

## Subjective Well-Being Enhances Experiential Perceptions

Hyewon Oh<sup>1</sup>, Joseph K. Goodman<sup>2</sup>, Dan R. Schley<sup>3</sup>, Incheol Choi<sup>4</sup> and Kathleen D. Vohs<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Business, Stevens Institute of Technology

<sup>2</sup>Department of Marketing and Logistics, The Ohio State University

<sup>3</sup>Department of Marketing Management, Erasmus University

<sup>4</sup>Department of Psychology, Seoul National University

<sup>5</sup>Marketing Department, University of Minnesota

### Author Note

Hyewon Oh <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0243-7209>

Joseph K. Goodman <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0525-5219>

Dan R. Schley <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4600-4192>

Incheol Choi <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5344-9085>

Kathleen D. Vohs <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5858-2603>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hyewon Oh, School of Business, Stevens Institute of Technology, 1 Castle Point Terrace, Hoboken, NJ 07030, United States. Email: [hoh@stevens.edu](mailto:hoh@stevens.edu), Phone: (201) 216-3649

### Author Contributions and Acknowledgments

Hyewon Oh played a lead role in data curation, formal analysis, investigation, software, visualization, writing-original draft, and project administration, and an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, and writing-review and editing. Joseph K. Goodman played a lead role in resources and supervision, an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, and writing-review and editing, and a supporting role in investigation. Dan R. Schley played an equal role in data curation, formal analysis, software, visualization, and writing-review and editing. Incheol Choi played a supporting role in conceptualization, methodology, investigation, resources, and supervision. Kathleen Vohs played an equal role in conceptualization, methodology, writing, and editing and a supporting role in formal analysis, investigation, visualization, and supervision. We thank Avni Shah for assistance with research materials.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

This research complies with the Declaration of Helsinki (2023) and received approval from the Ohio State University (2017B0527), with the need for written informed consent waived.

### Funding Statement

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Data Availability

All datasets and analysis codes are available on the Open Science Framework at [https://osf.io/tdbzw/?view\\_only=d929e8a2b51a48e0bdbbeb662430b9af](https://osf.io/tdbzw/?view_only=d929e8a2b51a48e0bdbbeb662430b9af). Studies 3 and 5 were

preregistered (Study 3: <https://aspredicted.org/6yi9d.pdf>; Study 5: <https://aspredicted.org/hnmk-zg7d.pdf>).

Word count: 9,575 words

**Subjective Well-Being Enhances Experiential Perceptions**

Word count: 9,575

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

### Abstract

The experiential advantage refers to the well-being people derive from experiences over material goods. This research took a psychological needs approach and tested whether well-being predicts seeing purchases and products as being able to offer experiences. Five studies, using trait and state measures of well-being and sampling people in Asia and North America, supported this hypothesis. Controlled studies found that people higher in trait well-being viewed purchases as more experiential (Studies 1 and 5). Momentary well-being, whether measured or manipulated, showed a similarly positive impact of higher well-being on experiential perceptions (Studies 2-4). The effect was specific to perceptions of the experiential nature of products, not their materiality, and was most consistent for the positive affect component of well-being. Combined with prior findings, results suggest a self-reinforcing, benevolent cycle: experiences improve well-being, and well-being orients people to the experiential, need-satisfying aspects of products, which may then further support well-being.

*Keywords:* subjective well-being, positive affect, life satisfaction, experiences, experiential and material products

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

How to improve one's well-being is a perennial topic, with scientists, policy makers, marketers, and the popular press weighing in with recommendations. One recommendation exhorts people to buy experiences rather than material goods. This recommendation is based on a rich program of psychological research on the experiential advantage, whereby people derive greater well-being from experiences compared to material goods (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; see Weingarten & Goodman, 2021 for a meta-analysis).

While material goods (tangible goods that one keeps in one's possession; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) and experiences (events that people live through; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) are different in many ways, they have a core similarity — both can be experiential. Clearly (tautologically), that is the case for experiences. Yet, it also can be the case for material goods when one is using or consuming them. Driving a car, spraying perfume, or living in a house all describe ways that material goods are consumed in an experiential manner. That observation helps to explain why the same purchase can be framed as experiential or material — with the experiential advantage emerging from that framing (Carter & Gilovich, 2012).

That people can come to see purchases as more or less experiential suggests that perhaps those perceptions may be a key element of how purchases contribute to well-being. Yet, prior research has largely focused on defining and categorizing experiences (see Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013), even though the very notion of experiential-material categorization relies on individuals' perceptions of the product<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the very question of whether material or experiential purchases are better for well-being seems to rest on how people view those products.

We therefore considered what influences whether purchases are perceived as experiential or material, centered on well-being. We tested whether well-being (trait or state) predicts finding

---

<sup>1</sup> While the term *product* may suggest a material good, it typically denotes items that firms sell more generally, whether material goods, services, or experiences. We adopt that broad usage here.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

more experiential elements in purchases, even if they are material. In this way, we complemented existing work about the relationship between experiences and well-being in proposing that well-being can contribute to experiential perception.

### **Experiential Advantage and the Fuzzy Distinction**

Multiple studies have found consistent evidence of an experiential advantage for happiness: People derive greater happiness and well-being from purchasing experiences compared to material goods (Weingarten & Goodman, 2021). The accumulating evidence in favor of the experiential advantage has even led researchers and practitioners to assert the normative claim that people should spend their money more on experiential purchases compared to material purchases to live a happier life (Frank, 2004; Nicolao et al., 2009).

A key underlying assumption in that recommendation (and much existing empirical work) involves how people perceive products. Purchasing experiences instead of material goods requires people being able to distinguish between the two, and these distinctions should be shared across individuals. Although prior work shows that people readily recognize the material-experiential distinction (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), other work has shown that the same purchase can be viewed as more experiential or more material (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). A bicycle could be perceived as a material purchase if bought with the intention of acquiring a possession; whereas the same bike could be thought of as a way to have an experience — for instance, the experience of riding bikes with the family. Hence, the fuzzy boundary between experiential and material products allows people to interpret the same purchase in different ways. Consistent with that notion, Guevarra and Howell (2015) termed some purchases “experiential products,” which are material goods purchased for the purpose of having an experience (e.g., a musical instrument). Indeed, some have gone so far as to assert that the distinction is a “false

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

dichotomy” because all material goods have experiential components (Schmitt et al., 2015, p. 167).

Recent empirical tests lend confidence to this assertion. Rather than thinking of experiences and material goods as being endpoints on a bipolar continuum, conceptually and empirically they can be considered as related but independent (Weingarten et al., 2023). Some evidence suggests that experiential advantages can vary across people, such that extraverts gain greater benefits from experiences (Bastos & Machado, 2025), whereas those with a chronic material buying orientation report fewer well-being gains (Zhang et al., 2014). One implication is that the well-being gains from consuming experiences may be not coming from intangible experiential purchases *per se* but rather from people perceiving what they are doing as being experiential.

### **Subjective Well-Being and Psychological Needs**

The crux of the experiential advantage lies in its ability to enhance well-being. Perhaps not incidentally, the science of well-being has exploded in recent decades. Subjective well-being (SWB) has been related to desirable life outcomes in areas as diverse as the workplace, physical health, and intimate relationships. In line with recommendations (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2018), we conceptualized SWB in terms of its affective and cognitive judgment components — namely, positive and negative affect as well as satisfaction with one’s life (Diener, 2000; Luhmann et al., 2012).

It is well-established that there are well-being benefits from engaging in experiences (Van Boven, 2005). At the same time, poor SWB, including negative affect, loneliness, and life dissatisfaction, is tied to interest in and desire for material goods (Dittmar et al., 2014; Donnelly

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

et al., 2016; Shrum et al., 2022). Thus, the positive link between purchasing experiences (instead of material goods) and SWB is clear.

In conceptualizing how SWB could influence views of products as offering experiences, we leaned on its connection to psychological needs. Psychological needs are experiences that help people become happy, successful, and mentally healthy individuals (Sheldon, 2011). There is a clear, strong link from psychological needs satisfaction to SWB. One of the defining features of SWB is that it seems to reflect the health of one's psychological needs (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018). That is, when people's social, spiritual, epistemic, achievement, and other needs are met, their SWB tends to rise. Conversely, SWB suffers when people's psychological needs are stifled or thwarted (Judge et al., 2005).

What role do psychological needs have in viewing consumption activities as being experiences? The very idea of what helps to fulfill psychological needs rests on the notion of experiences. According to one theory, "Psychological need theories in particular focus on certain *psychosocial experiences* (or sets of experiences) that people are presumed to need—for example, experiences of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), power (Adler, 1917), self-actualization (Rogers, 1961), self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1986), self-consistency (Heider, 1958), or autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000)" (Sheldon, 2011, p. 553; emphasis in original). Hence, since having experiences is a central route through which people's psychological needs are met, it may be that viewing consumption activities as experiences is a conduit for consumption activities to support psychological needs.

Findings on the experiential advantage dovetail with this idea in showing that experiences facilitate the fulfillment of psychological needs. For instance, experiences, more than material goods, forge and foster interpersonal relationships (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Being a part of

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

social relationships constitutes a psychological need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; see Sheldon, 2011). Experiences also facilitate an understanding of the self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), which connects to psychological needs involving self-actualization, self-consistency, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Heider, 1958; Rogers, 1961; see Sheldon, 2011). Last, experiences, more so than material goods, buffer self-esteem by liberating people from social comparisons (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), which suggests that experiences can address psychological needs around self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1986; see Sheldon, 2011). In short, the psychological benefits of having experiences, through experiential perceptions, are, not incidentally, the very kinds of experiences that support the establishment and maintenance of people's psychological needs.

What is more, the literature on SWB suggests a positive feedback loop between SWB and psychological need satisfaction. That is, activities that help to meet psychological needs are associated with elevations in SWB and higher SWB is related to participation in such activities and pursuit of those goals. Take, for instance, the link between engaging in prosocial behaviors and SWB. Experimental and longitudinal studies show that people with higher SWB perform more prosocial acts (relative to peers). At the same time, there is also support for the opposing causal direction insofar as inducing people to perform prosocial acts (relative to other activities) increases their well-being, thereby suggesting a reciprocal relationship (see Hui, 2022 for a review). This pattern seems not to be confined to prosociality. Research indicates a reciprocal relationship between well-being and other psychological needs, such as competence, wherein well-being predicts competence (e.g., at work) and being competent predicts greater well-being (e.g., Walsh et al., 2018). In sum, prior research suggests that people with higher SWB are more attuned to the fulfillment of their psychological needs, which orients them toward experiences that sustain those needs.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Taken to the current context, given that well-being and needs satisfaction seem to have a reciprocal relationship, the well-being benefits of engaging in experiences may operate in a similar reciprocal manner. That is, if experiences benefit need satisfaction and well-being (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), then perhaps well-being predicts viewing products as being experiences.

### **Overview of Studies**

The central hypothesis is that greater SWB leads people to perceive purchases and products as offering experiences (versus being a material object). Five studies tested this using chronic (Studies 1, 2, and 5), momentary (Study 2), and experimentally-elicited (Studies 3 and 4) SWB.

Study 1 examined trait SWB using a controlled lab setting. Study 2 employed experience sampling methods to capture momentary well-being and purchases in participants' daily lives in addition to measuring trait SWB. To establish causality, Study 3 investigated whether experimentally-elicited SWB enhances experiential perceptions. Study 4 addressed alternate explanations by manipulating positive, negative, and neutral affect. Study 5 further addressed the relationship between SWB and experiential perceptions, and it examined how it relates to explanatory variables previously found to explain the experiential advantage.

### **Transparency and Openness**

We studied people in WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries to test robustness across varying economic and cultural backgrounds (Heinrich et al., 2010). For relevant studies, sensitivity power analyses (G\*Power; Faul et al., 2007) identified the smallest effect size detectable with 80% statistical power based on the sample sizes obtained. We aimed to sample as many participants as was practical and economically viable. We obtained Institutional Review

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Board approval for all studies. Studies 3 and 5 were preregistered. All measures, conditions, and exclusions are reported in the studies. Data were primarily analyzed using R (Version 4.5.2; R Core Team, 2025) with packages listed in the Supplemental Online Materials (SOM). See here for all studies' deidentified data and analysis codes

[https://osf.io/tdbzw/?view\\_only=d929e8a2b51a48e0bdbbeb662430b9af](https://osf.io/tdbzw/?view_only=d929e8a2b51a48e0bdbbeb662430b9af).

### Study 1

Study 1 sought initial evidence regarding the relationship between greater well-being and viewing products as more experiential. We assessed people's SWB and, months later, had them rate the experiential and material nature of various products. We expected higher SWB to be associated with stronger views of products as experiential rather than material.

We measured well-being in two ways. One, through an overall SWB score to represent well-being comprehensively. Two, by separating the cognitive and affective components of well-being, which can diverge and relate differently to other variables (Diener, 1994). Following recommendations (Diener et al., 1999), we report analyses in all relevant studies both with the SWB factor scores and separately with each component. This dual approach allows us to capture the comprehensive construct of SWB while also preserving meaningful distinctions among its elements.

### Method

#### *Participants*

We recruited 175 Korean undergraduates (80 female;  $M_{age}=19.32$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ). Participants received extra course credit. Sample size was set externally by the number of participants available.

#### *Procedure*

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

In the beginning of the semester, participants in a large classroom completed a paper-and-pencil survey that included measures forming a SWB index. Following prior literature, we conceptualized SWB as a latent higher order factor, reflected in three subfactors: life satisfaction ( $\alpha=.81$ ; the Satisfaction With Life Scale [SWLS]; Diener et al., 1985), positive affect ( $\alpha=.85$ ), and negative affect ( $\alpha=.85$ ; the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule [PANAS]; Watson et al., 1988). Instead of conventional sum scores, which assume equal item weighting and error, we used a latent-variable approach. Exploratory factor analysis (see the S1\_supplement.html file on the manuscript's OSF page) suggested 2-5 factors depending on the criterion. Based on the theoretical factor structure, we next constructed a confirmatory factor analytic (CFA) model with a general SWB factor and three latent subfactors, yielding a reasonable fit (CFI=0.80, RMSEA=0.09, SRMR=0.08; Browne & Cudeck, 1992). The items from each subscale (i.e., SWLS, PANAS) loaded appropriately on their subfactors. For each participant we computed SWB factor scores (positive loadings from life satisfaction and positive affect and negative loadings from negative affect). These correlated  $r=0.89$  with the conventional sum scores.

Later in the semester, participants completed the study individually on computers in laboratory cubicles. They read definitions of experiential and material purchases adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003): "A material purchase is spending money with the primary intention of acquiring a material possession, whereas an experiential purchase is spending money with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience." Then they read that ambiguity may be present in these perceptions: "However, there are often cases in which we have trouble distinguishing experiences from possessions. For instance, in case of a music CD, it can be thought of as an object that occupies a corner of your music collection, while you can also

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

consider it an experience when you think about enjoyment and relief that the music delivers” (SOM).

Participants then rated 37 products as to how experiential or material they seemed (1=*definitely material*, 5=*equally material and experiential*, 9=*definitely experiential*; scale anchors counterbalanced; Table S1). The items were chosen because they have been used in prior work (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) and are a mix of products typically considered material as well as those typically considered experiential. Last, participants reported their gender and age.

### ***Statistical Analysis***

To examine the relationship between SWB and participants’ ratings of products as experiential versus material, we employed cross-classified multilevel models. Each rating comes from a particular person judging a particular product. Ratings given by the same person tend to resemble one another because people differ in their general rating style or in how they interpret “experiential.” Ratings of the same product also tend to resemble one another because products differ in how experiential they are, regardless of who is rating them. Our analyses therefore treated ratings as shaped by both the participant and the product at the same time, using random intercepts for participants and for products to account for these two overlapping sources of similarity (Judd et al., 2012). Product ratings served as the dependent variable, and SWB (or its components—life satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect) was included as a fixed effect. Models were estimated both with and without demographic covariates (age and gender).

### **Results**

The average experiential rating for the 37 products was around the scale midpoint of 5 ( $M=5.09$ ,  $SD=1.57$ ). Table S1 lists other descriptive statistics.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Results indicated that SWB was positively related to product ratings,  $B=0.21$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $t(174.15)=2.63$ ,  $p=.009$ , suggesting that higher levels of SWB were associated with higher experiential ratings of the items. For instance, the higher participants' SWB scores, the stronger their perceptions that a watch or ring is experiential. Specific tests of the relationship between SWB scores and each product's rating revealed that 16 (of 37) ratings were significant and positive, whereas there were no (0) significant negative correlations (Table S2).

Analyses were repeated separately for the three subfactors of SWB. Life satisfaction and positive affect were both significantly associated with higher experiential ratings (life satisfaction:  $B=0.15$ ,  $SE=0.05$ ,  $t(174.15)=2.76$ ,  $p=.006$ ; positive affect:  $B=0.08$ ,  $SE=0.03$ ,  $t(174.15)=2.08$ ,  $p=.022$ ), whereas negative affect was negatively associated with experiential ratings,  $B=-0.17$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $t(174.15)=2.21$ ,  $p=.029$ . Including demographic covariates (age and gender) did not significantly change these results (SOM).

## Discussion

Study 1 provided initial evidence that greater SWB is associated with viewing products as more experiential (as opposed to material), even for prototypically material products, such as watches and t-shirts. The results suggest that whether a product is considered an experience is psychologically constructed rather than due to product characteristics – and linked to people's sense of well-being, whether cognitive, emotional, or overall.

## Study 2

Study 2 advanced our investigation by tracking experiential perceptions as they unfold naturally across a week of purchases using experience sampling. We measured well-being both as a stable disposition (the SWB index from an intake session, as in Study 1) and as momentary affect during the experience sampling period. This allowed us to test whether greater experiential

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

perceptions are better understood as associated with trait well-being, state well-being, or both. Last, we tested whether findings held after accounting for objective purchase features: cost, product type (both self-reported), and physical tangibility (assessed by independent judges). This design provides a more rigorous and ecologically valid test of how SWB informs experiential perceptions in daily life.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

We recruited 263 adults (189 female;  $M_{age}=31.80$ ,  $SD=9.39$ ) in Korea. Sample size was set by panel availability. Participants with a response rate above 70% on the ESM items received 30,000 KRW (~\$30) and those with 50–70% received 20,000 KRW (~\$20). Data from 52 participants were excluded for insufficient responses or missing SWB measures, leaving 211 participants (159 female;  $M_{age}=31.47$ ,  $SD=9.39$ ).

#### ***Intake***

In a 60-minute introductory session, participants were told that the study investigated emotions and purchasing patterns in daily life. Participants completed SWB measures: the Satisfaction With Life Scale ( $\alpha=.86$ ; Diener et al., 1985), positive affect ( $\alpha=.86$ ), and negative affect ( $\alpha=.88$ ; Positive and Negative Affect Schedule [PANAS]; Watson et al., 1988). As in Study 1, hierarchical CFA estimated factor scores both for the overall SWB and the subfactors (RMSEA=0.07). Participants also reported demographic information, such as age, gender (1=*male*, 2=*female*), and socioeconomic status (SES; 1=*very low*, 9=*very high*).

#### ***Experience Sampling***

Participants received five daily smartphone notifications over seven consecutive days with links to online questionnaires. From 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., a signal occurred at random times

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

during each of five 150-minute blocks except for the last block, which was 120 minutes (8 p.m. to 10 p.m.). Participants were instructed to immediately access an online questionnaire through the link provided. To prevent participants from responding to the previous questionnaires or to questionnaires without a notification, the URL changed each time and the previous survey closed. A day before beginning, participants received a trial text message for training purposes.

To measure momentary affect, participants indicated their feelings at that moment on eight positive (i.e., fun, pleased, amused, cheerful, relaxed, excited, serene, and proud) and eight negative affect states (i.e., worried, depressed, irritable, sad, angry, afraid, bored, and lonely; 1=*not at all*, 5=*very much*; adapted from Fredrickson et al., 2003; Watson et al., 1988). We constructed a hierarchical CFA with these 16 items nested within participant over time. Positive affect and reverse-coded negative affect were allowed to correlate rather than assuming that they exist on one bipolar latent scale (Zautra et al., 2000).

Because participants were assessed on these items repeatedly across time, for each time point, we nested the errors of the CFA within participant (i.e., essentially a repeated measures CFA), using a full information maximum likelihood estimator to account for missing responses. For each participant, we computed their factor scores for positive and negative affect (overall RMSEA=0.09; S2\_supplement.html on OSF). Because affect varies across participants and across time, we performed a decomposition on the affect factor scores. This allows us to probe whether perceptions that a product offers an experience are, for instance, tied to having more positive affect than other participants, or relative to each participant's own average positivity.

Next, participants reported whether they had made any purchases since the last signal. (For the first signal: Think about the purchase(s) you have made before this message.) If

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

participants indicated zero purchases, they were automatically directed to the end of the survey.<sup>2</sup> If participants had made a purchase, they provided information on it. If they made more than one purchase, they provided information on one “important purchase” of their choosing. They provided the cost of the product and its product category using 13 pre-defined categories or “other” (SOM). After reading the definitions of experiential and material purchases (as in Study 1; from Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), participants rated the degree to which the purchase seemed experiential or material (0=*definitely material*; 100=*definitely experiential*).

### ***Tangibility Post-Test***

To control for purchase characteristics, we had products’ tangibility judged independently. We had 128 undergraduates (51 female;  $M_{age}=20.47$ ,  $SD=1.19$ ) and 101 Mechanical Turk workers (35 female;  $M_{age}=31.81$ ,  $SD=8.90$ ) rate the tangibility of the 13 purchase categories and the 23 individual purchases listed under “other” (1=*definitely intangible*, 7=*definitely tangible*).

### ***Statistical Analysis***

We employed a hierarchical Bayesian framework to model repeated, nested ESM data. Prior to testing the hypotheses, we assessed whether the data were robust against selection bias due to missingness and the structure of the experience-sampling data. We rescaled material–experiential purchase ratings to range from 0 to 1 to address nonnormality, using a zero–one–inflated beta (ZOIB) model. To summarize the ZOIB model, we used average marginal effects (AMEs). An AME controls for the nonnormality and expresses how much the predicted material–experiential ratings are expected to change, on average, when a given predictor

---

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that not collecting data from those who had not purchased before a given sampling time necessarily produces a selection effect such that our data only concerns experiential evaluations among individual after a recent purchase.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

increases by one standard deviation, holding all other variables at their observed values, with a 95% Bayesian credible interval that reflects uncertainty.

We examined the relationship between well-being measures (each component of trait SWB and momentary affect at between- and within-levels) and experiential perceptions. We controlled for age, gender, SES, purchase cost, and tangibility as they are associated with SWB (Batz-Barbarich et al., 2018; Buecker et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2020) and experiential consumption (Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Lee et al., 2018), along with timing variables. Within-person variables captured moment-to-moment deviations in positive and negative affect, purchase cost, and product tangibility relative to each participant's own average, whereas between-person variables captured stable individual differences, including trait well-being and demographics. We also included random intercepts for participants to represent stable differences in tendencies to view purchases as experiential (S2\_supplement.html on OSF).

### Results

Table 1 reports the AMEs showing the relationships between all well-being measures and experiential perceptions. Coefficients for the lag variables are on the same 0–1 scale as the dependent variable, whereas trait SWB, momentary affect, tangibility, purchase cost, age, and SES are standardized (z-scored) predictors. Gender and time-related variables are dummy coded. Bolded coefficients denote effects whose 95% credible intervals do not include zero.

The results show that within-person momentary positive affect was reliably related to experiential evaluations. When participants felt more positive than usual, they tended to view their current purchase as more experiential (AME=0.02, CI [0.004,0.03]). The corresponding between-person effect, reflecting whether people with higher average positive affect across the study tended to give higher experiential ratings overall, was not statistically reliable (AME=0.01,

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

CI [-0.01,0.03]) but pointed in the same direction. In contrast, momentary negative affect was not reliably related to experiential evaluations at either the within- or between-person level.

Trait-level SWB and its subcomponents likewise did not show robust associations once momentary affect, tangibility, and timing variables were taken into account.

**Table 1***Average Marginal Effects Predicting Experiential-vs-Material Evaluations in Study 2*

Predictor	Average Marginal effect	95% CI
Momentary Affect (State)		
<b>Positive (Within participant)</b>	<b>0.016</b>	<b>[0.004, 0.029]</b>
Positive (Across participant)	0.014	[-0.007, 0.034]
Negative (Within participant)	-0.002	[-0.015, 0.012]
Negative (Across participant)	0.015	[-0.005, 0.035]
Subjective Well-Being Components (Trait)		
Life Satisfaction	0.001	[-0.025, 0.025]
PANAS Negative	0.001	[-0.020, 0.022]
PANAS Positive	0.008	[-0.016, 0.031]
Purchase Cost and Tangibility		
<b>Tangibility (Within participant)</b>	<b>-0.055</b>	<b>[-0.066, -0.043]</b>
<b>Tangibility (Across participant)</b>	<b>-0.035</b>	<b>[-0.054, -0.015]</b>
<b>Purchase Cost (Within participant)</b>	<b>-0.014</b>	<b>[-0.026, -0.003]</b>
Purchase Cost (Across participant)	-0.021	[-0.043, 0.001]
Demographics		
Age	-0.005	[-0.027, 0.017]
Gender	-0.002	[-0.020, 0.015]
SES	0.000	[-0.019, 0.021]
Study timing		
Day FE → 2	0.000	[-0.027, 0.027]
Day FE → 3	-0.006	[-0.032, 0.022]
Day FE → 4	-0.008	[-0.035, 0.018]
Day FE → 5	0.005	[-0.021, 0.034]
Day FE → 6	0.003	[-0.027, 0.034]
Day FE → 7	0.005	[-0.027, 0.038]
Wave → W5	0.000	[-0.004, 0.004]
Weekend → Weekend	0.004	[-0.021, 0.030]
Hour bin		

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Predictor	Average Marginal effect	95% CI
Hour bin → 10 12	0.002	[-0.019, 0.024]
Hour bin → 13 15	0.000	[-0.020, 0.020]
Hour bin → 22	0.018	[-0.022, 0.058]
Hour bin → other	-0.002	[-0.020, 0.017]
Lagged Effects		
<b>Lag previous time DV</b>	<b>0.089</b>	<b>[0.039, 0.137]</b>
Lag variable existed or imputed	0.004	[-0.016, 0.025]

*Note.* Bolded parameters are those that are significant using 95% Bayesian Credible Intervals. The Day FE → 1 and the Hour bin → 16-18 are the reference levels for those dummy variables.

The results also showed temporal dependence: higher experiential ratings at the previous measurement occasion were associated with higher ratings at the current occasion. Tangibility behaved in the theoretically expected way, serving as a useful validity check. More tangible products were associated with lower experiential ratings both within participants (AME=  $-0.06$ , CI  $[-0.07, -0.04]$ ) and across participants (AME=  $-0.04$ , CI  $[-0.05, -0.02]$ ). The within-person effect indicates that when a given individual purchased something more tangible than usual (e.g., electronics rather than a service), they rated that purchase as less experiential at that moment. The between-person effect indicates that people who tended to purchase more tangible products overall gave lower experiential ratings across the week. Products that were more expensive than a given participant's average tended to be negatively related to experiential perceptions (AME=  $-0.01$ , CI  $[-0.03, -0.003]$ ).

We estimated 16 additional model specifications as sensitivity analyses (S2\_supplement.html on OSF). Because model specification involves a set of reasonable but partly subjective choices, we do not interpret these 16 models as separate hypothesis tests. Instead, we use them to assess whether the main conclusion is consistent across alternative specifications. In every model, momentary positive affect was consistently associated with seeing purchases as experiential, above and beyond product characteristics and timing variables.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

### **Discussion**

Study 2 advanced Study 1 by capturing purchases and well-being in daily life, evaluating a richer assortment of products, and assessing well-being at both trait and state levels. Across models, within-person momentary positive affect (feeling more positive than one's own average) is consistently positively associated with perceiving products as offering experiences, even after controlling for purchase characteristics such as cost, tangibility, and product type. These results support our argument that well-being relates to how people perceive their purchases, not merely the kinds of purchases they make.

At the same time, Study 2 did not fully replicate Study 1's effects insofar as trait SWB was not significantly related to experiential perceptions. It could be that trait SWB is not a reliable predictor of experiential perceptions. This possibility will be explored in Study 5, where the overlap between trait SWB and experiential perceptions is tested again.

### **Study 3**

Study 2 found that momentary positive affect is associated with experiential perceptions, suggesting that state-level SWB is relevant to how people interpret their purchases. Because these findings were correlational, stronger evidence requires a causal test. Pre-registered Study 3 did just that by eliciting well-being through having people think about their best possible selves (King, 2001), a method shown to boost positive affect and life satisfaction (see Loveday et al., 2018 for a review). We hypothesized that people in the best possible self (vs. neutral) condition would subsequently view a product (here, a bicycle) as more experiential.

Study 3 also addressed a potential alternate explanation. Instead of using a bipolar experiential–material scale, participants simply indicated how much the product offers an

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

experience without having them compare it to a material good. This allowed us to assess whether the prior results held when assessing experiential perceptions independently.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

We recruited 276 U.S. undergraduates (107 female;  $M_{age}=20.66$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ). Participants received course credit. Sample size was set by a lab manager based on participant availability. Because this is a between-participant design we were able to conduct an interpretable power analysis ( $1 - \beta=0.80$ ,  $\alpha=.05$ ), which indicated that our sample size would allow us to detect a  $d=.34$  with a probability of .80 (Faul et al., 2007). This study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/6yi9d.pdf>).

#### ***Procedure***

Participants were randomly assigned to a well-being or neutral condition. Those in the well-being condition thought about their best possible self (King, 2001). Participants in the neutral condition thought about a typical day (Loveday et al., 2018). Both prompts advanced after 20 seconds.

Participants continued to a purportedly different study and read that people can think about products in a material or experiential way (i.e., a bicycle can be seen as something one owns vs. something one uses; SOM). They then rated a bicycle on how experiential it is (1=*not at all*, 9=*very much*). We selected bicycles because prior research shows that they are easily amenable to being seen as material or experiential (Guevarra & Howell, 2015). Last, participants completed additional marketing-related ratings (SOM).

#### ***Statistical Analysis***

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

To investigate the impact of enhancing well-being on increasing experiential perceptions of a bicycle, we conducted an independent-samples *t*-test comparing the well-being and neutral conditions, with experiential perception ratings as the dependent variable.

### Results

A separate pretest confirmed that the manipulation increased positive affect (SOM). In hypothesis-testing analyses, we assessed whether experiential perceptions differed by condition. Participants in the well-being condition ( $M=6.85$ ,  $SD=1.92$ ) indeed perceived the bicycle as more experiential than neutral condition participants ( $M=6.28$ ,  $SD=2.32$ ;  $t(274)=2.21$ ,  $p=.028$ ,  $d=0.27$ ). Including covariates (age and gender) did not significantly change the results (SOM).

### Discussion

Pre-registered Study 3 provided causal evidence that well-being enhances experiential perceptions. A well-being boost via thinking about one's best possible self (King, 2001) led to perceiving a bicycle as more experiential than the neutral condition. This study also addressed a methodological concern involving using an experiential-material bipolar scale. This study's use of a unipolar scale helps to allay that concern. At the same time, because Study 3 measured experiential perceptions only, Study 5 assessed experiential and material perceptions separately to corroborate that the effect reflects shifts in experiential perceptions rather than generalized rating increases.

### Study 4

Study 4 sought to replicate the effect of experimentally-induced well-being on experiential perceptions and to test whether the effect is driven by having well-being rather than lacking it. Prior evidence pointed in this direction: in Study 2, higher within-person momentary positive affect was positively related to greater experiential perceptions, whereas negative affect

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

showed no significant association. Study 4 systematically tested this idea by manipulating well-being in three ways: increasing, decreasing, and leaving it neutral. We anticipated that only the positive well-being condition would enhance experiential perceptions.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

We recruited 359 U.S. undergraduates (166 female;  $M_{\text{age}}=20.75$ ,  $SD=1.75$ ). Participants received extra course credit. Sample size was set externally by the lab manager based on participant availability.

#### *Procedure*

Participants completed two ostensibly unrelated studies. First, they were randomly assigned to a positive affect, negative affect, or neutral condition described as an autobiographical memory study. These prompts were designed to influence affect indirectly through the recall of prior experiences. Participants wrote about three recent life events — positive, negative, or neutral (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; SOM). Then they indicated how much they felt six emotions at that moment (happy, exhilarated, sad, satisfied, content, disappointed,  $\alpha=.90$ ; 1=*not at all*, 7=*extremely*; Park & Banaji, 2000). Negative emotion ratings were reverse-scored and an affect index was created by conducting a CFA, allowing for the reverse-coded items to have a residual correlation among themselves, and computed factor scores for each participant (RMSEA=0.11).

In the purportedly second study, participants read definitions of experiential and material purchases as in Studies 1-2. They then rated 14 purchases, presented in a random order, as to whether they were more experiential or material (1=*definitely material*, 5=*equally material and experiential*, 9=*definitely experiential*). We selected the items for representing a mix of products

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

generally seen as material or, separately, experiential and for being employed in previous studies (Weingarten et al., 2023).

### *Statistical Analysis*

To examine the effect of condition on experiential ratings of the products, we constructed cross-classified models with random effects both for participants and for the 14 purchases. We dummy coded condition relative to the neutral condition such that there is a fixed effect comparing the positive to neutral condition and another comparing the negative to neutral condition. We also re-coded the model using the positive condition as the baseline to compare the positive versus negative conditions. The dependent variable was the ratings of products on the experiential scale – this variable’s distribution had very low kurtosis (i.e., fat tails in the distribution at 1 and 9). Because of the violation of assumptions within maximum likelihood estimators, in the S4\_supplement.html on the OSF page, we show highly analogous results using robust regression for violations of normality. We also estimated the primary model with demographic covariates (age and gender; SOM).

### **Results**

The manipulation elicited changes in well-being as intended, showing a significant conditional difference in affect ( $M_{positive}=0.47$ ,  $SD=0.81$  vs.  $M_{neutral}=0.22$ ,  $SD=0.84$  vs.  $M_{negative}= -0.72$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ;  $F(2,356)=62.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2=.26$ ). Participants in the positive affect condition felt more positive than participants in the negative affect condition ( $t(356)=10.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d=1.35$ ) and neutral condition ( $t(356)=2.28$ ,  $p=.023$ ,  $d=0.31$ ). Neutral condition participants felt more positive than negative affect condition participants ( $t(356)=8.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d=1.04$ ).

Hypothesis-testing analyses found that participants induced to feel more positively perceived products as more experiential than did participants in the neutral condition,  $B=0.28$ ,

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

$SE=0.13$ ,  $t(358.03)=2.16$ ,  $p=.032$  as well as those induced to feel negatively,  $B= -0.30$ ,  $SE=0.13$ ,  $t(358.03)=2.31$ ,  $p=.021$ . In line with our account, results indicated no difference in experiential perceptions between the negative and neutral conditions,  $B= -0.02$ ,  $SE=0.13$ ,  $t(358.03)=0.16$ ,  $p=.870$ . Including age and gender as covariates did not significantly change the results (SOM).

### Discussion

Study 4 accomplished several goals. The first was to see if experimentally manipulating well-being changed how people viewed products, namely in terms of being able to offer an experience. The results showed that it did. The second goal was to see if higher well-being enhances experiential perceptions or lower well-being diminishes them. The low and neutral well-being conditions reported similar experiential perceptions and both significantly differed from the positive affect condition, which had the strongest experiential perceptions. This suggests the driving force for the effect may be at higher levels of well-being, not lower ones.

### Study 5

The studies thus far demonstrate that well-being positively influences experiential perceptions, driven by positive feelings of well-being and not a lack of well-being. Preregistered Study 5 examined how this relationship relates to product appraisals previously linked to the experiential advantage. We measured how much the purchase reveals one's identity (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), is different from other products (Carter & Gilovich, 2010), involves being social (Caprariello & Reis, 2013), and provides long-lasting enjoyment (Nicolao et al., 2009). These variables are either directly relevant to satisfying psychological needs (e.g., being social) or may reflect affordances of products that may support need-relevant experiences (e.g., lasting enjoyment). Thus, they offer insights into plausible pathways through which higher well-being is associated with greater experiential perceptions.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Study 5 also made a psychometric change. To corroborate that well-being affects experiential perceptions independently of material perceptions (as in Study 3), Study 5 had people assess experiential perceptions and material perceptions separately (Weingarten et al., 2023). This design also allowed us to revisit a puzzle from earlier studies: Study 1 found a positive trait-level association, whereas Study 2 did not. By using a reflective judgment format similar to Study 1 but separating experiential and material assessments, Study 5 clarifies whether this discrepancy reflects meaningful boundary conditions or methodological differences, thereby testing the robustness of the trait-level relationship.

### **Method**

We recruited 354 U.S. undergraduates (157 female;  $M_{age}=20.33$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ). Participants received course credit. Sample size was set externally by the lab manager based on participant availability (pre-registered at <https://aspredicted.org/hnmk-zg7d.pdf>).

Participants recalled and described a recent purchase in detail (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) and read a short description of material and experiential purchases (Studies 1-2). Participants rated their purchase on how experiential and, separately, material it seemed (1=*not at all*, 9=*very much*).

Participants then evaluated the purchase with respect to explanatory variables for the experiential advantage: comparability to similar purchases (1=*not comparable to other purchases*, 9=*very comparable to other purchases*), difficulty classifying it (1=*not difficult at all*, 9=*very difficult*), social (1=*not at all*, 9=*very much*) and solitary (1=*not at all*, 9=*very much*) nature, identity relevance (1=*very much at all*, 9=*very much*), and long-lasting enjoyment (1=*not long-lasting*, 9=*very long-lasting*). Last, participants completed trait SWB measures as in Studies 1 and 2.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

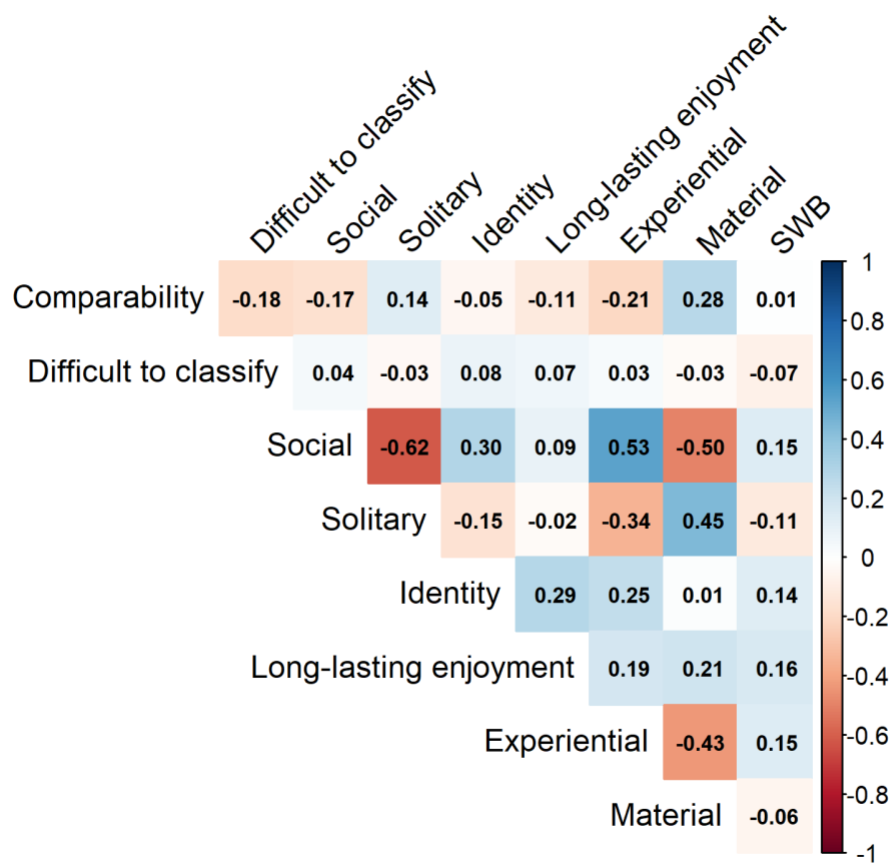
*Statistical Analysis*

The preregistration did not specify how to compute SWB scores (an oversight on our part). We applied the CFA approach used in previous studies. Experiential and material ratings were moderately correlated ( $r = -.43$ ). The potential explanatory variables—such as sociality, comparability, and identity relevance—also were intercorrelated (Figure 1). These correlations made it difficult to interpret separate regressions so we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to model the relationships jointly, instead of examining the preregistered interactions between SWB and explanatory variables.

**Figure 1**

*Correlations Among Subjective Well-Being, Product Perceptions, and Experiential Advantage Factors*

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS



Study 5's goal was to test SWB's association with experiential perceptions as it relates to other constructs previously identified as explaining the experiential advantage. Accordingly, we built a SEM in which experiential and material evaluations were simultaneously regressed on SWB factor scores (from the same CFA procedure used in Studies 1–2) and on potential explanatory variables.

This structure resembles a parallel mediation model with two key differences. First, we treat the explanatory variables as correlated constructs rather than causal mediators. Second, we allow these variables to covary with one another and experiential and material ratings while keeping the model parsimonious enough to estimate reliably. This approach enabled us to examine how SWB relates to experiential perceptions while accounting for the shared variance

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

among the explanatory variables, without imposing unwarranted causal assumptions. We repeated this analysis for each SWB component and reported full details in the SOM.

### Results

We first examined the overall association between SWB and how experiential versus material participants perceived their purchases. From the SEM, higher SWB was associated with greater experiential perceptions ( $\beta=0.41$ , 95% CI [0.10,0.72]; Table 2) but not with material perceptions ( $\beta= -0.09$ , 95% CI [-0.47,0.30]). Thus, consistent with prior studies, people higher in SWB tended to see their purchases as offering more of an experience, but not as more (or less) material.

Analyses on each SWB component revealed a nuanced pattern: higher positive affect was associated with greater experiential perceptions ( $\beta=0.22$ , 95% CI [0.07,0.37]) but not with material perceptions ( $\beta= -0.07$ , 95% CI [-0.26,0.12]; Table S4, SOM), mirroring the SWB results. All the other associations were not significant. These results were in line with prior findings that positive affect was the SWB component most consistently associated with experiential perceptions.

Overall trait SWB scores, along with the other explanatory variables (comparability, difficulty to classify, social, solitary, identity-relevant, and long-lasting enjoyment), yielded a good model fit (CFI=.97, TLI=.91, RMSEA=.06, SRMR=.05; SOM). The key question was whether these other explanatory variables could account for the link between SWB and experiential evaluations. The direct path from SWB to experiential ratings became small and nonsignificant (direct effect:  $\beta=0.10$ , 95% CI [-0.19,0.40]), whereas the combined indirect path via the six components remained significant (total indirect effect: indirect  $\beta=0.31$ , 95% bootstrap

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

CI [0.12,0.51]), accounting for 76.1% of the total effect. We conducted the same analyses for SWB components, and only positive affect showed patterns similar to those of SWB (SOM).

There were two primary drivers: seeing purchases as social, accounting for roughly half of the total effect of SWB on experiential evaluations ( $\text{indirect}_{\text{social}} \beta=0.22$ , 95% CI [0.08,0.39]), and perceiving purchases as providing long-lasting enjoyment ( $\text{indirect}_{\text{long-lasting enjoyment}} \beta=0.07$ , 95% CI [0.01,0.15], about 16% of the total effect). The remaining components contributed little (Table 2). For material ratings, SWB exerted no meaningful overall effect once these characteristics were considered.

**Table 2**

*Subjective Well-Being Scores Relationship to Experiential and Material in Study 5*

	Experiential			Material	
	Estimate	95% CI	% of total	Estimate	95% CI
Total Effect	<b>0.412</b>	<b>[0.104, 0.718]</b>	100%	-0.094	[-0.472, 0.295]
Direct	0.099	[-0.191, 0.398]	23.9%	-0.084	[-0.416, 0.256]
Indirect (total)	<b>0.314</b>	<b>[0.123, 0.510]</b>	76.1%	-0.010	[-0.269, 0.249]
Comparability	-0.006	[-0.049, 0.032]	-1.5%	0.015	[-0.072, 0.101]
Difficult to Classify	0.000	[-0.018, 0.017]	0.0%	-0.000	[-0.020, 0.019]
Social	<b>0.218</b>	<b>[0.075, 0.385]</b>	52.9%	<b>-0.222</b>	<b>[-0.394, -0.074]</b>
Solitary	0.005	[-0.028, 0.046]	1.1%	-0.042	[-0.133, 0.032]
Identity	0.032	[-0.018, 0.095]	7.7%	0.057	[-0.001, 0.142]
Lasting Enjoyment	<b>0.065</b>	<b>[0.007, 0.145]</b>	15.8%	<b>0.182</b>	<b>[0.070, 0.326]</b>

*Note.* Bolded coefficients are those whose 95% CI does not include 0. Additionally, we do not include the percent of total column for Material evaluations because there was no total effect and such percentages do not have straightforward interpretation in those cases.

**Discussion**

Preregistered Study 5 showed that well-being is positively associated with experiential perceptions, but not with material ones. Among the SWB components, only trait-level positive affect was associated with experiential perceptions, whereas life satisfaction and negative affect

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

were not. These results reinforce the pattern observed across studies: positive affect is the SWB facet most reliably linked to experiential perceptions, whether assessed as a momentary state or a stable trait.

Analyses suggested two potential pathways, that those higher in SWB viewed their purchases as more social and as offering longer-lasting enjoyment. The sociality finding speaks to a psychological-needs perspective, insofar as social connections are a foremost psychological need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Perceptions of lasting enjoyment may reflect a core element that drives experiential perceptions as seen in our studies, that of positive affect. To the extent that positive affect aids in seeing products as offering experiences (Studies 1-4), then viewing products as affording positive feelings may be another hint at how SWB operates to induce experiential perceptions. We discuss the implications of this interpretation next.

### **General Discussion**

We tested the hypothesis that SWB predicts people seeing products as offering experiences. A bevy of existing research, going back over 20 years, has demonstrated that purchasing or even talking about experiential purchases, as opposed to material purchases, improves individuals' well-being (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; see Weingarten & Goodman, 2021 for a meta-analysis).

The current research took that work as inspiration and asked the reverse: does well-being predict seeing products as being experiential? Five studies, using trait (Studies 1, 2, and 5) and state well-being (Studies 2, 3, and 4) across WEIRD and non-WEIRD samples (Henrich et al., 2010), found that SWB predicts experiential perceptions. These findings suggest that well-being is not merely an outcome of experiential consumption but functions as a lens through which individuals construe the potential for experiences in their lives.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

### **Positive Affect: The Experiential Core of Well-Being**

A robust and theoretically meaningful pattern emerged across studies: positive affect was the SWB component most reliably associated with experiential perceptions. Every study found positive affect to be a significant predictor of viewing products as offering experiences, whereas the predictive ability of negative affect and life satisfaction was not consistent.

Multiple interpretations may help explain this pattern. One, positive affect may be most consistently predictive of experiential perceptions because people primarily consider the positive experiential potential of purchases. Indeed, the entire notion of the experiential advantage – that people get more well-being benefits from having experiences than material goods – is predicated on the experiences being positive (Nicolao et al., 2009). Hence, if (positive) experiences yield positive affect, then it may follow that positive affect would affect viewing products as experiences. Furthermore, Study 5 provides an additional wrinkle regarding the role of positive feelings in the finding that SWB was related to viewing products as offering long-lasting enjoyment. Hence, people generally expect experiences to be positive, and having stronger feelings of positivity predicts seeing products as offering experiences and expecting them to deliver happiness over time.

### **Psychological Needs as a Motive**

The importance of positive affect also aligns with a psychological-needs perspective. Herein we call on debates about whether psychological needs act as a motive that drives behavior or as a requirement for healthy functioning. The view that psychological needs are a motive suggests that they help the psychological system prioritize what to pursue. Psychological needs as a requirement suggest they act as a reward function that reinforces prior behavior (Sheldon, 2011).

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

Several aspects of our studies support the motivation interpretation. A requirement interpretation concerns the experience of psychological rewards once someone has performed a behavior that satisfies needs. Yet in our studies, there was no behavior that was rewarded – people simply reported or received experimental boosts in their SWB — and yet they adopted an experiential perspective. This pattern suggests it is less about reinforcing prior behaviors and more about how SWB orients people to opportunities to build psychological needs, which viewing products as being experiences can afford.

Furthermore, the particular role of positive affect suggests an even stronger link to psychological needs as motives. Positive affect is a signal of approach motivation (Carver & White, 1991), orienting people toward goal-relevant opportunities and providing the desire to enact behaviors to reach their goals.

This explanation points to a self-reinforcing, benevolent cycle. The Matthew effect, commonly summarized as “rich get richer” patterns, describes patterns in which people who are well-off in one dimension also reap benefits in another dimension (Merton, 1968). The term is inspired by the Biblical passage, “unto everyone that hath be given, and he shall have abundance” (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matthew 25:29). The proposed cycle would work something like this: If experiences support well-being and thus fulfill psychological needs, which we have argued, and if positive affect leads people to see products as offering experiences, which we have shown, then the approach motivation afforded by positive affect may help people extract what best supports their psychological needs from the products they buy or own.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations suggest opportunities to extend theory. First, recent work proposes SWB as a dynamic system wherein components continually influence each other (Shmotkin,

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

2005). In our context, momentary increases in positive affect might heighten experiential perceptions in the short term, which could then feed back into subsequent affective states or life satisfaction, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. A dynamic perspective would also open opportunities to explore time-dependent interactions, such as how prior experiences or existing well-being levels shape the interpretations of new purchases (e.g., lagged effect of experiential perceptions observed in Study 2). Adopting this approach would move theories of SWB beyond static models into conceptualizing well-being as an integrated, evolving system.

Second and relatedly, our findings highlight the need to examine the role of positive affect within SWB. Across studies, positive affect was the most reliable predictor of experiential perceptions, and in Study 2, only within-person momentary positive affect was associated with moment-to-moment experiential perceptions. Because this pattern was not preregistered or anticipated, it clearly warrants future research. Prior work suggests that SWB components form distinct, person-specific configurations (e.g., high positive affect despite moderate life satisfaction; Shmotkin, 2005). Future work could explore why positive affect, specifically, drives experiential perceptions and whether certain SWB configurations, such as chronically high positive affect, heighten sensitivity to the experiential qualities of products. Investigating these patterns would clarify the psychological role of positive affect within SWB and why experiential perceptions appear uniquely tied to affective, rather than cognitive, components of well-being.

Third, although Study 2 used experience sampling, we did not capture well-being states and perceptions at the moment of purchase. Research on how certain contexts affect interpretations of consumption would be welcome. Event-based experience sampling could assess SWB and product perceptions during purchasing moments, offering insights into time-dependent associations and immediate contextual influences. Similarly, wearable devices, such

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

as smartwatches that provide physiological markers (e.g., heart rate variability), could help test whether affective fluctuations, in combination with contextual cues, generate real-time experiential interpretations.

Fourth, exploring boundary conditions more rigorously could yield new insights into the relationship between SWB and experiential perceptions. Our samples were limited to the United States and Korea, and during a certain time period, leaving it unclear whether the relationship would evince in other cultures and contexts. Establishing measurement invariance across cultures at both between- and within-person levels would clarify cross-cultural comparability of SWB and experiential perceptions. Although we controlled for basic demographics and purchase characteristics, incorporating richer contextual variables, such as cultural consumption norms, may yield important findings.

### **Conclusion**

Five studies indicated that well-being alters not only how people view marketplace activities but gives insight more generally into how people view the world and their purchases in it. Existing work shows that buying and having experiences leads to greater well-being (e.g., Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003); according to the current findings, well-being (and particularly positive affect) leads people to see the things they purchase as offering experiences. Together, these findings imply that well-being itself can motivate the fulfillment of psychological needs and help one recognize that they are living through a moment — whether from a material good or an experience.

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

## References

- Adler, A. (1917). *Study of organ inferiority and its psychological compensation*. (S. E. Jelliffe, Trans.). Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10734-000>
- Bastos, W., & Machado, F. (2025). Extraverts perceive purchases more experientially and attain greater happiness from them. *Journal of the Association of Consumer Research*, 10(4), 355–368. <https://doi.org/10.1086/737277>
- Batz-Barbarich, C., Tay, L., Kuykendall, L., & Cheung, H. K. (2018). A meta-analysis of gender differences in subjective well-being: Estimating effect sizes and associations with gender inequality. *Psychological Science*, 29(9), 1491–1503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797618774796>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>
- Browne, M. W., & Cudeck, R. (1992). Alternative ways of assessing model fit. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 21(2), 230-258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124192021002005>
- Buecker, S., Luhmann, M., Haehner, P., Bühler, J. L., Dapp, L. C., Luciano, E. C., & Orth, U. (2023). The development of subjective well-being across the life span: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies. *Psychological Bulletin*, 149(7-8), 418–446. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000401>
- Caprariello, P. A., & Reis, H. T. (2013). To do, to have, or to share? Valuing experiences over material possessions depends on the involvement of others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 104(2), 199–215. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030953>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

- Carter, T. J., & Gilovich, T. (2010). The relative relativity of material and experiential purchases. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98*(1), 146–159.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017145>
- Carter, T. J., & Gilovich, T. (2012). I am what I do, not what I have: The differential centrality of experiential and material purchases to the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102*(6), 1304–1317. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027407>
- Carver, C. S., & White, T. L. (1994). Behavioral inhibition, behavioral activation, and affective responses to impending reward and punishment: The BIS/BAS Scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*(2), 319–333. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.2.319>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry, 11*(4), 227–268.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01)
- Diener, E. (1994). Assessing subjective well-being: Progress and opportunities. *Social Indicators Research, 31*(2), 103–157. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01207052>
- Diener, E. (2000). Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.34>
- Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 49*(1), 71–75.  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa4901_13)
- Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Oishi, S. (2018). Advances and open questions in the science of subjective well-being. *Collabra: Psychology, 4*(1), Article 15.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.115>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

- Diener, E., Oishi, S., & Tay, L. (2018). Advances in subjective well-being research. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 2(4), 253–260. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0307-6>
- Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 276–302. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276>
- Dittmar, H., Bond, R., Hurst, M., & Kasser, T. (2014). The relationship between materialism and personal well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 107(5), 879–924. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037409>
- Donnelly, G. E., Ksendzova, M., Howell, R. T., Vohs, K. D., & Baumeister, R. F. (2016). Buying to blunt negative feelings: Materialistic escape from the self. *Review of General Psychology*, 20(3), 272–316. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000078>
- Dunn, J. R., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2005). Feeling and believing: The influence of emotion on trust. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 88(5), 736–748. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.5.736>
- Faul, F., Erdfelder, E., Lang, A. G., & Buchner, A. (2007). G\* Power 3: A flexible statistical power analysis program for the social, behavioral, and biomedical sciences. *Behavior Research Methods*, 39(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03193146>
- Frank, R. H. (2004). How not to buy happiness. *Daedalus*, 133(2), 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.1162/001152604323049415>
- Fredrickson, B. L., Tugade, M. M., Waugh, C. E., & Larkin, G. R. (2003). What good are positive emotions in crisis? A prospective study of resilience and emotions following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 365–376. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.365>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

- Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S. (1986). The causes and consequences of a need for self-esteem: A terror management theory. In R. F. Baumeister (Ed.), *Public Self and Private Self* (pp. 189–212). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5_10)
- Guevarra, D. A., & Howell, R. T. (2015). To have in order to do: Exploring the effects of consuming experiential products on well-being. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.06.006>
- Heider, F. (1958). The naive analysis of action. In F. Heider (Ed.), *The psychology of interpersonal relations* (pp. 79–124). John Wiley & Sons, Inc..  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/10628-004>
- Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2-3), 61–83.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X>
- Hui, B. P. (2022). Prosocial behavior and well-being: Shifting from the ‘chicken and egg’ to positive feedback loop. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 44, 231–236.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.09.017>
- Judd, C. M., Westfall, J., & Kenny, D. A. (2012). Treating stimuli as a random factor in social psychology: a new and comprehensive solution to a pervasive but largely ignored problem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(1), 54–69.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028347>
- Judge, T. A., Bono, J. E., Erez, A., & Locke, E. A. (2005). Core self-evaluations and job and life satisfaction: The role of self-concordance and goal attainment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(2), 257–268. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.2.257>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

King James Bible. (2017). King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>

(Original work published 1769)

King, L. A. (2001). The health benefits of writing about life goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(7), 798–807. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201277003>

Lee, J. C., Hall, D. L., & Wood, W. (2018). Experiential or material purchases? Social class determines purchase happiness. *Psychological Science*, 29(7), 1031–1039.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797617736386>

Loveday, P. M., Lovell, G. P., & Jones, C. M. (2018). The best possible selves intervention: A review of the literature to evaluate efficacy and guide future research. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 19, 607–628. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9824-z>

Luhmann, M., Hofmann, W., Eid, M., & Lucas, R. E. (2012). Subjective well-being and adaptation to life events: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(3), 592–615. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025948>

Merton, R. K. (1968). The Matthew effect in science: The reward and communication systems of science are considered. *Science*, 159(3810), 56–63.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.159.3810.56>

Nicolao, L., Irwin, J. R., & Goodman, J. K. (2009). Happiness for sale: Do experiential purchases make consumers happier than material purchases? *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36(2), 188–198. <https://doi.org/10.1086/597049>

Park, J., & Banaji, M. R. (2000). Mood and heuristics: The influence of happy and sad states on sensitivity and bias in stereotyping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(6), 1005–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.6.1005>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

R Core Team (2025). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing* (Version 4.5.2)

[Computer Software]. <https://www.R-project.org/>

Rogers, C. R. (1961). The process equation of psychotherapy. *American journal of*

*psychotherapy*, 15(1), 27-45. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1961.15.1.27>

Schmitt, B., Brakus, J. J., & Zarantonello, L. (2015). From experiential psychology to consumer experience. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 25(1), 166–171.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2014.09.001>

Schmitt, B. & Zarantonello, L. (2013). Consumer experience and experiential marketing: A critical review. In N. K. Malhotra (Ed.), *Review of marketing research* (Vol 10, pp. 25–61). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1108/S1548-](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1548-6435(2013)0000010006)

[6435\(2013\)0000010006](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1548-6435(2013)0000010006)

Sheldon, K. M. (2011). Integrating behavioral-motive and experiential-requirement perspectives on psychological needs: A two process model. *Psychological Review*, 118(4), 552–569.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024758>

Shmotkin, D. (2005). Happiness in the face of adversity: Reformulating the dynamic and modular bases of subjective well-being. *Review of General Psychology*, 9(4), 291–325.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.4.291>

Shrum, L. J., Chaplin, L. N., & Lowrey, T. M. (2022). Psychological causes, correlates, and consequences of materialism. *Consumer Psychology Review*, 5(1), 69–86.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/arcp.1077>

Tan, J. J. X., Kraus, M. W., Carpenter, N. C., & Adler, N. E. (2020). The association between objective and subjective socioeconomic status and subjective well-being: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(11), 970–1020. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000258>

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

- Van Boven, L. (2005). Experientialism, materialism, and the pursuit of happiness. *Review of General Psychology, 9*(2), 132–142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.132>
- Van Boven, L., & Gilovich, T. (2003). To do or to have? That is the question. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(6), 1193–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.6.1193>
- Walsh, L. C., Boehm, J. K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2018). Does happiness promote career success? Revisiting the evidence. *Journal of Career Assessment, 26*(2), 199–219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072717751441>
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*(6), 1063–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063>
- Weingarten, E., Duke, K., Liu, W., Hamilton, R. W., Amir, O., Appel, G., ... & Sun, M. (2023). What makes people happy? Decoupling the experiential-material continuum. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 33*(1), 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1291>
- Weingarten, E., & Goodman, J. K. (2021). Re-examining the experiential advantage in consumption: A meta-analysis and review. *Journal of Consumer Research, 47*(6), 855–877. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa047>
- Zautra, A. J., Reich, J. W., Davis, M. C., Potter, P. T., & Nicolson, N. A. (2000). The role of stressful events in the relationship between positive and negative affects: Evidence from field and experimental studies. *Journal of Personality, 68*(5), 927–951. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6494.00121>
- Zhang, J. W., Howell, R. T., Caprariello, P. A., & Guevarra, D. A. (2014). Damned if they do, damned if they don't: Material buyers are not happier from material or experiential

## WELL-BEING AND EXPERIENTIAL PERCEPTIONS

consumption. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 50, 71–83.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2014.03.007>