perhaps one is not so full of gratitude after all.

Because of these challenges to the continued effectiveness of gratitude expression exercises, alternative ways of eliciting gratitude that are less effortful might increase well-being and advance societal good. We examine one possible way of doing so in this paper, one focused on the pursuit of experiential rather than material consumption.

### The Benefits of Experiential Over Material Consumption

A great deal of recent research indicates that people tend to get more satisfaction, and more enduring satisfaction, from money they spend on experiences (e.g., vacations, tickets to a Regina Spektor concert) than money they spend on material possessions (e.g., clothing, jewelry; Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Howell & Hill, 2009; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015, 2016; Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014, 2016; Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009; Pchelin & Howell, 2014; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; see Gilovich & Kumar, 2015 for a review). In one early study, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) asked participants to think of a significant experiential purchase or a significant material purchase they had made and to then report how happy and satisfied

with it they were now. The participants reported being happier and more satisfied with their experiential purchases and considered them a better use of their money. In another study, participants who were asked to think about a past experiential purchase were found to be in a better mood than those asked to think about a past material purchase. Subsequent studies have shown that people get more joy from anticipating experiential purchases than from anticipating material purchases (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015, 2016; Kumar et al., 2014) and that experiential purchases lead to less buyer's remorse than material purchases (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012).

Of course, the distinction between material and experiential purchases is not a hard-and-fast dichotomy. Clothes, furniture, and jewelry are clearly material possessions, whereas concerts, ski passes, and vacations are clearly experiential purchases. But what about a bicycle or video game system? Both are clearly possessions, but both are also vehicles for experience (see Gilovich & Kumar, 2015, and Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015a for a fuller discussion of this issue; see also Guevarra & Howell, 2015). This fuzzy boundary between material and experiential purchases has allowed researchers to hold the exact purchase constant, and examine the effects of thinking of the purchase in question in material or experiential terms (e.g., Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). This work has found that thinking of the very same purchase in experiential terms tends to make people enjoy it more and stay satisfied with it longer. More importantly for the present purposes, however, although these "middle ground" purchases can be especially useful methodologically, the distinction between material and experiential purchases has proven to be an easy one for research participants to grasp and they tend to have little difficulty listing purchases that to them are unambiguously material or experiential in nature.

Researchers have identified several mechanisms that explain why people tend to derive more enduring satisfaction from experiential purchases than from material purchases. Experiences foster more social connection than material goods (Chan & Mogilner, 2016; Howell & Hill, 2009; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015; Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, 2016; Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010), they contribute more to a person's identity (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Kumar et al., 2016), and they are less likely to evoke aversive social comparisons (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). All three of these mechanisms lend credence to the possibility that experiential purchases may also evoke more gratitude than material goods.

First, the tendency for experiences to spark less intense social comparisons results in people taking more of a satisficing approach when choosing experiences to buy, in contrast to the maximizing mindset that often accompanies material consumption (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Howell & Hill, 2009; for a discussion of satisficing and maximizing, see Schwartz et al., 2002). By dampening unpleasant social comparisons, experiential consumption can foster greater appreciation of one's own circumstances, and less worry about the circumstances of others. Second, people tend to experience more or less gratitude in proportion to the benefits they've received, and by contributing more to a person's sense of self, experiential purchases tend to provide greater overall benefits to the consumer. Finally, gratitude is often described as a prototypical social emotion (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; McCullough

et al., 2008). Because being connected to others is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and experiences tend to foster feelings of social connection more than material possessions, it stands to reason that experiences would be more likely to elicit gratitude for advancing this important social goal. Taken together, we suspect that people are likely to feel grateful for purchases that connect them to others, enhance their sense of self, and encourage them to appreciate what they've purchased for its intrinsic value, not for how it compares with what others have purchased (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven et al., 2010). Experiential purchases do just that.

Emmons and McCullough (2003) define gratitude as an emotion that results "from the perception of a positive personal outcome, not necessarily deserved or earned, that is due to the actions of another person," (p. 377). They base their definition in part on early theorizing that views gratitude a bit more broadly, as "the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience" (Bertocci & Millard, 1963, p. 316). This broader definition includes the possibility of feeling grateful for positive outcomes that result from something other than the actions of another. It is this sort of gratitude that especially rewarding purchases are most likely to inspire.

Although we are not aware of any research that directly tests our hypothesis that experiential purchases tend to elicit greater feelings of gratitude than material purchases, there are a variety of findings in the literature on materialism that lend credence to this idea. Researchers have documented a negative relationship between materialism and reported gratitude, for example (Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono, & Wilson, 2011; McCullough et al., 2002). In addition, trait materialism is associated with decreased life satisfaction (Belk, 1985; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Richins, 1987; Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001), and gratitude appears to partly mediate the relationship between trait-level materialism and well-being (Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, & Carlisle, 2014). And from the other direction, expressions of gratitude can dampen material desires (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009; Polak & McCullough, 2006). It appears, then, that a persistent focus on material consumption can impede feelings of gratitude, providing some encouragement to the possibility that a different profile of consumption—one focused on experiences—might more readily promote that beneficial, prosocial emotion.

### Overview of the Present Research

In six studies, we explored whether experiential consumption promotes both the experience of gratitude and one of gratitude's most beneficial effects—prosocial behavior. First, in a within-subjects, forced-choice paradigm, we examined whether participants report that their recent experiential purchases have prompted greater feelings of gratitude than their recent material purchases (Study 1). We also investigated, using a between-subjects design in Studies 2a and 2b, whether participants rate, on a continuous scale, experiential purchases as having fostered more gratitude than material purchases. We then looked for manifestations of this effect far removed from the laboratory, by examining online consumer reviews and seeing if reviews of experiential purchases are more likely than reviews of material purchases to include spontaneous references to gratitude (Study 3).

In our final two studies, we investigated a significant behavioral consequence that might follow from the greater gratitude people feel as a result of their experiential purchases. Previous research has shown that gratitude leads to increased prosocial behavior (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), and so we examined whether participants who were induced to think about a significant experiential purchase behaved more generously in a standard economic game than participants induced to think about a significant material purchase (Studies 4a and 4b). Together, the research reported below examines whether shifting some personal consumption toward "doing" rather than "having" can increase feelings of gratitude and, in so doing, lead people to be more generous to others.

We report the results from all conditions and all measures in each study below. No data were excluded from any of the studies except where noted and in all studies, minimum sample sizes were determined before data were collected and analyzed.

## Experiment 1

The most straightforward way to examine whether people tend to be more grateful for their experiential purchases than their material purchases is to ask them. Accordingly, we simply asked participants, in a within-subjects design, to list both a material and experiential purchase they had made and then report which one made them feel more grateful. We predicted that participants would report feeling more gratitude for their experiential purchases than their material goods.

### Method

**Participants.** Ninety-five participants from the United States (35 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 35.40$ ,  $SD = 12.14$ ) were recruited via Mechanical Turk and participated in exchange for modest compensation.

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants were told that they would take part in a study of how people feel about what they buy. They were given definitions of experiential and material purchases<sup>1</sup> and asked to think of their most recent purchase of each type that cost more than \$100. They were then asked to write about each purchase in detail. The order in which they did so was counterbalanced. After writing about both purchases, participants were instructed to take a few moments to contemplate all the emotions they felt when they thought about the purchases they described. They were then asked, "Which purchase gives you a greater feeling of gratitude?" Finally, they indicated the cost of the two purchases and provided their age and gender.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of experiential and material purchases provided to participants in Studies 1, 2a, and 2b were those provided by 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."

<sup>2</sup> We asked about age and gender in all studies except Studies 2a and 3 and included them as factors in our initial analyses, but because no significant differences were found and they did not qualify any of our significant findings, we do not discuss these variables further.

## Results

Participants wrote about a variety of material (e.g., furniture, clothing) and experiential purchases (e.g., vacations, restaurant meals), but there was no difference in reported price between the two purchase types ( $t < 1$ ). However, as predicted, more participants (63.2%) chose their experiential purchase as the one that made them feel more grateful than chose their material purchase (36.8%),  $\chi^2(1, N = 95) = 6.06, p = .01, \phi = 0.25$ . This study thus provides some initial evidence that money spent on doing evokes greater feelings of gratitude than money spent on possessions.

### Experiments 2a and 2b

To further investigate the differential impact of experiential and material purchases on gratitude, we used a between-subjects design in the next two studies. It is possible that participants in Study 1 felt that they were *supposed* to say that their experiences prompt more gratitude than their material goods, or that saying so might cast them in a more favorable light (Van Boven et al., 2010). A between-subjects design eliminates any direct comparisons between experiential and material purchases and therefore offers a stronger test of our hypothesis. Participants in Study 2a were therefore asked to think of either an experiential *or* material purchase they had made and to rate how much gratitude they felt when they thought about the purchase. Study 2b was a replication of Study 2a using a larger sample from a different population and an expanded gratitude measure, but excluded measures unrelated to gratitude that were used in Study 2a that might have influenced participants' gratitude responses. Study 2b also included a control condition.

## Method

**Participants.** Seventy-five Cornell University undergraduates were recruited at locations around campus and participated in Study 2a. In Study 2b, 302 United States participants were recruited on Mechanical Turk in exchange for modest monetary compensation. Five participants were excluded from Study 2b because they did not complete the survey, leaving a final sample size of 297 (146 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.19, SD = 10.66$ ).

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants in Study 2a were told they would be filling out a questionnaire about a purchase they had made. Participants were then randomly assigned to write about either a recent experiential or material purchase they had made costing more than \$100. Depending on their assigned condition, they were given one of the two purchase definitions used in Study 1 (see Footnote 1). Once they had completed the writing exercise, they were asked to indicate the length of time since they had made the purchase and to provide or estimate its cost.

Participants then answered three questions about purchase satisfaction, taken from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003), all on 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) scales: "When you think about this purchase, how happy does it make you?", "How much does this purchase contribute to your happiness in life?", and "To what extent would you say this purchase is money well-spent?" Finally, participants answered a gratitude question, which constituted our primary dependent variable: "How grateful are you for being able

to have this experience/possession?" which they answered on a similar scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*).

Study 2b was a conceptual replication designed with several aims in mind. One was to address the possibility that participants' responses to the gratitude measure in Study 2a may have been influenced by the earlier happiness measures. Participants in this study thus closely followed the procedure of Study 2a except that they did not answer the three satisfaction questions taken from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003), nor did they indicate the cost or length of time since the purchase had been made. We also expanded the measure of gratitude, using items taken from DeSteno et al. (2014). Accordingly, after answering the same gratitude question from Study 2a, participants were also asked, "How appreciative are you for being able to have this experience/possession" and "How thankful are you for being able to have this experience/possession." These questions were answered on the same 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) scale. Finally, to determine whether any difference between the experiential and material purchase conditions is due to experiences increasing baseline levels of gratitude or material goods decreasing gratitude, a control condition was added. Participants in this condition were asked to write about a typical activity they perform on a daily basis. They then rated their gratitude for being able to engage in such an activity on the same three measures of gratitude using the same 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) scale.

## Results

**Study 2a.** As predicted, participants in the experiential condition reported feeling more grateful about their purchases ( $M = 8.17, SD = 1.08$ ) than those in the material condition, ( $M = 7.15, SD = 1.84$ ), unequal variances  $t(62.26) = 2.93, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.68$ . Although not the primary focus of this investigation, we also replicated the previously documented differences in the happiness and satisfaction people derive from the two types of purchases (e.g., Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Participants reported that their experiential purchases made them happier ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 7.94, SD_{\text{exp}} = 1.04; M_{\text{mat}} = 6.41, SD_{\text{mat}} = 1.68; t(73) = 4.71, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.10$ ), contributed more to their happiness in life ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 7.17, SD_{\text{exp}} = 1.64; M_{\text{mat}} = 5.33, SD_{\text{mat}} = 2.17; t(73) = 4.10, p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.96$ ), and represented money better spent ( $M_{\text{exp}} = 8.14, SD_{\text{exp}} = 1.10; M_{\text{mat}} = 7.00, SD_{\text{mat}} = 1.89$ ; unequal variances  $t(61.90) = 3.22, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.74$ ). There was no difference in length of time since the material and experiential purchases had been made ( $t < 1$ ). There was also no difference in the reported cost of the two purchase types ( $t < 1$ ), and the difference in reported gratitude between the two types of purchases remained significant when controlling for purchase price ( $b = 0.96, t = 2.72, p < .01$ ).

**Study 2b.** As expected, the results replicated the findings from Study 2a. Participants again reported feeling more grateful for their experiential purchases ( $M = 7.36, SD = 1.39$ ) than their material purchases ( $M = 6.81, SD = 1.50$ ),  $t(197) = 2.83, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.38$ . They also reported feeling more appreciative of their experiential purchases ( $M = 7.44, SD = 1.29$ ) than their material purchases ( $M = 6.93, SD = 1.48$ ),  $t(197) = 2.59, p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.37$ , and more thankful for their experiential purchases ( $M = 7.37, SD = 1.33$ ) than their material purchases ( $M = 6.70, SD = 1.61$ ),  $t(195) = 3.19, p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.45$ . When

these three measure were combined into a composite index of gratitude (Cronbach's alpha = .93) participants felt more grateful for their experiential purchases ( $M = 7.39$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) than their material purchases ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $t(197) = 3.08$ ,  $p < .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.44$  (Figure 1).

The responses of participants in the control condition fell in between those of participants in the experiential and material conditions on all three dependent measures. To assess the statistical significance of this pattern, we conducted a planned linear contrast analysis of variance on the composite index of gratitude, which yielded a significant linear trend,  $F(1, 294) = 8.17$ ,  $p < .01$ . The  $F$  test for the residual did not approach significance,  $F < 1$ . Simple effects tests yielded a marginally significant difference between the experiential ( $M = 7.39$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) and control conditions ( $M = 7.05$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1, 294) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .106$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ , and a nonsignificant difference between the control and material conditions ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $F(1, 294) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .21$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.24$ .

These results suggest (and only suggest) that the difference between the experiential and material conditions is due more to experiential purchases boosting gratitude rather than material purchases dampening it. This suggestion, however, is reinforced by the results of a follow-up analysis in which we examined the specific purchases participants' generated. This analysis uncovered 18 participants who listed as experiential purchases (e.g., business suit; DVD player) items that participants in other studies have generally listed as material items—indeed, items that we have used as examples of material purchases in instructions to participants in other studies (e.g., see Studies 4a and 4b). No participants in the material condition, in contrast, listed items that participants in other studies have commonly assigned to the experiential category.

When the data from these 18 participants who arguably did not follow instructions are excluded, the mean composite gratitude rating ( $\alpha = .93$ ) in the experiential condition ( $M = 7.53$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) was significantly higher than that in the control condition ( $M = 7.05$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1, 276) = 4.08$ ,  $p = .04$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.34$ . The difference between the control condition and the material condition was (of course) unchanged from the original analysis and not significant ( $p = .21$ ). These results thus reinforce the suggestion that the difference in gratitude elicited by experiential

and material purchases is due more to an increase in gratitude from experiential consumption than a decrease in gratitude from material consumption. However, these results do not preclude the possibility suggested in previous work (e.g., Tsang et al., 2014) that material consumption may also have a deleterious effect on gratitude.

Given that people were more grateful for their experiential purchases than their material purchases in both studies, it is unlikely that the results observed in Study 2a were an artifact of the gratitude question being asked after the purchase satisfaction measures. Furthermore, the fact that both studies employed a between-subjects design casts doubt on the possibility discussed above that participants' responses were a reflection of what they thought they should say rather than how they actually felt.

### Experiment 3

If people's experiential purchases do indeed inspire more gratitude than their material purchases, evidence of such a difference should be apparent far from the confines of the psychological laboratory. One place where this difference might appear is in customer reviews. Consumers post comments about their purchases on a host of websites, some, like TripAdvisor, devoted to experiential consumption and others, like CNet, to material goods. Most of the comments, of course, are devoted to the evaluation of specific features of the experiences or material items the consumer purchased, and expressions of gratitude are likely to be rare. Still, given the results of the previous studies, we might expect customers to more often express feelings of gratitude when evaluating experiential purchases than when evaluating material purchases. To find out if this is the case, we randomly selected samples of comments posted on customer review websites that were experiential or material in nature and coded them for expressions of gratitude. We predicted that there would be significantly more expressions of gratitude in the samples taken from customer review websites that focus on experiences than in the samples taken from websites that focus on material goods.

### Method

**Sampling.** The data consist of 1,200 comments randomly selected from customer review websites. We selected 150 reviews from websites devoted to each of four categories of prototypically experiential purchases and each of four categories of prototypically material purchases. The experientially oriented websites were TripAdvisor ([www.tripadvisor.com](http://www.tripadvisor.com)) for hotels and restaurants and Yelp ([www.yelp.com](http://www.yelp.com)) for arts/entertainment and hotels/travel. The materially oriented websites were CNET ([www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com)) for televisions and laptops and Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) for furniture and clothing.

To ensure that we sampled broadly from each experiential category, we first randomly selected six cities for each category and then randomly selected 25 reviews for that city in the given category. To ensure a broad sample of reviews of material items, from the Amazon furniture category we randomly selected the subcategories of home office, dining room, and living room, and then randomly selected 50 reviews from each. From the Amazon clothing category, we randomly selected the subcategories of women's active wear, women's jumpsuits, men's jeans, men's

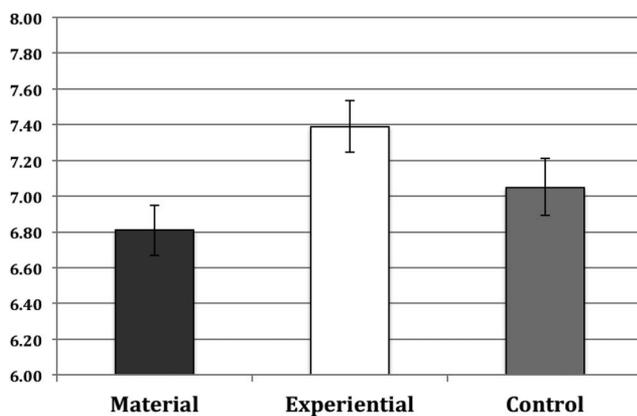


Figure 1. Mean gratitude ratings (composite of three gratitude measures), by condition, in Study 2b.

accessories, and baby clothes, and then randomly selected 25 reviews from the first four subcategories and 50 from the last. The two CNET categories were not broken down further, so we randomly selected 150 reviews from each. This process allowed us to make comparisons between a large variety of experiential and material purchases.

**Coding.** Two coders who were unaware of the hypothesis read each of the 1,200 reviews that were gathered and rated them on the extent to which the comments reflected feelings of gratitude. They did so on a three-point scale where 1 = *no expression of gratitude*, 2 = *suggestive of gratitude*, and 3 = *clearly grateful*. They agreed on 83.7% of their ratings and when they disagreed we averaged their ratings.

## Results and Discussion

As anticipated, expressions of gratitude were not commonly expressed in the consumer reviews. Nevertheless, as shown in Figure 2, they were more frequent in the comments posted about experiential purchases ( $M_{\text{TripAdvisor-Hotels}} = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ;  $M_{\text{TripAdvisor-Restaurants}} = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ;  $M_{\text{Yelp-Arts/Entertainment}} = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ;  $M_{\text{Yelp-Hotels}} = 1.23$ ,  $SD = 0.32$ ) than in those posted about material purchases ( $M_{\text{CNET-TV's}} = 1.04$ ,  $SD = 0.14$ ;  $M_{\text{CNET-Laptops}} = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ;  $M_{\text{Amazon-Furniture}} = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ;  $M_{\text{Amazon-Clothing}} = 1.04$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ). Collapsing across the four experiential and the four material categories, unprompted mentions of gratitude were more likely when consumers were reviewing experiences they had bought ( $M = 1.16$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ) than when they were reviewing possessions they had bought ( $M = 1.05$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ),  $t(1022.92) = 7.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.17$ . A multilevel model with the four experiential and four material categories nested within the broader experiential and material conditions also indicated a significant difference in unprompted mentions of gratitude between reviews of the two purchase types,  $F(1, 1192) = 52.17$ ,  $p < .0001$ .

Far removed from the laboratory, and in the context of customer reviews where expressions of gratitude are uncommon, people tend to be more inspired to comment on their feelings of gratitude when they reflect on the trips they took, the venues they visited, or

the meals they ate than when they reflect on the gadgets, furniture, or clothes they bought.

## Experiments 4a and 4b

The greater feelings of gratitude that come with experiential consumption are likely to have a host of downstream benefits to those who purchase life experiences, as gratitude has been shown to lead to increased well-being, improved physical health, and enhanced social connection. Might the gratitude elicited by experiential purchases extend outward to other people as well? Previous research has established that feelings of gratitude encourage people to act more prosocially (Bartlett et al., 2012; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). More specifically, studies have found that participants who are induced to feel grateful tend to be more generous to others in economic games (DeSteno et al., 2010).

We therefore sought in Studies 4a and 4b to build on this established finding and investigate whether participants asked to reflect on a significant experiential purchase would act more generously toward an anonymous stranger than those asked to reflect on a significant material purchase. Participants in Study 4a were asked to recall either an experiential or material purchase and then assigned the role of allocator in a dictator game (Camerer, 2003; Forsythe, Horowitz, Savin, & Sefton, 1994; Henrich et al., 2004). We predicted that thinking about an experiential purchase would lead participants to be more generous in their allocations than those led to think about a material purchase. Study 4b was a strict replication that included a control condition to provide a baseline for comparison.

## Method

**Participants.** Forty-eight Cornell undergraduates (35 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.21$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ) in Study 4a and 60 Cornell undergraduates (33 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.60$ ,  $SD = 2.12$ ) in Study 4b volunteered to participate in exchange for a \$5 show-up fee. Because of the expense of these studies (\$5 show-up fee and the payouts for the dictator game) and the robust effects of gratitude on giving reported by DeSteno et al. (2010), we aimed for the minimum per-condition sample size of 20 outlined by Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn (2011). The sample sizes of 24 per cell in Study 4a exceed 20 because we ran everyone who signed up to participate before the study was removed from Cornell's online recruitment system (available time slots for participation were posted for the whole week at the beginning of the week and eight more participants had already signed up by the time 40 participants had completed the study).

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants in Study 4a were told they would be participating in a series of brief, unrelated studies to fill the half-hour session. The first portion of the session was presented to participants as a memory task, in which they were asked to recall the most significant experiential purchase or the most significant material purchase they had made in the past 5 years.<sup>3</sup> After being asked to take some time to reflect

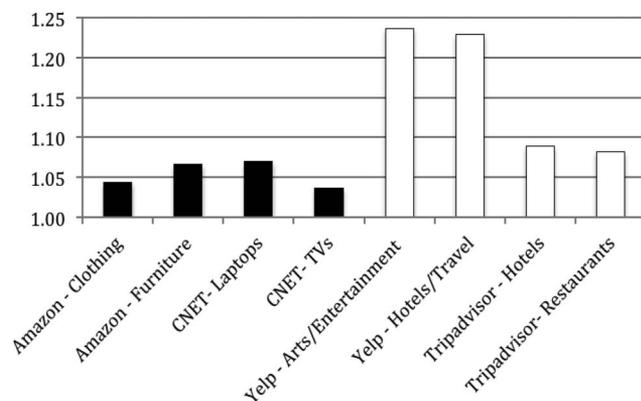


Figure 2. Mean ratings of gratitude expressed in customer reviews on material product-review sites (dark bars) and experiential review websites (light bars) in Study 3.

<sup>3</sup> Experiential purchases were defined as “things such as vacations, concert or theatre tickets, or meals out that you buy in order to have an *experience* (as opposed to a material good, that you buy to keep on your possession).” Material purchases were defined as “things such as cars, computers, televisions, or clothing or jewelry—purchases that you make to have something in your possession (as opposed to an *experience*, which is something you live through).”

on their purchase, they were asked a couple of filler questions about it, to disguise any relation between the purchase prime and the dictator game. The first question asked participants to rate how clearly they could picture the purchase in their minds on a 9-point scale, ranging from “I can’t picture it clearly at all” to “I can picture it very clearly.” Next, they were told:

As you may know, studies of people’s memories have shown that human memory is subject to more striking errors (e.g. false memories, complete memory failure) than most people suspect. What about your memory for this purchase? How likely do you think it is that you would remember this purchase if asked about it 10 years from now?”

Participants were then asked to estimate the likelihood that they would recall their purchase from 0% to 100%. Ostensibly because that task was over, participants provided their age and gender and were told that they would now move on to the next task.

Participants were then told:

Now, on to the next study, which consists of one of the ‘economic games’ popular in economics and political science circles. You have been randomly selected to serve in the role of ‘decider’ and in that role you will be asked to make a decision that can earn you some money in addition to the \$5 you will receive for participating in this series of studies. Other participants in this study have been or will be randomly selected to the role of ‘recipient.’ You will be paired with a specific recipient who you will never meet. Your task is simply to divide \$10 between you and the recipient in whatever way you want. You will receive, in cash, whatever amount you assign to yourself and the recipient will receive what is left over.

Participants then wrote down how much money they wanted to keep for themselves and how much they wanted to give to the recipient (their responses always summed to \$10). After completing a series of unrelated studies, participants were thanked, debriefed, and given the money they allocated to themselves in addition to their \$5 show-up fee.

The procedure in Study 4b exactly followed that of Study 4a except a control condition was added in which participants were asked to list as many colors as they could think of at that moment (Kumar et al., 2016). The same cover story was used to reinforce the notion that participants were taking part in separate experiments, and so participants in this condition were also asked how clearly they could picture the colors they had listed and how likely they would be to remember most of the colors they had listed.

## Results and Discussion

In Study 4a, participants in the two conditions did not differ in terms of how clearly they could picture their purchase ( $t = 1.6$ ) or how likely they thought they would be able to recall their purchase in 10 years ( $t = 0.7$ ). However, participants in the experiential and material conditions did differ significantly in how much they allocated to the receiver in the dictator game. On average, participants in the experiential condition allocated \$3.96 ( $SD = 1.65$ ) to the other person, whereas those in the material condition allocated only \$2.67 ( $SD = 2.21$ ), unequal variances  $t(40.46) = 2.27$ ,  $p < .03$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.66$  (Figure 3, left panel).

This finding was replicated in Study 4b. Again, there were no significant between-condition differences on the ancillary memory-related questions ( $ps = 0.2$  and  $0.9$ ). And again, participants who recalled a gratifying experiential purchase ( $M = \$3.58$ ,

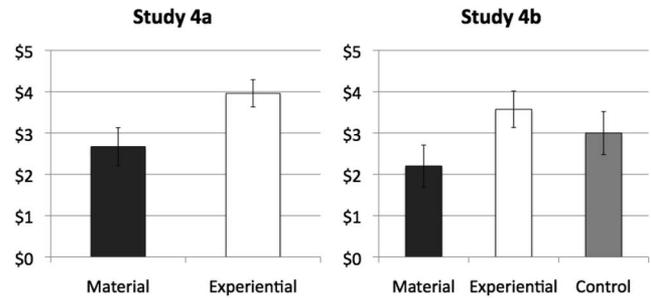


Figure 3. Mean amounts donated to an anonymous stranger in the dictator game, by condition, in Studies 4a (left) and 4b (right).

$SD = 1.97$ ) were more generous to their anonymous partner than those who recalled a significant material purchase ( $M = \$2.20$ ,  $SD = 2.28$ ),  $t(38) = 2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.65$  (see Figure 3, right panel). Analyzing all three conditions together, a planned contrast revealed a marginally significant linear trend,  $F(1, 57) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .054$ , and a test of the residual variance was not close to significant,  $F < 1$ . Simple effects tests revealed that the mean of the control condition ( $M = \$3.00$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ) was not significantly different from that in either the material or experiential conditions ( $ps > 0.25$ ). We predicted the core result in both studies on the basis of research showing that feelings of gratitude prompt greater prosocial behaviors and therefore expected a boost in generosity when recalling a meaningful experiential purchase (DeSteno et al., 2010). But data from the control condition in Study 4b again suggest that, in addition, being reminded of material purchases might also decrease how generous people are toward others (see also Kumar et al., 2016).

Because the targeted sample sizes in both studies were set to the minimum outlined by Simmons et al. (2011), it is instructive to examine the difference between the experiential and material conditions across the two studies. Using Stouffer’s (1949) meta-analytic method, the difference in generosity between the experiential and material conditions is highly reliable,  $z = 2.93$ ,  $p < .005$ .

These results indicate that the benefits of experiential consumption extend beyond the purchase itself and even beyond the experienter: they flow outward to others as well. It is especially notable that participants who were prompted to think about an experiential purchase were more generous to anonymous others, recipients they knew they would never meet, and who would never know they had acted generously.

## General Discussion

Gratitude may not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of “consumerism.” But what we have shown here is that a certain type of consumption—experiential consumption—is more likely to foster feelings of gratitude than the consumption of material goods. And by prompting greater feelings of gratitude, it also leads to more prosocial behavior.

We obtained evidence for these beneficial effects of experiential consumption from a variety of different types of studies. In Study 1, we directly asked participants whether they felt more grateful for a recent experiential purchase or a recent material purchase and

a significant majority said the former. Using a between-subjects design in Studies 2a and 2b, we found that those asked about a recent experiential purchase reported being significantly more grateful for it than those asked about a material purchase. Study 3 looked at expressions of gratitude in daily life, finding that customers expressed more gratitude on websites devoted to experiences (Yelp and TripAdvisor) than on websites devoted to material goods (CNet and Amazon). Studies 4a and 4b examined whether the increased gratitude people feel as a result of their experiential purchases might have notable downstream consequences. Building on prior work showing that gratitude encourages people's altruistic impulses (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno et al., 2010), we found that participants asked to reflect on a significant experiential purchase responded more generously in the dictator game than those asked to reflect on a significant material purchase.

We earlier laid out several reasons why experiential consumption might promote more gratitude. Experiences tend to be evaluated more on their own terms (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), and less in terms of how they stack up with the experiences of others, and thus foster more of an intrinsic than extrinsic orientation (Van Boven et al., 2010). Feeling in tune with one's inner values is likely to promote more of a sense of gratitude than dividing one's attention between what one has and what others have. Experiences also tend to contribute more to a person's identity than material goods (Carter & Gilovich, 2012) and anything that boosts a person's sense of self—the sense that one's life is rich and there are fewer personal deficits to hide, overcome, or compensate for—is also likely to enhance gratitude. Finally, experiences do more to foster social connection than material goods do (Kumar et al., 2016) and by furthering this fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), they are likely to promote greater feelings of gratitude as well.

Although sorting out the relative contributions of each of these mechanisms awaits the results of future research, the fact that thinking about notable experiential purchases makes people more generous to others highlights the importance of the tendency of experiences to foster social connection. We have found in other work that not only do people feel more similar to someone who made the same experiential purchase that they did than to someone who made the same material purchase, but also that thinking about a notable experiential purchase makes people feel more connected to humankind generally as well (Kumar et al., 2016). It is this greater feeling of connection to others, in general, that likely makes people more inclined to act altruistically, as we saw in participants' responses in the dictator game in Studies 4a and 4b. Participants in the experiential conditions in those studies were not acting generously to a benefactor or even to an identifiable individual who had not provided them with an earlier benefit, but to an abstract, anonymous other.

These findings highlight a potential distinction between two different types of gratitude. Most of the research on gratitude has focused on what might be called “targeted” gratitude—the sense of appreciation and indebtedness one feels when one receives a specific benefit (or benefits) from a particular person (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno et al., 2010; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; McCullough et al., 2001; Tsang, 2006). The special emphasis on this sort of gratitude reflects the fact that it is likely the most frequently experienced type of gratitude. But it may not be the type of gratitude that most of our participants felt when they were asked

to reflect on a notable experiential purchase. The gratitude our participants felt is more likely to be “untargeted”—the kind of gratitude felt over one's good fortune that is not attributable to the actions of another individual. Indeed, we have found in other research that people characterize the gratitude they feel over a notable material purchase as more specific and targeted than what they feel over a significant experiential purchase, which tends to be more diffuse and untargeted (Walker & Gilovich, 2016).

Targeted gratitude typically comes with a very powerful feeling, fueled by the norm of reciprocity (McCullough et al., 2008), of wanting to give back to the person who provided the earlier benefit. To be sure, it can carry over and lead to giving to other individuals as well, as past research has shown (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006). But we suspect that the urge to “give back” that stems from untargeted gratitude is more broadly felt, encouraging a desire to pay forward as well as back. The emotional state of feeling grateful when there is no one to thank—when one feels grateful for being alive, for good fortune, or, yes, for an unusually satisfying experience—can lead to a powerful urge to do something with that gratitude, such as giving to anonymous others. This is presumably the motivation that drove the generosity we observed on the part of participants who had reflected on a significant experiential purchase in Studies 4a and 4b.

The distinction between targeted and untargeted gratitude is relevant to recent work on people's reactions to gifts they've received. Paralleling the finding that experiential consumption fosters greater feelings of social connection than material consumption (Kumar et al., 2016; Van Boven et al., 2010), Chan and Mogilner (2016) have shown that people tend to feel closer to those who've given them experiential gifts than those who've given them material gifts. In that context, it is a very targeted sense of connection, and the gratitude one feels—for *receiving* the gift, that is—is likely to be targeted as well. But it would be interesting to see if that changes after the gift is *consumed*. Does the gratitude one feels tend to broaden and become less targeted after spending a week at a mountain resort, being moved to tears by a Broadway play, or cashing in a gift certificate for trapeze or singing lessons?

As we noted earlier, experiential purchases tend to contribute more to a person's sense of self than material purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), which, at first glance, might seem to encourage a greater self-focus as well. However, that possibility is belied by the results of Studies 4a and 4b, where the generosity of participants who had reflected on an experiential purchase would seem to indicate that they were *less* self-focused. Or at least the self they were focused on was a quieter, less selfish sort. Prior research has noted that experiential purchases facilitate thoughts of a social self that is connected to others (Kumar et al., 2016) and perhaps less needy and less individualistic. As a result, we suspect that there are parallels between our work and studies of the experience of awe, which researchers have found to encourage a quieter sense of self (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). The untargeted gratitude that experiential purchases engender can, at least at times, overlap with the experience of awe and likewise lead to a quieter self.

Two caveats are worth mentioning here. We found in Studies 1–3 that thinking about experiential purchases inspires more gratitude than thinking about their material purchases, and in Studies 4a and 4b that doing also inspires more altruism. We did not, however, collect evidence that the enhanced feelings of gratitude

that experiences inspire are directly responsible for the enhanced altruism. We didn't do so simply because past research has clearly established that gratitude promotes giving to others (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno et al., 2010). There is thus solid evidence for both elements in the causal chain: Thinking about one's experiential purchases promotes gratitude (Studies 1, 2a, 2b, and 3) and feeling grateful promotes altruism (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; DeSteno et al., 2010).

We also found that thinking about past experiential purchases made participants happier and more satisfied than thinking about material purchases, in addition to feeling more grateful. People tend to behave more altruistically when they are in a positive mood (Isen, 1987), and so these more general positive feelings may have contributed to the observed greater generosity on the part of those prompted to think about their experiential purchases. Feeling grateful and being in a good mood are inherently linked and therefore likely to work in tandem whenever reflecting on a past experiential purchase that inspires a sense of gratitude. However, it should be noted that a fair amount of past research has shown that gratitude is a stronger, more reliable spur to altruistic action than simple positive affect (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Tsang, 2006; see also DeSteno, 2009, and McCullough et al., 2008).

We noted earlier that one impetus for conducting this research was that we believe it is important for researchers to document simple, reliable ways to elicit feelings of gratitude. These studies provide evidence that consuming experiences instead of things is one way to do so. But this suggestion, of course, pushes the question one step back: how, then, might we nudge people to buy experiences rather than material goods? One intriguing possibility is that the consumption of experiential pursuits and the feelings of gratitude that result from doing so might create a "virtuous cycle," wherein consuming experiences causes people to feel grateful, which, in turn, might lead them to opt for even more experiential consumption. That is, the enhanced gratitude brought about by experiential consumption may lead to a less materialistic orientation, prompting even more gratitude, and so on. This seems especially likely in light of previous research demonstrating that gratitude can decrease material desires (Lambert et al., 2009; Polak & McCullough, 2006). Feeling grateful as a consequence of earlier experiences may lead people to forgo material consumption and opt for more experiences in the future.

The possibility of such a positive feedback loop further highlights the value to society that might result from making experiences easier to consume (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015b). As a naturalistic behavior that is relatively resistant to adaptation, experiential consumption may be an especially easy way to encourage the experience of gratitude. All one needs to do is spend a little less on material goods and a little more on experiences. And as we have shown, in addition to enhancing gratitude, experiential consumption may also increase the likelihood that people will cooperate and show kindness to each other. Our results thus lend weight to the notion that governments might increase the general well-being of their citizens by providing infrastructure and incentives that make it easier for people to consume experiences (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015). Although it would surely be asking too much of any public policy to make people grateful for the regular functioning of their anatomy (as aptly expressed by Ms. Spektor), a society that makes it easier

for its citizens to have satisfying experiences is likely to reap the benefits of a more grateful and altruistic outlook.

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