

Study suggests to buy experiences, not things, to combat loneliness

May 21 2024, by Kiah Collier



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Last year, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy released [an advisory](#) that described loneliness and isolation as a national epidemic, with health consequences that rival those associated with cigarette smoking and obesity.

To help address this pervasive isolation, Murthy's office challenged Americans to find and act on ways to strengthen their [social connections](#).

New research by Amit Kumar, assistant professor of marketing and psychology at Texas McCombs, suggests one effective method: spending money on experiences rather than material goods. The research is [published](#) in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*.

Kumar's prior research has shown that paying to attend concerts, eat at restaurants, or travel the world tends to be far more satisfying to consumers than buying a new car or fancy clothes. This time, he and his co-researchers focused on a different consequence of [experiential purchases](#): how they affect feelings of social connection.

"What this work suggests is that we might actually be able to build social capital from what we buy," Kumar says. "That, in turn, could lead to more health and happiness."

In seven varied experiments—with psychologists Thomas Mann of Harvard University and Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University—Kumar surveyed more than 1,400 participants about their feelings of social connection after making experiential and material purchases.

The experiments found that compared with material ones, experiential purchases:

Boost feelings of similarity

Participants rated their feelings of similarity to someone else who had made the same purchase, on an ascending scale from 1 to 9. In several separate experiments, they consistently rated those feelings significantly higher for experiential purchases than for material ones: up to 1.51 points higher. They also felt greater senses of connection and kinship.

"You feel a significantly stronger sense of connectedness when you find out that you just saw the same band in concert, than when you learn you have the same shoes as someone else," Kumar says.

Are more tied to identity

One reason for stronger feelings of connection is that experiences are a bigger part of a person's identity than material possessions. On a similar scale, participants rated at an average 7.21 their sense that experiential purchases constitute part of who they are. They rated material purchases only 5.92.

"All of our buying habits are, to some extent, part of who we are, and they can connect us to other people," Kumar says. "But that's much more likely to be true of experiences we buy than material items we buy."

Are less tied to envy

Even when the other person consumes a similar but superior version of the same purchase, experiential purchases bring a greater sense of connection than material ones do.

As an example, Kumar cites two people who attend the same baseball game, with one sitting in the nosebleed section and the other in a private

box. Despite that difference, the two people are likely to feel a stronger sense of kinship than when they notice they are wearing the same kind of shoes.

It might seem obvious that experiential purchases would boost social connection, since people usually attend concerts or travel for leisure in the company of others. But Kumar says they increase feelings of connectedness not just to friends, but to people in general.

In two experiments, participants felt a greater "sense of connection to humanity" after reflecting on experiential purchases than on material purchases, Kumar says. In contrast, thinking about material purchases left them "unusually disinclined" to pursue social connection in general.

While the team's findings are most relevant to individual consumers and policymakers who are looking to boost health and happiness, Kumar says there are also interesting potential practical implications for businesses. One is that companies should consider highlighting experiential aspects of the [material goods](#) they're selling.

"That would likely enhance consumers' feelings of social connection and drive longer-term satisfaction," he says. "That can be important for things like customer retention and brand loyalty."

More information: Amit Kumar et al, The Aptly Buried "I" in Experience: Experiential Purchases Promote More Social Connection Than Material Purchases, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/bdm.2376](https://doi.org/10.1002/bdm.2376)

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

Citation: Study suggests to buy experiences, not things, to combat loneliness (2024, May 21)
retrieved 22 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-05-buy-combat-loneliness.html>

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