

# New happiness research demonstrates when material items are the best option

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It matters whether you give your loved one a material gift or an experience for Valentine's Day, say researchers at The University of Texas at Austin's McCombs School of Business and Washington University in St. Louis.

Past research has shown that opting for shared experiences such as vacations and theatre tickets will lead to more long-term happiness than will buying material goods. However, new research to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that sometimes experiences can backfire.

The research was co-authored by Leonardo Nicolao and Julie Irwin of the McCombs School of Business and Joseph K. Goodman of Washington University in St. Louis.

"Previous studies have only tested happiness with positive experiences versus positive material purchases," said Irwin, associate professor of marketing at the McCombs School of Business. "We have studied the effects of negative purchases—ones where the results went poorly."

Indeed, Irwin said, experiences do lead to more happiness when the purchase goes well. "However, for negative purchases, bad experiences lead to more lasting unhappiness than do bad material purchases. Experiences 'stay with' us longer than material purchases, whether good or bad. They simply have more lasting power over our happiness. Imagine that really terrible play or restaurant meal—it is tougher to

recover from picking the wrong experience than from picking the wrong thing."

So, when considering the perfect romantic gift, it may be best to forgo the risky adventure vacation (with its risk of danger and bad weather) in favor of a safer gift, such as a piece of jewelry. A bad choice of an experience could make your valentine unhappy for a much longer time than will a badly chosen material gift. On the other hand, if you have a good reason to suspect that the purchase will turn out well (if it is her favorite restaurant, for instance, or the movie tickets she has been hinting about) then experiences are the way to go and will leave your valentine happier (and more appreciative) longer than any material gift could.

More information: The paper can be viewed at [www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/597049](http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/597049) .

Source: University of Texas at Austin

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