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Investing in the real me: Preference for experiential to material purchases driven by the motivation to search for true self-knowledge

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ABSTRACT

One mechanism underlying the hedonic benefits of experiential purchases is that one's core self is more centrally reflected in experiential purchases. However, little is known about whether people consume experiential purchases as a means of discovering their true self. The present research explored the possibility that people value experiential purchases as a potential tool for understanding their true self. Consistent with the hypothesis, Study 1 demonstrated that experiential purchases were perceived to be a more valuable source of gaining knowledge about one's true self compared to material purchases. Using correlational methods, Study 2 found that the motivation to search for true self-knowledge positively predicted preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. Finally, Study 3 showed a causal effect of motivation to search for true self-knowledge on a tendency to prefer experiential purchases to material purchases. Implications and future directions for well-being research and marketing are discussed.

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The only journey is the journey within. – Rainer Maria Rilke

Many philosophers extol the virtues of understanding one's core self and using it as a guide when deciding how to live. A recent stream of psychological research has demonstrated that the perception of knowing one's *true self*, defined as who a person really is "deep down inside," is linked to enhanced subjective well-being (Ryan, LaGuardia, & Rawsthorne, 2005; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997) and decision satisfaction (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013). Although people often report that they are motivated to know who they really are (i.e., their true self), it is unclear what types of behaviors and activities increase perceived true self-knowledge. A body of research on experiential and material purchases offers a hint to this question. According to Carter and Gilovich (2012), experiential purchases (i.e., spending money on life experiences) are more centrally positioned in one's inner and core self than material purchases (i.e., spending money on material goods). Their research suggests that

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experiential purchases might help one “discover” his or her true self. In the current studies, we explored whether people have lay theories about the functionality of experiential purchases for gaining insight into the true self, and whether people who are motivated to learn about their true self are more likely to prefer experiential purchases over material purchases.

Purchasing behaviors and the construction of self

The idea that consumptive behaviors facilitate the construction (or reconstruction) of self and identity is not new. In his formulation of the extended self, Belk (1988) argues that purchasing behaviors can contribute to the self-concept when acquired material possessions are imbued with self-relevant symbolic meanings (Mehta & Belk, 1991; Schouten, 1991; Solomon, 1983). For instance, by simply purchasing sophisticated books and displaying them on a bookshelf, one would be able to add an image of intelligence to his or her old self-concept. The creation of the self-concept mediated by purchasing behaviors is facilitated particularly by the motivation to approach desirable possible selves or avoid undesirable possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Purchasing behaviors are also made in an attempt to maintain or bolster one’s well-established self-view when there is a threat to the self (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Kim & Rucker, 2012). For example, Gao et al. (2009) demonstrated that an intelligence-related product (e.g., a fountain pen) was more likely to be chosen than an intelligence-unrelated product (e.g., M&M candies) when one is less confident about her level of intelligence.

The key assumption of the extended self theory is that products foster self-understanding to the extent that they are perceived as symbolizing certain aspects of one’s self-concept. This further suggests that people may be able to gain self-insight and self-knowledge more by engaging in purchases that are rich in self-relevant symbolic meanings. If so, what types of purchasing behaviors are more functional for discovering one’s true and core self?

Functionality of experiential purchases for knowing true self

Previous research suggests that experiential purchases may lead to more self-knowledge compared to material purchases. According to research on experiential and material purchases, engaging in experiential purchases (i.e., garnering life experiences such as a trip to NYC) compared to material purchases (i.e., having material goods such as a designer bag) produce more satisfaction and happiness (e.g., Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Providing explanations for this hedonic advantage of experiential purchases, researchers have found three psychological mechanisms relevant to our argument about the functionality of experiential purchases for true self-knowledge. First, experiential purchases are less likely to incur social comparison than material purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). This is argued to enable one to act in accord with one’s values, feelings, and desires (Goldman, 2006). Second, experiential purchases boost happiness by helping people form and maintain social relationships (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Fulfilling needs for belonging and relatedness is a crucial source for finding a sense of meaning and purpose in one’s life (Lambert et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). These markers of well-being have been strongly linked to perceived self-knowledge (Schlegel et al., 2009, 2011).

Most relevant to the current article, the third mechanism is grounded in recent findings showing that experiential purchases are more central to one’s inner and core self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). In Carter and Gilovich (2012)’s research, for example, people positioned

experiential purchases physically much closer to their self than material purchases, were more likely to feature experiential purchases in their life stories, and evaluated histories of experiential purchases as worthwhile information in knowing one's true self. According to their argument, experiential purchases are more central to the self because they are processed as mental representations and reconstructed as a form of autobiographical memory that often constitutes an important part of self-concept (Klein, 2001). This centrality of experiential purchases to the true self suggests that people may have some level of awareness that experiential purchases are functional for understanding who they truly are "deep inside."

That experiential purchases serve a function of knowing one's true self is also echoed in research on intrinsic motivation and eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001; Waterman, 1990, 1993). According to self-determination theory, engaging in intrinsically motivated activities results in feelings of eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Eudaimonia refers to a subjective state that is often experienced when one is pursuing important life goals and realizing his or her best personal potential (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Similarly, Waterman (2004) proposed the eudaimonistic identity theory, arguing that individuals can progress toward self-realization by engaging in intrinsically motivated, personally expressive activities (i.e., eudaimonia; Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008; Waterman et al., 2003). These theories all suggest that intrinsically motivated activity has a self-realization value. Given the evidence that experiential purchases are often perceived to be intrinsically motivated (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010; Zhang, Howell, & Caprariello, 2013), they should have a similar self-realization value. That is, life experiences are typically purchased for their own sake and are driven by goals of self-fulfillment. On the contrary, material purchases are less likely to have self-realization value relative to experiential purchases, especially when they serve as a means to attain extrinsic goals (e.g., to be famous or popular; Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

In short, experiential purchases should help one gain true self-knowledge due to their low involvement with social comparisons, facilitation of social connectedness, centrality to the self, and their intrinsically motivated nature. From this theoretical starting point, we advanced hypotheses regarding people's belief in the functionality of experiential purchases for true self-knowledge and their preferences for experiential purchases over material purchases as a function of their motivation to search for self-knowledge.

A lay belief about the self-knowledge functionality of experiential purchases

As reviewed above, extant literature on experiential and material purchases and theories of intrinsic motivation and eudaimonia lend credence to the proposition that engaging in experiential purchases is more helpful in understanding one's true self than engaging in material purchases. Indeed, recent research demonstrated that experiential purchases are characterized as reflecting one's true identity and expressing one's core self-concept (Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Zhang, Howell, Caprariello, & Guevarra, 2014). However, one potentially important question remains unanswered: Are people aware of the functionality of experiential purchases for knowing the true self? If experiential purchases are more functional for knowing the true self than material purchases, people may have already learned the association between spending money on life experiences and gaining true self-knowledge by engaging in experiential purchases. Additionally, people often purchase life experiences for intrinsic reasons whereas they often buy material goods for extrinsic

reasons (Kasser et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2013), suggesting that people may have very different expectations about what psychological outcomes experiential and material purchases can provide. In this sense, we argue that people would hold a lay belief that experiential purchases are more instrumental to knowing one's true self than material purchases (Hypothesis 1).

Motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases

If laypeople commonly share a conception that experiential purchases are functional for acquiring true self-knowledge, it follows that life experiences are more likely to be consumed than material goods to the extent that a person is motivated to search his or her real self. Although people may innately strive for self-realization and self-discovery (Maslow, 1968; Wu, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2011), the degree to which each individual is motivated to search for true self-knowledge varies (Berzonsky, 2008; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Marcia, 1966). As such, we believe people will be more likely to choose experiential purchases to the extent that they are highly motivated to search for their true self. Indeed, one important motive for sustained participation in high-risk activities, such as skydiving, is a desire to construct a new identity (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993). In contrast, if a consumer craves other secular motives (e.g., popularity), material products will be perceived as more attractive relative to experiential purchases as they often fulfill materialistic needs (Ferraro et al., 2011; Kasser et al., 2004; Richins & Dawson, 1992).¹ Thus, we predicted that there would be a positive relationship between motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases such that people who are highly motivated to search for the true self would favor experiential purchases over material purchases than their less motivated peers (Hypothesis 2).²

Overview of the present research

In the present research, we conducted three studies to test these hypotheses.³ When describing the true self and knowledge thereof, we did not provide participants with any definitions of what the true self is; rather, we relied on their own subjective interpretations, and sometimes used "who you really are inside" to describe the true self. In assessing attitudes and judgments about experiential and material purchases, we offered the standard definition of experiential and material purchases (Studies 2 and 3; see Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) and presented specific items that are exemplars of the two purchase types without mentioning experiential or material purchases per se (Study 1). In Study 1, we tested H1 by exploring how people think about a set of experiential and material items in terms of their usefulness for acquiring true self-knowledge. Studies 2 and 3 were conducted to test H2 using different research designs. Study 2 tested H2 by examining whether motivation to search for the true self predicted a trait tendency to prefer experiential purchases to material purchases over and above effects of other relevant variables. Finally, Study 3 tested H2 by adopting an experimental methodology, in which participants' motivation to search for true self-knowledge was manipulated and subsequent preference for experiential purchases was measured. On the basis of prior research and theories supporting the link between experiential purchases and true self-knowledge, we predicted that people would hold a belief that experiential purchases are more functional for knowing the true self than material

purchases, that motivation to search for the true self would be a unique and meaningful predictor for preference for experiential purchases, and that people highly motivated to search for true self-knowledge would favor experiential purchases to material purchases than their less motivated peers.

Study 1: A lay belief about the true self-knowledge functionality of experiential purchases

The goal of Study 1 was to examine whether people believe experiential purchases are more functional for acquiring true self-knowledge than material purchases (H1). To achieve this goal, we gave participants various consumption situations consisting of experiential and material items and had them answer questions about their willingness to pay for each item, anticipated satisfaction and regret with each purchase, and, importantly, the extent to which each purchase would lead to self-knowledge. We predicted that experiential purchases would be perceived as a more effective tool for knowing one's true self than material purchases, and that this belief would not be a mere reflection of differences in willingness to pay for each type of purchase.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty-seven undergraduate students (111 females, 40 males, 6 unidentified) recruited from a large public university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old ($M = 18.87$, $SD = .90$). A majority of participants were White (65.0%) and non-Hispanic (73.2%).

Materials and procedure

Participants considered twenty hypothetical purchasing situations consisting of ten experiential purchases and ten material purchases adopted from previous research (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015a, 2015b). The set of experiential purchases included tickets to a sporting event, a beach vacation, ski passes, a meal at a nice restaurant, concert tickets, a trip to the zoo, movie tickets, fees for an outdoor activity, a cruise package, and a trip to New York City. The set of material purchases included a jacket, pair of jeans, shirt, television set, stereo speakers, iPod, wristwatch, diamond necklace, designer wallet, and laptop computer. Previous studies have shown that these two sets of the experiential and material purchases were equivalent in their subjective attractiveness (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015a, 2015b).

Participants were first asked to indicate their willingness to pay (WTP) for each purchase. There were no pre-assigned ranges in the amount of money they were allowed to spend on each purchase; responses were open-ended and participants simply provided the monetary value they were willing to pay for each purchase. Participants then rated the expected functionality of each purchase for knowing true self-knowledge (e.g., "After going to the beach vacation, to what extent do you think it would help you know who you really are?"), anticipated satisfaction with each purchase (e.g., "How satisfied do you think you would be with the beach vacation?"), and anticipated regret making each purchase (e.g., "How much do you think you would regret going to the beach vacation?") on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). Each purchase was presented in random order.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of willingness to pay, perceived functionality for acquiring true self-knowledge, satisfaction, and regret for experiential and material purchases (Study 1).

	WTP (\$)	TSK Functionality	Satisfaction	Regret
<i>Experiential purchases</i>				
Sporting event	219.35 (612.21)	2.87 (1.90)	5.23 (1.67)	2.33 (1.49)
Beach vacation	2888.26 (12,272.51)	3.97 (1.81)	6.33 (1.04)	1.79 (1.26)
Ski passes	444.60 (645.59)	3.25 (1.85)	5.52 (1.57)	2.00 (1.41)
Eating out	68.36 (92.42)	2.64 (1.84)	6.02 (1.07)	2.31 (1.43)
Concert ticket	296.30 (1053.68)	3.44 (1.93)	5.99 (1.19)	1.82 (1.13)
Trip to zoo	47.08 (77.30)	3.03 (1.83)	4.99 (1.51)	2.13 (1.47)
Movie ticket	11.03 (5.29)	2.85 (1.75)	5.31 (1.14)	2.07 (1.14)
Outdoor activity	519.58 (1203.28)	4.42 (1.91)	5.95 (1.40)	1.71 (1.24)
Cruise package	1834.88 (2327.21)	3.29 (1.79)	5.99 (1.33)	2.19 (1.49)
Trip to NYC	1967.23 (2628.44)	3.96 (1.86)	6.06 (1.23)	1.85 (1.34)
<i>Material purchases</i>				
Jacket	109.36 (207.25)	2.55 (1.81)	5.73 (1.04)	1.96 (1.02)
Jeans	62.92 (48.43)	2.40 (1.74)	5.53 (1.12)	2.03 (1.11)
Shirt	37.14 (46.03)	2.65 (1.71)	5.54 (1.10)	2.28 (1.31)
TV set	803.42 (1055.25)	2.40 (1.58)	5.62 (1.31)	2.43 (1.47)
Speaker	112.41 (124.23)	2.10 (1.57)	5.24 (1.59)	2.53 (1.61)
iPod	162.43 (108.79)	2.64 (1.72)	4.94 (1.68)	2.81 (1.83)
Wristwatch	4342.10 (40,941.45)	2.50 (1.79)	5.33 (1.53)	2.41 (1.57)
Diamond necklace	12,293.25 (89,942.10)	2.26 (1.76)	4.88 (1.94)	3.50 (2.07)
Designer wallet	125.49 (187.93)	2.24 (1.60)	4.74 (1.71)	3.19 (1.76)
Laptop	1178.51 (684.02)	3.12 (1.96)	6.31 (.88)	1.69 (1.21)

Notes. WTP = Willingness to pay. TKS = True self-knowledge. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Results

We first examined whether participants displayed any difference in their WTP for the ten experiential purchases and the ten material purchases and found that there was no significant difference between the two purchase types, $t(156) = 1.08, p = .28$, although WTP for material purchases ($M = 1910.33, SD = 12,978.52$) was considerably higher than WTP for experiential purchases ($M = 827.51, SD = 1494.91$). More importantly, we found a significant difference in the ratings of self-knowledge functionality between the experiential and the material purchases, $t(156) = 12.82, p < .001, d = .64$. Consistent with the hypothesis, participants evaluated the experiential purchases ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.37, \alpha = .91$) to be a more valuable investment for understanding one's true self than the material purchases ($M = 2.50, SD = 1.37, \alpha = .93$). For the anticipated satisfaction with the purchases, we found that the experiential purchases ($M = 5.74, SD = .71, \alpha = .72$) were expected to be more satisfying than the material purchases ($M = 5.38, SD = .84, \alpha = .79$), $t(156) = 7.52, p < .001, d = .45$. Similarly, the experiential purchases ($M = 2.03, SD = .77, \alpha = .76$) were expected to be less regretful than the material purchases ($M = 2.49, SD = .97, \alpha = .84$), $t(156) = 9.28, p < .001, d = .50$. These results are consistent with the previous literature on the stronger hedonic expectations associated with experiential compared to material purchases (e.g., Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014; Pchelin & Howell, 2014). Results of all four variables for each purchase are presented in Table 1.

Comparisons of purely material products, experiential products, and purely experiential purchases

Guevarra and Howell (2015) demonstrated that material goods that also enable experiences (so-called *experiential products*, such as electronic gadgets), provide hedonic advantages

similar to more purely experiential purchases that lack a substantial material component (e.g., dining out). Thus, a lay belief in the self-knowledge functionality of experiential purchases might also be present in the domain of experiential products, not only in the domain of purely experiential purchases. To investigate this possibility, we reanalyzed the data with a set of purchases categorized into purely material products, experiential products, and purely experiential purchases. Experiential products (i.e., television set, stereo speakers, iPod, and laptop computer) were distinguished from purely material products (i.e., a jacket, pair of jeans, shirt, wristwatch, diamond necklace, and designer wallet) following the criteria from previous research (Guevarra & Howell, 2015). The ten purely experiential purchases remained together as a single category.

First, we explored whether there was a difference in WTP among the three purchase types. A repeated measures ANOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in WTP among purely material purchases ($M = 2804.6231$, $SD = 21,533.15$), experiential products ($M = 569.97$, $SD = 389.20$), and purely experiential purchases ($M = 827.51$, $SD = 1494.91$), $F(2, 312) = 1.56$, $p = .21$. Regarding the lay belief about the purchases' functionality of knowing true self, the analysis found that there was a significant difference among the three purchase types, $F(2, 312) = 93.80$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .38$. Bonferroni-adjusted *post hoc* tests correction revealed that purely experiential purchases ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.37$, $\alpha = .91$) were evaluated to be more effective for knowing one's true self than experiential products ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.37$, $\alpha = .81$), $p < .001$, and purely material purchases ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .92$), $p < .001$, while there was no significant difference in the perceived true self-knowledge functionality between experiential products and material purchases, $p = .23$. This result suggests that people believe that purchasing actual life experiences, compared to products that produce or facilitate certain experiences, is more helpful for understanding who they really are. For the anticipated satisfaction and regret, we found that there were significant differences among the purchase types, $F(2, 312) = 28.68$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .16$ and $F(2, 312) = 40.87$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .21$, respectively. A *post hoc* test revealed that purely experiential purchases were perceived as more satisfying ($M = 5.74$, $SD = .71$, $\alpha = .72$) and less regrettable ($M = 2.03$, $SD = .77$, $\alpha = .76$) compared to experiential products and material purchases, all $ps < .01$. We also found that experiential products were reported to be more satisfying and less regrettable than purely material purchases ($M = 5.52$, $SD = .98$, $\alpha = .66$ vs. $M = 5.29$, $SD = .89$, $\alpha = .66$), $p = .001$ and ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.09$, $\alpha = .67$ vs. $M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .75$), $p = .005$, respectively. This finding is consistent with the previous research demonstrating the hedonic advantages of experiential products over pure material purchases (e.g., Guevarra & Howell, 2015).

Additional analyses

In order to rule out the possibility that the present results could be entirely explained in terms of WTP, we tested whether purchase type continued to predict purchases' perceived self-knowledge functionality after controlling for WTP. Because these variables were nested within persons, we analyzed the data using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with HLM7 software (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, Congdon, & du Toit, 2011) to account for the lack of independence among observations. Two levels were included in the models we tested. Level 1 represented purchase evaluations nested within individuals, and Level 2 represented differences between individuals (no Level 2 predictors were included in the model). Following

guidelines from Rosenthal, Rosnow, and Rubin (2000), we used the obtained t and df to calculate effect size r coefficients.

We ran a model using restricted maximum likelihood estimation, in which purchases' perceived true self-knowledge functionality was entered as the outcome variable, and purchase type (experiential vs. material) and WTP were entered as predictors. Results of this model indicated that WTP significantly predicted the purchases' perceived true self-knowledge functionality, $b = .0002$ ($SE = .00003$), $t(156) = 7.20$, $p < .001$, $r = .50$. More importantly, however, purchase type continued to significantly predict the outcome when this relationship was accounted for, $b = .83$ ($SE = .07$), $t(156) = 12.04$, $p < .001$, $r = .69$. These results indicate that the greater perceived functionality of experiential purchases for knowing one's true self than material purchases is not merely a justification of one's monetary investment on experiential purchases, but may be due to the essential differences between experiential and material purchases.⁴

Discussion

Whereas Carter and Gilovich (2012) find that people believe experiential purchases better reflect one's sense of self, Study 1 advances this research by exploring beliefs about these purchases' functional importance. That is, Study 1 demonstrated that people have a lay belief that experiential purchases are a better means of understanding who they really are than material purchases. Notably, our findings further suggest that people's belief about the functionality of experiential purchases in gaining true self-knowledge does not simply originate from a motivation to justify their willingness to spend money on experiential purchases. Our findings instead suggest that people may recognize the self-realization value of experiences (Waterman, 1990, 1993), and subsequently, develop a belief that owning life experiences rather than material possessions would be more helpful in the acquisition of true self-knowledge. Additionally, Study 1 demonstrated that lay beliefs about the functionality of experiential purchases for gaining true self-knowledge seem to primarily apply to purely experiential purchases (i.e., life experiences), rather than experiential products and purely material goods. We also found that experiential products and pure material goods did not differ in terms of their perceived true self-knowledge functionality. This is an interesting finding given the evidence for hedonic advantages of experiential products over purely material goods (Guevarra & Howell, 2015).

Based on the findings of Study 1, Studies 2 and 3 were designed to test the hypothesis that experiential purchases would be more favored than material purchases to the extent that one is motivated to search for true self-knowledge. If experiential purchases are perceived as a better means of being in touch with one's true self, people who are highly motivated to search for their true self should seek experiential purchases more than material purchases. Although people generally endorse the importance of knowing one's true self (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012), there is also variability in the degree to which individuals are motivated to pursue self-knowledge (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Thus, we hypothesized that an individual level of the motivation to search for the true self would predict a preference toward experiential purchases.

Study 2: Motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential over material purchases

Study 1 demonstrated a lay belief that experiential purchases can indeed help one garner true self-knowledge. The existence of this lay belief implies that people may want to buy life experiences to the extent that they have an innate need to learn about who they are “deep down inside.” The aim of Study 2 was to explore how motivation to search for the true self is associated with preference for experiential purchases. The motivation to search for one’s true self is conceptualized as the desire to understand and engage in proactive behaviors to discover who one *really* is, at their core self. To achieve this purpose, we measured participants’ motivation to search for their true self, tendency to seek experiential purchases over material purchases, as well as relevant covariates (e.g., materialism). We hypothesized that the motivation to search for the true self would predict a preference for experiential purchases over and beyond other relevant factors (H2).

Method

Participants

One hundred and twelve undergraduate students (53 females, 59 males) recruited from a large public university participated in the study in exchange for course credit. Their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years old ($M = 18.79$, $SD = .88$). Participants were predominantly White (72.3%) and non-Hispanic (76.8%).

Materials and procedure

Participants completed a survey that consisted of various questionnaires including motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. We also measured other variables that are known to be associated with preference for experiential purchases such as materialism, the Big Five personality traits, and satisfaction with life.

Motivation to search for the true self. To measure participants’ level of motivation to search for their true self, we created three face-valid items (i.e., “how much do you want to understand more about yourself?”, “how much do you care about knowing your true-self?”, and “how important is it that you know who you really are?”). Responses to each item were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) and were averaged to create a composite score ($M = 5.91$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .92$).

Preference for experiential over material purchases. A modified version of the Experiential Buying Tendency Scale (EBTS; Howell et al., 2012) was used to assess participants’ preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. The original version of the EBTS consists of four items, assessing people’s dispositional tendency to prefer spending money on experiential items versus material items (e.g., “In general, when I have extra money I am likely to buy...” 1 = *a material item*, 7 = *a life experience*). Prior to completing the EBTS, participants read a brief description of how experiential and material purchases are distinguished (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003):

A material purchase is to spend money with the primary intention of acquiring a material possession – a tangible object that you obtain and keep in your possession such as jewelry or clothes. An experiential purchase is to spend money with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience – an event or series of events that you personally encounter or live through such as going out to dinner or going on vacation.

The EBTS is shown to be a reliable and valid measure and predicts consumer choice and psychological well-being (Howell et al., 2012). For this study, we added one more item that captures momentary intention for experiential purchases over material purchases (“Right now, if I had extra money I’d be likely to buy...” 1 = a material item, 7 = a life experience). Composite scores of the EBTS were created by averaging responses ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.00$, $\alpha = .63$).

Covariates. We assessed three different traits that are known to be relevant to purchase preferences: Materialism, Big Five personality traits, and satisfaction with life. First, it has been well documented that materialistic people have aspirations for extrinsic values such as financial success and fame and are less motivated to pursue intrinsic values such as self-acceptance and self-growth (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Therefore, it is possible that interests in experiential purchases among those who are motivated to search for the true self are actually explained by a low level of materialism. To examine this possibility, we measured individual materialism using the Material Value Scale (MVS; Richins & Dawson, 1992). The MVS has 18 items that constitutes three subscales: material possessions as a standard of success in one’s life (e.g., “I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes”), the centrality of material possessions in one’s life (e.g., “The things I own aren’t all that important to me”- reverse coded), and the belief that material possessions leads to happiness (e.g., “I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things”). Responses to each item were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to compute composite materialism scores ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .45$, $\alpha = .80$).

Second, some personality traits might account for the proposed link between motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases. For instance, people high in extraversion and/or openness to experience might be interested in both knowing more about their true self and having more life experiences. Indeed, it has been shown that extraversion and openness are associated with the experiential purchasing tendency (Howell et al., 2012). Thus, we measured personality traits through the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).

Finally, it is possible that both motivation for true self-knowledge and preference for experiential purchases are characteristics of happy people. For example, happiness is linked with pursuit of intrinsic, self-concordant goals (e.g., Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) and investment of money on experiential purchases (e.g., Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Although happiness is often considered a consequence of having an intrinsic motivation and buying experiential items, it is still possible that the relationship between motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases depends on individuals’ levels of happiness. To control for happiness, we assessed participants’ life satisfaction through the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The five items of the SWLS (e.g., “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to create a composite score of life satisfaction ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.15$, $\alpha = .86$).

Table 2. Summary of intercorrelations, means, and standard deviations for motivation to search for the true self, experiential buying tendency, materialistic value, big 5 personalities, and life satisfaction (Study 2).

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Search for TS	–								
2. EBTS	.25**	–							
3. MVS	–.03	–.41***	–						
4. Extraversion	.08	.24*	.09	–					
5. Agreeableness	.23**	.01	–.02 [†]	.26**	–				
6. Conscientiousness	.28**	.18 [†]	–.22*	.20*	.36***	–			
7. Emotional stability	.11	.09	–.10	.16	.36***	.31**	–		
8. Openness	.32**	.29**	–.12	.44***	.37***	.44***	.30**	–	
9. SWL	.35***	.25**	–.10	.19*	.15	.20*	.32**	.23*	–
<i>M</i>	5.91	4.37	2.97	4.49	4.83	4.66	4.73	4.96	5.07
<i>SD</i>	1.13	1.00	.45	1.28	1.13	1.04	1.21	1.22	1.15

Note. Search for TS = Search for True Self; EBTS = Experiential Buying Tendency Scale; MVS = Materialistic Value Scale; SWL = Satisfaction With Life.

[†] $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Motivation to search for the true self was positively correlated with the EBTS ($r = .25, p = .007$), indicating that people high in motivation to search for the true self were more likely to express their interests in making experiential purchases than material purchases (see Table 2). MVS was negatively correlated with the EBTS ($r = -.41, p < .001$). Agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience were correlated with motivation to search for the true self ($r = .23, p = .016$; $r = .28, p = .002$; $r = .32, p = .001$, respectively). Consistent with the previous research (e.g., Howell et al., 2012), the EBTS was positively correlated with extraversion and openness to experience personality traits ($r = .24, p = .012$; $r = .29, p = .002$, respectively). Also, life satisfaction was positively correlated with motivation to search for the true self and the EBTS ($r = .35, p < .001$; $r = .25, p = .007$, respectively).

Primary analyses

A hierarchical linear regression model was created to test whether motivation for the true self predicted preference for experiential purchases above and beyond the relevant variables. In the first step, the personality traits, the MVS, and the SWLS were entered to represent the main effects. Motivation to search for the true self was entered in the second step to examine if it still predicted the EBTS while the MVS and the SWLS were controlled. As presented in Table 3, the first step contributed to predicting the EBTS (R^2 change = .30, $p < .001$) with extraversion ($\beta = .20, p = .03$), the MVS ($\beta = -.40, p < .001$), and the SWL ($\beta = .17, p = .062$) significantly predicting the EBTS. Importantly, the second step revealed that the motivation to search for the true self significantly predicted the EBTS while controlling for personality traits, the MVS, and the SWL (R^2 change = .272, $\beta = .19, p = .044$). Using the measure tapping one's own motivation to search for the true self, Study 2 provided supporting evidence for our notion that people prefer experiential to material purchases to the extent to which they are motivated to know their true self.

Table 3. Regression analyses: Predicting preference for experiential to material purchases from personality traits, the materialistic value, satisfaction with life, and motivation to search for the true self (Study 2).

Predictor	EBTS			
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2
<i>Step 1</i>				
Extraversion	.16	.20	2.18*	
Openness	.14	.18	1.70†	
Agreeableness	-.11	-.13	-1.32	
Conscientiousness	-.003	-.003	-.03	
Emotional stability	-.04	-.04	-.46	
MVS	-.89	-.40	-4.60**	
SWL	.15	.17	1.89†	.298*
<i>Step 2</i>				
Extraversion	.18	.23	2.47*	
Openness	.11	.13	1.25	
Agreeableness	-.13	-.15	-1.57	
Conscientiousness	-.03	-.03	-.32	
Emotional stability	-.02	-.02	-.21	
MVS	-.91	-.41	-4.81**	
SWL	.09	.11	1.17	
Search for TS	.17	.19	2.04*	.027*

Note. Search for TS = Search for True Self; EBTS = Experiential Buying Tendency Scale; MVS = Materialistic Value Scale; SWL = Satisfaction With Life.

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

Study 2 provides evidence that experiential purchases are more likely to be favored than material purchases as one's motivation to search for the true self increases. This association between motivation to search for the true self and preference for experiential purchases was not explained by materialistic tendency, satisfaction with life, and relevant personality variables.

One important limitation of Study 2 is that we used a correlational design, thereby offering only indirect evidence for the causal effect of motivation to search for the true self on preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. Although the results of Study 2 ruled out the possibility that certain third variables (e.g., materialism) explain away the proposed link, it is still necessary to examine whether experimentally induced motivation to search for the true self subsequently leads to preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. Study 3 was designed to test this causal hypothesis.

Study 3: Induction of motivation to search for true self-knowledge and subsequent changes in preference for experiential over material purchases

In Study 3, we developed an experimental manipulation for the motivation to search for true self-knowledge. Participants completed the manipulation, and we assessed subsequent changes in preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. In the manipulation, we created divergent levels of motivation to search for the true self by augmenting or undermining the importance of possessing true self-knowledge. We predicted that people who were induced to be highly motivated to search for the true self would show a stronger

preference for experiential purchases over material purchases compared to their counterparts who were less motivated to search for true self-knowledge.

Method

Participants

One hundred and fifty individuals (72 females, 78 males) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform and paid \$1.00 in exchange for their participation. They were 18 to 62 years old ($M = 32.09$, $SD = 11.01$) and predominantly White (77.3%) and non-Hispanic (92.7%).

Materials and procedure

Participants read a short paragraph that described how knowing one's true self is related to real life outcomes such as better decisions and higher well-being. In the *high motivation to search for true self-knowledge* condition ($N = 73$), it was argued that true self-knowledge benefits people in various ways, and empirical research provides supporting evidence. They were then asked to write about their two personal experiences where they made a good decision using true self-knowledge as a guide (see Supplemental Material available online for the verbatim prompts). In the *low motivation to search for true self-knowledge* condition ($N = 77$), the paragraph argued that knowing one's true self does *not* predict any important life outcomes. After reading the passage, those in this condition were also asked to write about two personal experiences where they made an optimal decision without using their true self as a guide, but by relying on other methods such as logical thinking or advice from friends (see Supplemental Material). Participants then responded to the same three-item measure of motivation to search for the true self used in Study 2. Responses to each item were made on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and were averaged to create a composite score ($M = 5.66$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = .91$). This measure was assessed to examine whether the proposed effect of the manipulation on preferences for experiential purchases was driven by the different levels of motivation to search for true self-knowledge.

As the main dependent variable, participants completed the modified version of the EBTS that was used in Study 2 to assess their preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. Composite scores of the EBTS were computed by averaging responses to the five items ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .89$). Participants also responded to the MVS to explore whether the manipulated motivation to search for true self-knowledge reduced their tendencies to value materialistic possessions. The same 18-item MVS was used and averaged to compute a composite score ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .89$).

Results and discussion

Manipulation check

As a manipulation check, we first examined whether there was a divergent level of motivation to search for true self-knowledge across the conditions. As expected, we found that the motivation to search for true self-knowledge was significantly higher in the high motivation condition ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.20$) than the low motivation condition ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.52$), $t(148) = 3.29$, $p = .001$, $d = .54$.

Preference for experiential over material purchases

Consistent with our hypothesis, the results found that participants in the high motivation condition ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.45$) reported significantly higher EBTS scores than those in the low motivation condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.65$), $t(148) = 1.98$, $p = .05$, $d = .32$. That is, people who were made to have a stronger motivation to understand their true self were more interested in spending their money on life experiences than material goods compared with those who were made to have a weaker motivation for true self-knowledge.

If the motivation to search for true self-knowledge was responsible for a tendency to prefer experiential over material purchases, the observed difference in the EBTS across the conditions should be explained by the reported motivation to search for true self-knowledge. To test this possibility, we conducted an additional analysis examining the indirect effect of the manipulation on the EBTS. As predicted, the effect of the manipulation on the EBTS was significantly reduced (from $b = .50$, $SE = .25$, $p = .05$ to $b = .37$, $SE = .26$, $p = .16$) when the reported motivation to search for true self-knowledge was included in the regression model ($b = .18$, $SE = .09$, $p = .048$). The bias-corrected bootstrapping procedures confirmed the indirect effect, 95% confidence interval (CI) = $[.01, .36]$ ($N = 1000$; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This finding further suggests that the observed difference in the EBTS across the conditions was attributable to the extent to which people were motivated to search for the true self.

Materialistic value

Unexpectedly, we also found that there was a significant difference in the MVS between two conditions: Participants in the high motivation condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = .65$) were lower in the MVS than those in the low motivation condition ($M = 2.90$, $SD = .76$), $t(148) = 2.00$, $p = .048$, $d = .30$. Similar to the EBTS, the effect of the manipulation on the MVS was significantly reduced (from $b = -.23$, $SE = .12$, $p = .048$ to $b = -.14$, $SE = .12$, $p = .24$) as the reported motivation to search for true self-knowledge was included in the model, indicating that the motivation to search for true self-knowledge was responsible for the observed difference in the MVS across the conditions. The bias-corrected bootstrapping procedures confirmed the indirect effect, 95% CI = $[.01, .35]$ ($N = 1000$). Along with the results of the EBTS, this finding supports our hypothesis by showing that motivation to search for true self-knowledge undermined participants' tendencies to pursue material possessions (see General Discussion for more on this interesting finding).

Taken together, these results demonstrated that a high level of motivation to search for true self-knowledge led to a preference for experiential purchases over material purchases. Importantly, Study 3 offers evidence for the proposed causal link between motivation to search for true self-knowledge and preference for experiential purchases by using an experimental design. Namely, we found that people who were induced to have a stronger motivation to search for true self-knowledge showed a tendency to choose experiential purchases over material purchases compared to their less motivated peers.

General Discussion

The present research examined the lay perception that experiential purchases can aid in the search for one's true self. Study 1 found that many individuals possess a lay belief that experiential purchases are more likely to foster true self-knowledge. This lay belief could not be explained simply by participants' willingness to pay for experiential purchases.

Moreover, Study 1 further demonstrated that the lay belief about experiential purchases' self-knowledge functionality is specific to purchases of life experiences, rather than experiential products (e.g., a smartphone) and purely material purchases (e.g., a t-shirt), which were perceived as less useful for acquiring self-knowledge. Study 2 found that the motivation to search for one's true self, that is, the desire to learn about who one really is, predicted a preference for experiential purchases. This relationship was independent of possible covariates (e.g., materialism). Finally, Study 3 found that individuals induced to search for true self-knowledge valued experiential purchases over material purchases compared to individuals with less motivation to search for their true self. Overall, these findings suggest that people do have an awareness that purchasing life experiences, as opposed to material goods, can be an important vehicle to gaining knowledge about one's true self.

This research makes two primary contributions to the literature. First, the present research extends Carter and Gilovich's (2012) findings by linking experiential purchases with true self-knowledge. Carter and Gilovich (2012) demonstrated that core self-concepts are more centrally positioned in experiential purchases than material purchases, but they have not examined whether people perceive that experiential purchases can help them *learn* about their true selves. Adding to their findings, our research further suggests that experiential purchases are perceived to be a valuable source of gaining knowledge about one's true self. Second, the current research provides another possible explanation for why experiential purchases lead to more happiness than material purchases (e.g., Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). By establishing a link between motivation to search for true self-knowledge and preference for experiential purchases, our research suggests that experiential purchases may in part boost happiness through their self-knowledge value, especially among those motivated to pursue self-knowledge.

Implications

The current findings carry theoretical implications for research on experiential purchases and well-being. First, while most of the previous research on experiential and material purchases focused on hedonic advantages of experiential purchases (e.g., Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Kumar et al., 2014; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), our research suggests that experiential purchases may also yield eudaimonic benefits (e.g., resolving existential issues). Indeed, Guevarra and Howell (2015) found that psychological well-being obtained by engaging in experiential products was mediated by feelings of expressing one's true identity. The present research further helps understand the eudaimonic benefits of experiential purchases by demonstrating that people are aware of the fact that experiential purchases have eudaimonic benefits such as true self-knowledge. This suggests that people have different expectations regarding psychological outcomes when they spend money on experiential and material purchases (e.g., Pchelin & Howell, 2014).

Our research also gives a hint as to why some experiential purchases help people learn about their true self, and conversely, what properties of material purchases are detrimental to gaining true self-knowledge. As often argued in literature, experiential and material purchases are not mutually exclusive categories. For instance, Guevarra and Howell (2015) distinguished material purchases into products offering experiences (i.e., experiential products) and pure material goods. Following their distinction, Study 1 found that people endorsed the lay belief about purchases' self-knowledge value particularly for life experiences such as

outdoor activities, rather than for experiential products such as an iPod. Interestingly, there was no meaningful difference in perceived self-knowledge value between experiential products and pure material products. This indicates that people primarily attach self-knowledge value to actual life experiences (e.g., acting and socializing), not to material goods that enable or facilitate certain experiences (e.g., electronic gadgets). People seem to believe that they can discover their true selves by purchasing life experiences, but not merely by purchasing material products with experiential affordances.

Directions for future research

The present studies offer many avenues for future research. Although individuals believe experiential purchases are more functional for discovering the true self and place greater value on experiential purchases when they are motivated to learn more about their true selves, one important question left to explore is whether experiential purchases *actually* increase true self-knowledge (or perceptions thereof). The current investigation and research by Carter and Gilovich (2012) both provide strong self-report evidence that purchasing life experiences over material purchases is a valuable tool in knowing one's true self. We believe that actually making experiential purchases would also lead to a greater sense of true self-knowledge and is best examined outside of the laboratory setting. In order to establish external validity, participants would need to actually and consistently purchase life experiences to learn about who they are. For instance, choosing to go to a concert over a new shirt may not be as effective as the actual experience of the concert. Moreover, it is unlikely that one can learn much about his true self from simply attending one trip to the concert. Time is needed for individuals to find adequate meaning in their experiences and for these experiences to relay insight to who they really are. Indeed, research has found that the initial pursuit of high-risk activities (e.g., skydiving) lies in hedonic pleasure, but the motivation to continue these activities can be traced to constructing a new identity (Celsi et al., 1993). Thus, to sufficiently examine the effect of experiential purchases on true self-knowledge, an experience-sampling method, daily diary, or longitudinal approach would be appropriate. Similarly, people may hold a negative view of material purchases compared to experiential purchases (e.g., Pchelin & Howell, 2014), and as such, self-presentation may explain the preference for life experiences over material possessions. Employing different methodologies (e.g., experience-sampling) may reduce the possibility of self-presentation as participants are reporting on their real experiences.

In a related vein, future research can also investigate the *contents* of true self-knowledge people acquire from experiential purchases. While experiential purchases may lead to more global levels of true self-knowledge compared to material purchases, specific knowledge about the true self obtained from engaging in experiential purchases could vary by individuals. For instance, a person may report that she has learned about her true self by watching a musical, but that "self-discovery" may either inform her that she really likes musicals or she really hates them. These two different pieces of information lead to qualitatively distinct discoveries.⁵

Relatedly, there are two metaphoric approaches of thinking about acquiring true self-knowledge: self-discovery and self-construction (or creation) (Schlegel et al., 2012; Waterman, 1984). Self-discovery implies that people believe that the true self already exists inside the person as a set of innate characteristics, while self-construction implies people believe that

there is no pre-existing true self, but that a person's identity is created through the choices they make. It is possible that people's motivation for certain purchases varies as a function of these lay beliefs. For instance, people endorsing self-discovery may be motivated to search for the true self especially when they lack self-clarity. In contrast, people endorsing the self-contruction metephor may want to search for the true self when they are dissatisfied with how they currently view themselves. It is possible that people embracing the self-discovery defintion may seek experiential purchases to uncover pre-existing truths about the self while those embracing the self-construction definition may seek experiential purchases as a means to (re)invent the self in desired direction. Future research should explore this possibility.

Despite the largely consistent findings in the current research, there were seemingly inconsistent patterns related to materialism. In Study 3, the manipulation of motivation to search for true self-knowledge affected not only the experiential buying tendency, but also materialistic value tendency. That is, people who were experimentally induced to have a stronger motivation to search for true self-knowledge reported less materialism compared to those in the other condition. This finding is somewhat unexpected because Study 2 found that motivation to search for the true self was uncorrelated with materialism, and also predicted the extent to which experiential purchases were preferred to material purchases when materialism was controlled for. One plausible explanation for this finding is that Study 3 used an experimental design where materialism was assessed after the manipulation of motivation to search for true self-knowledge. We did not hypothesize that materialism would be influenced by motivation to search for true self-knowledge, but it is possible that our manipulation was strong enough to affect materialism as well as experiential buying tendencies. Given the negative association between materialism and the EBTS (Howell et al., 2012), this is actually consistent with our hypothesis that motivation to search for the true self leads to preferences for experiential purchases to material purchases. It may also be possible that people who were induced to be concerned about the existential issue of knowing one's true self became more intrinsically motivated, which in turn drove them away from extrinsic values such as materialism. However, this effect on materialism might be temporary and susceptible to experimental design. As mentioned previously, another possible explanation is the presence of self-presentation. It is possible that people in the high motivation to search for true self-knowledge condition, induced to believe that knowing one's true self is important and bears on life outcomes, may attempt to present their true self more positively. As such, they report lower materialistic values. Future research should examine whether this finding is replicated, what factors are related to the effect of motivation to search for the true self on materialism, and control for the possibility of self-presentation through social desirability measures.

Finally, it is important to note that not all material goods are explicitly purchased for pure consumption and not all experiential purchases serve noble functions such as true self-knowledge. While people believe experiential purchases are more functional for understanding the true self, some material purchases can still be used as a vehicle to know one's true self. For example, a blu-ray movie may be perceived as an unnecessary expenditure; however, a blu-ray movie may also be purchased for meeting one's artistic interests. Similarly, it is possible that some experiential purchases are purchased for the explicit intention of lavish display (Zhang et al., 2013). For instance, expensive concert tickets might be purchased as an indication of wealth or status rather than out of any motivation to learn about oneself

through the concert-going experience. The reasons behind experiential and material purchases should be explored further in future research.

The journey to discover one's true self is often an arduous one. Although there are many activities that can lead to a fruitful path of self-discovery, our studies suggest that some consumer purchases may be understood as valuable sources in learning about one's true self. Individuals more eager for self-understanding prefer to spend money on life experiences as opposed to material goods, as they believe these purchases can provide the knowledge they seek. Thus, if people desire greater true self-knowledge, they may begin by seeking out (and purchasing) life experiences.

Notes

1. It should be noted that although preference for material purchases would be positively predicted by materialism (e.g., Howell, Pchelin, & Iyer, 2012), they are conceptually distinct. For instance, purchasing material goods to merely possess them can fulfill materialistic needs, but materialism can be also fulfilled through experiential purchases as well if they are pursued for an extrinsic reason (e.g., showing off).
2. Although pursuing experiential purchases over material purchases may be driven by anticipated hedonic and eudaimonic advantages (i.e., happiness and true self-knowledge), forgoing material possessions that fulfill basic needs in favor of experiential purchases may beget problems. For example, spending money on traveling around the world to find one's true self at the cost of a shelter may ultimately put him or her in various dangers, such as losing stable relationships with family. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this issue.
3. Please see supplementary materials for additional studies supporting our argument.
4. A consistent pattern of results was found when satisfaction and regret were substituted with WTP as covariates, and when all three of these covariates were entered simultaneously. See supplemental materials for detailed results.
5. We thank an anonymous reviewer for addressing this issue.

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