

# Hedonic objects and utilitarian experiences: The overriding influence of hedonism in driving consumer happiness

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## Abstract

The *experience recommendation* prescribes a disadvantage to material purchases, suggesting that spending on experiential rather than material purchases makes people happier. This study challenges this idea by examining the hedonic/utilitarian nature of purchases. The results of a qualitative study and four experiments (one preregistered) show that the happiness advantage of experiential (vs. material) purchases is contingent on pronounced hedonic properties. Our results indicate that hedonism asymmetries override the distinction between purchase type, such that there is no happiness advantage in buying experiences over material objects when purchases are equally (non)hedonic. Importantly, we find that hedonism is more instrumental for material purchases and that hedonic materials are equally effective as experiential purchases, altogether, and even outperform utilitarian experiences in eliciting happiness. Our findings encourage consumers to focus on the properties, rather than the type, of purchases to increase purchase-related happiness. Our results further suggest that marketers of material goods, in particular, can considerably increase customer value by using design components, product features, and brand imagery that leverage hedonic qualities.

## KEYWORDS

experience recommendation, experiential advantage, experiential and material purchases, happiness, hedonic, utilitarian

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Extant literature suggests that spending money on experiential purchases, such as vacations and concerts, elicits higher happiness levels than spending on material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Howell & Hill, 2009), a phenomenon dubbed as the *experience recommendation* or *experiential advantage* (Nicolao et al., 2009; Weingarten & Goodman, 2021). Relevant research identifies the distinction between purchase types (experiential or material) as a determinant of happiness and recommends that

consumers prioritize experiential purchases as they promise higher happiness returns (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Pchelin & Howell, 2014). However, against the *experience recommendation*, market evidence shows that US consumers spent almost \$2 trillion on material purchases, such as clothing, jewelry, home furnishing, cars, books, and so on, in 2020 alone; a figure that has been growing since 2012 (Bureau of Economic Analysis US Department of Commerce, 2021). It appears that consumers invest and will keep investing significant resources on material possessions, despite their presumed happiness disadvantage.

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A reason why this discrepancy is observed may be the mutually exclusive way of thinking about the different purchase types, and the fact that prior studies have been mainly tracing back happiness effects to characteristics associated with either experiential or material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). While legitimate, this approach does not fully accommodate the more nuanced reality consumers experience and neglects that material and experiential purchases may often bear similar happiness-inducing characteristics and properties. As a result, advising against material purchases altogether may prevent consumers from optimizing their happiness returns, potentially leading to adverse consequences associated with wasted money, time, effort, and other psychological resources. Thus, the critical issue lies not in whether one should prioritize experiential over material purchases but, instead, in how one can derive more happiness from their material purchase decisions. Are material purchases always at a disadvantage compared to experiential purchases? And, how can marketers of material goods contribute to their customers' happiness? We aim to answer these crucial questions by focusing on the hedonic value attached to different purchase types.

We argue that hedonism is a fundamental component of the human condition and should override influences traditionally attributed to the, sometimes vague, distinction between experiential and material consumption. More specifically, we suggest that, while both purchase types can bear substantial hedonic merit, individuals typically link experiential purchases to a pleasure-driven, hedonic nature, and more often associate material purchases with functional and utilitarian properties. We predict that such asymmetries may explain the differences in consumers' perceived happiness observed in prior studies. However, not *all* experiences are highly hedonic, as anyone who has commuted on a crowded train, or sat through a tedious workshop or training session can attest. Similarly, not *all* material purchases are predominantly utilitarian: toys, paintings, TVs, or clothes people choose for a party or other celebrations are mainly purchased for the pleasure they promise. Along these lines, we hypothesize that equalizing the hedonic/utilitarian value across experiential and material purchases will eliminate the experience recommendation and expect that material purchases imbued with salient hedonic properties will have no disadvantage against experiential purchases.

In five complementary studies, we find support for these propositions and provide strong evidence for the role of hedonism in overriding influences of purchase type (experiential vs. material) on purchase-induced happiness. The results show that *hedonic material* purchases elicit similar levels of happiness as *hedonic experiential* purchases and even outperform *utilitarian experiential* purchases. Our work offers the first empirical evidence to disentangle the role of hedonism/utilitarianism in inducing consumer happiness across different purchase types. As such, it contributes to the relevant literature by highlighting that the hedonic value attached to purchases supersedes the effects of purchase type, revealing that hedonism is more instrumental for material (vs. experiential) purchases, and showing that, contrary to the experience recommendation, material purchases do not invariably have a handicap over experiential ones. The results emphasize the pleasure-related aspects of consumption and highlight the need for conscious spending that

prioritizes happiness-increasing characteristics, such as joy and pleasure. Consistent with the recent anti-consumption movement which prioritizes the downsizing, decluttering and reduction of consumption to free up time and money for more fulfilling activities (Makri et al., 2020; Shaw & Newholm, 2002), our studies propose that people should not forego material possessions altogether, but instead make room, physically and metaphorically, for those that—beyond any functional benefits—are more pleasurable. Our findings provide insight to marketers, especially those managing material goods, on how to increase customer value by using design components, product features, and brand imagery that leverage hedonic qualities.

## 2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | The experience recommendation

The experience recommendation (also known as, the experiential advantage) posits that spending money on experiential purchases, like vacations and concerts, elicits higher levels of happiness than spending on material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Howell & Hill, 2009; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Purchase-related happiness in this context refers to individuals' cognitive appraisal of the perceived happiness associated with a particular discretionary purchase made in the past (Lee et al., 2018; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Zhang et al., 2014). Although variations in the specific measurement approach exist (Weingarten & Goodman, 2021), there is consensus across empirical studies in assessing how happy people feel when thinking about a (past) purchase (Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Nicolao et al., 2009; Rasmus et al., 2022; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). A similar approach is adopted in our studies.

Pioneering work bringing forward the experience recommendation suggests that experiential purchases will generally have an advantage over material ones because of their inherent characteristics. For instance, relevant literature has proposed that experiential (vs. material) purchases have a slower hedonic adaptation rate (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Nicolao et al., 2009), are more instrumental in expressing one's self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), enable social relationships (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Van Boven, 2005), are more difficult to compare to other purchases, and tend to be reinterpreted using a more positive lens (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Van Boven, 2005).

More recent studies, however, have identified important boundary conditions, indicating that the relationship between purchase type (experiential and material) and happiness is more complex than previously thought and that the superiority of experiences may not reflect a general principle but only conditionally hold true (Goodman et al., 2016; Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Weingarten & Goodman, 2021; Weidman & Dunn, 2016; Halkias et al., 2020). For example, Nicolao et al. (2009) showed that experiential purchases have an advantage over material ones, only if the outcome of the purchase is positive, while Capriarello and Reis (2013) found that when material purchases facilitate the involvement of others, they do not have a handicap over experiential purchases. What is more,

Goodman et al. (2016) observed that in the context of important life milestones, such as graduations or promotions, it is material, and not experiential, purchases that have a happiness edge. Further illustrating the tentative nature of the experience recommendation, a recent study from Razmus and colleagues (2022), found no differences in purchase-related happiness across purchase types for consumers who generally treat brands as important elements of their self-schemas. Similarly, Lee et al. (2022) demonstrate that when material purchases are imbued with human-like characteristics they offer similar levels of happiness as experiential purchases.

Common to these recent investigations is an emphasis on specific properties that may potentially increase perceived happiness and are not contingent on the dichotomy between experiential and material purchases. Along similar lines, Weingarten et al. (2023) question the need to distinguish between experiential and material purchases in relation to the happiness they elicit and provide empirical evidence that both purchase types are related to happiness and that consumers can indeed enjoy the consumption related to both experiential and material qualities. Drawing on the notion that purchase-related happiness lies in the very nature, and not the type, of a purchase, this study contributes to this stream of research by investigating the critical role of hedonism/utilitarianism in conjunction with experiential and material purchases.

## 2.2 | Hedonic and utilitarian nature

The distinction between hedonic and utilitarian purchases is widely documented. Hedonic goods appeal to the emotions, are oriented toward fun and excitement, and are motivated by pleasure-seeking (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). In contrast, utilitarian goods aim at fulfilling functional or practical needs and are motivated by end-goal considerations (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). Put simply, one typically wants a hedonic product but needs a utilitarian one (Batra & Ahtola, 1991).

While classifying a purchase as hedonic or utilitarian is often a discretionary matter, all purchases serve the purpose of benefitting or improving our quality of life (Khan et al., 2005; Okada, 2005): regardless of whether one buys a fridge or a necklace, their purchase decision should satisfy them and ultimately make them happy. Nonetheless, hedonic and utilitarian purchases bring about consumer happiness through different pathways. Utilitarian purchases contribute to happiness by facilitating and simplifying our practical needs and are associated with satisfaction, confidence, and security (Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008). Hedonic purchases, on the other hand, are explicitly targeted at increasing enjoyment and eliciting excitement to make us happy (Chitturi et al., 2007, 2008).

Hedonic and utilitarian properties are distinct but not mutually exclusive (Batra & Ahtola, 1991) and can simultaneously coexist in a purchase (Khan et al., 2005). Whether one property dominates the other “is a matter of degree or perception” and may also depend on the specific consumer and the circumstantial motive (want or need) underlying the purchase (Khan et al., 2005, p. 147). Especially for material goods, the balance between hedonic and utilitarian properties is rather malleable and

often blurred. For instance, sunglasses can simultaneously offer sun protection (utilitarian), and make someone look and feel good (hedonic). As Alba and Williams (2013, p. 4) aptly note “relative to a concert, a cellphone may be viewed as utilitarian. Over the course of a day, however, the same phone may swing between being a tool and being a toy.” This is not the case with experiential purchases. People may ordinarily engage with a wide range of hedonic and utilitarian experiential purchases, including holiday bookings, concert tickets, restaurant reservations, or dance classes (hedonic), but also ride-sharing journeys, doctor appointments, or repair shop visits (utilitarian). Nevertheless, when they retrospectively reflect on experiential purchases—that is, events they “paid to live through” (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194)—people typically come up with something that is indulgent and pleasant. For instance, when thinking about experiential purchases, one is more likely to bring to mind the thrill of skiing down a slope (hedonic), rather than the ski lessons (utilitarian) that preceded it even though, by definition, both are experiential purchases. This notion is consistent with Weingarten and Goodman’s (2021) work which documents that experiential purchases are often described in the literature in terms of enjoyability. Arguably, people tend to associate experiential purchases with the notion of hedonism so strongly, they hardly consider utilitarian experiential purchases when thinking of their past purchases.

Such imbalances may be underlying the experiential advantage observed in previous work. Psychological theory identifies pleasure (hedonia) as a fundamental component of happiness, treating the pathological lack of it (anhedonia) as a diagnostic of happiness-impeding disorders, such as depression (Kringelbach & Berridge, 2010). While there is a lack of research on the causal influence of purchase-induced hedonism on consumer happiness, there is considerable correlational evidence across/within national contexts to suggest that hedonistic elements in one’s lifestyle are independently associated with perceived happiness (Joshani & Jarden, 2016; Veenhoven, 2003). Therefore, the extent to which a purchase is imbued with hedonic/utilitarian properties should be critical for purchase-related happiness. In fact, given that hedonism is an integral element of the human condition, hedonic properties should prevail over the influences attributed to the distinction between experiential and material purchases. Overall, we predict that experiential, compared with material, purchases are more readily associated with hedonic attributes and, thus, have an advantage in eliciting happiness. However, in contrast to the experience recommendation, equally hedonic/utilitarian purchases will cancel out the happiness handicap prescribed to material purchases. Importantly, we predict that *hedonic material* purchases will offer similar levels of happiness as *hedonic experiential* ones, and even higher happiness levels than *utilitarian experiences*.

## 2.3 | Overview of hypotheses and empirical studies

The present investigation is organized as follows. Study 1 offers qualitative, exploratory insight gauging consumers’ unaided understanding of experiential and material purchase types regarding their underlying

hedonic/utilitarian nature. Study 2 formally tests whether the experiential (vs. material) purchases reported are more (less) hedonic (H1), whether material (vs. experiential) purchases reported are more (less) utilitarian (H2) and examines the mediating role of hedonism/utilitarianism in the purchase type–happiness relationship (H3). Study 3 tests the causal impact of hedonism on happiness by directly manipulating the hedonic and utilitarian nature of purchases (H3). It further tests whether hedonic purchases elicit greater happiness than utilitarian purchases, irrespective of purchase type (H4), and whether hedonic material purchases outperform utilitarian experiential purchases in terms of happiness (H5). Study 4 extends the results of Study 3, employing a different operationalization that manipulates the *motivation* behind the purchases (pleasure-seeking vs. practical needs satisfaction). As such, our studies effectively account for the various manifestations of the hedonic/utilitarian distinction that, consistent with the relevant theory, can be effectively attributed to both stimulus-based (e.g., product) and situational (e.g., purchase motive) factors (Khan et al., 2005; Melnyk et al., 2012; Voss et al., 2003). Finally, a preregistered Study 5 replicates the results of Study 3 and acts as a further robustness check. Table 1 below summarizes the nature and purpose of our studies.

### 3 | STUDY 1

Study 1 aims to explore whether the notions of hedonism and utilitarianism intuitively emerge in conjunction with implicitly formed experiential/material purchases. In most prior studies, respondents are typically provided with exact definitions of experiential and material purchases (e.g., Howell & Hill, 2009; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Zhang et al., 2014). This, however, may inadvertently sensitize participants toward the (hedonic/utilitarian) content of these concepts and inhibit their organic understanding (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). To this end, Study 1 employed a double-blind, unaided classification task that explicitly avoided priming participants toward either concept of interest (Saunders & Thornhill, 2011). Qualitative sorting techniques, whereby participants sort stimuli such as pictures or cards containing words into different groups, are particularly useful in item categorizations (Whaley & Longoria, 2009). Essentially, Study 1 draws on individuals' natural perception of semantic associations without implicitly priming any underlying category membership and contaminating participants' responses (Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020; Saunders & Thornhill, 2011).

**TABLE 1** Overview of empirical studies.

Study	Method	Objective
Study 1	Qualitative study employing an unaided sorting and label elicitation task with a double-blind process regarding respondents' and coders' categorizations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inductive approach to assess whether the notion of hedonism/utilitarianism organically arises in conjunction with experiential and material purchases.</li> </ul>
Study 2	Single factor, between-subjects experimental design manipulating purchase type ( <i>experiential vs. material purchases</i> ). Measures hedonic and utilitarian properties, and perceived happiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assess in a confirmatory manner if experiential and material purchases are systematically associated with hedonism/utilitarianism, respectively.</li> <li>Provide correlational evidence about whether hedonic/utilitarian asymmetries mediate the purchase type–happiness relationship.</li> </ul>
Study 3	Factorial, 2×2 between-subjects experimental design manipulating purchase type ( <i>experiential vs. material purchases</i> ) and nature of purchase ( <i>hedonic vs. utilitarian</i> ). Measures perceived happiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide causal evidence for the link between hedonism/utilitarianism and happiness and assess the relative efficacy of hedonic material purchases against hedonic and utilitarian experiential purchases.</li> <li>Stimulus-based manifestation of the hedonic/utilitarian distinction based on the properties inherent to the purchase itself.</li> </ul>
Study 4	Factorial, 2×2 between-subjects experimental design manipulating purchase type ( <i>experiential vs. material purchases</i> ) and nature of purchase ( <i>pleasure-seeking vs. practical need-satisfaction motivation</i> ). Measures perceived happiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Corroborate the direct link between hedonism/utilitarianism and happiness, and show that the superiority of experiential over material purchases is contingent on the hedonic/utilitarian value attached to them.</li> <li>Situational manifestation of the hedonic/utilitarian distinction based on the individual's motivation behind a purchase.</li> </ul>
Study 5	Factorial, 2×2 between-subjects experimental design manipulating purchase type ( <i>experiential vs. material purchases</i> ) and nature of purchase ( <i>hedonic vs. utilitarian</i> ). Measures perceived happiness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Robustness check: preregistered replication of the original operationalization (Study 3) to calibrate statistical power across studies and assess the replicability of results.</li> </ul>

### 3.1 | Method

Ten participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 35.7$ , 40% female) were recruited in a sorting task using 32 index cards (Richins, 1994) with a material or experiential purchase written on it (e.g., “laptop,” “30 massage”). The purchase examples were extracted from previous empirical studies (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) (see Supporting Information: Sections 1–3 for more details).

The researchers presorted the cards and placed them into two decks: one containing the examples of material purchases and one of experiential purchases. Participants, who were naïve to this distinction, were instructed to examine their content, observe the common elements, and assign a label to each deck capturing its unique essence. These labels summarized the key theme and characteristics that tied together the various purchases within each card deck.

Following, the analysis focused on the types of words participants used for their labels and on whether these loaded onto themes of a hedonic or utilitarian nature. Two independent coders, who were also blind to the a priori sorting of experiential and material purchases, were asked to indicate whether each label reflects a hedonic or a utilitarian purchase nature, following the Voss et al. (2003) conceptualization. More specifically, the coders classified the labels generated by the respondents by assessing the extent to which they (a) signal hedonic notions such as *fun*, *exciting*, *delightful*, *thrilling*, and *enjoyable*, or (b) imply utilitarian notions such as *effective*, *helpful*, *functional*, *necessary*, and *practical*. The original intercoder agreement was 85% and uncertainties were resolved through discussion to reach consensus (see Supporting Information: Section 3).

### 3.2 | Results

The labels that participants used for each category are listed in Table 2 below. Overall, participants' unaided descriptions of the experiential and material purchases categories seem to converge on the themes of hedonism and utilitarianism.

In line with the Voss et al. (2003) definition, the coders indicated that 4 out of 10 participants used words descriptive of utilitarian purchases, such as “easier,” “functional,” “practical,” when referring to the material purchases deck. However, there was ambivalence in coding the remaining descriptive labels with both coders noting that these are generic and could potentially be interpreted both as utilitarian and as hedonic. For instance, the titles “objects,” “things,” “objects - inanimate” could be referring to something hedonic or utilitarian. Following discussion to reach consensus, the coders reported that in the absence of any further descriptor or qualifier (e.g., “*fun* things”), these labels should be treated as utilitarian which they considered to be the most probable or default interpretation (see Supporting Information: Section 3).

The labels assigned to the deck with the experiential purchases were classified in their entirety as hedonic by both coders. Most participants used words such as “enjoyment” or “entertainment” to

**TABLE 2** Participants' category labels.

#### Participant-generated labels: Material purchases

“Objects”; “Various objects”; “Daily life - everyday life”; “Things”; “Things that make life easier”; “Products, means with very specific use. I'd buy them for practical reasons”; “Objects, inanimate”; “Consumption objects”; “Gifts for my self...with a functional nature”; “Functional objects”

#### Participant-generated labels: Experiential purchases

“Means for enjoyment”; “Entertainment options”; “Entertainment”; “Experiences”; “Things that make life more enjoyable”; “You want to have a good time, you want something different”; “Activities...they include people, mobility, lots of things”; “Personal enjoyment”; “Making plans for the weekend”; “Trips - Entertainment”

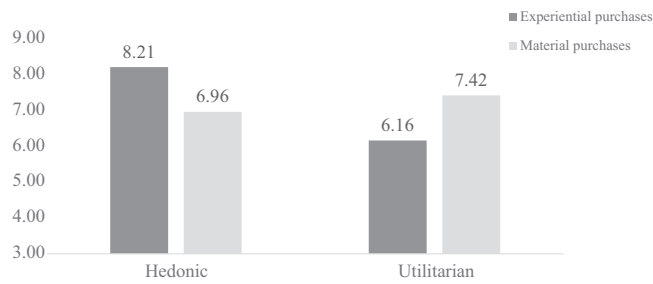
label the experiential purchases category, both of which are included in the definition provided by Voss et al. (2003). In contrast to material purchases, the coders were considerably more confident about their coding, reporting some uncertainty for only a single label; for example, coders pointed that, except for entertainment plans (hedonic), “making plans for the weekend” might also be alluding to errands (utilitarian). Overall, participants' thought listings as well as coders' explicit certainty in classifying these labels attests to the fact that experiential purchases are more readily associated with the notion of hedonism. While at an aggregate level the findings regarding the purchase examples are consistent with the experiential-hedonic and material-utilitarian relationship, they also imply that, unlike experiential purchases, material ones can more often be associated with both utilitarian and hedonic properties.

## 4 | STUDY 2

Qualitative insights from Study 1 are consistent with our expectations, indicating that individuals seem to naturally parallel experiential and material purchases with the notions of hedonism and utilitarianism. Study 2 aims to formally test this notion. More specifically, we test whether consumers' perceptions about experiential purchases are predominantly hedonic (H1), whether perceptions about material purchases are predominantly utilitarian (H2), and whether the perceived hedonic/utilitarian nature mediates the relationship between purchase type and happiness (H3).

### 4.1 | Method

A total of 117 undergraduate students were recruited in a pen and paper experiment in exchange for course credit ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22$ , 58.1% female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions manipulating purchase type (experiential vs. material). Consistent with previous relevant studies (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003; Howell & Hill, 2009), participants were asked to report a purchase (experiential or material) they made in the past. They were explicitly instructed to recall purchases made with the aim



**FIGURE 1** Mean hedonic and utilitarian scores by purchase type (Study 2).

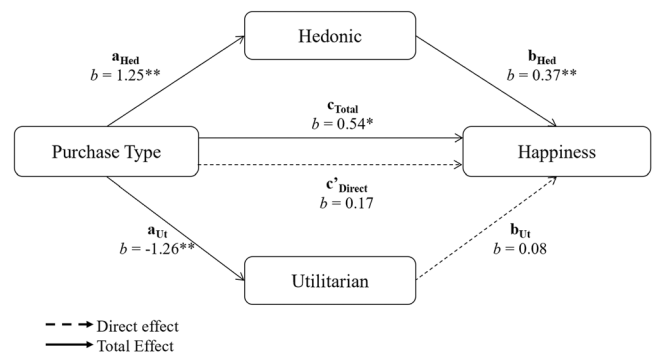
of increasing their happiness and were provided with definitions of each purchase type adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003). Following, participants indicated how happy the reported purchase made them feel, and how hedonic and utilitarian they considered it to be.

Happiness was measured using a two-item scale adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ). Specifically, participants were asked, “When you think about this purchase, how happy does it make you?” and “How happy did you feel when you made this purchase?”. The hedonic and utilitarian nature of purchases was measured with the Voss et al. (2003) hedonic/utilitarian scale ( $\alpha = 0.88$  and  $\alpha = 0.85$ , respectively). Variables were measured on a nine-point scale, with higher values indicating more of the property being measured.

## 4.2 | Results

In line with the experience recommendation, the results indicate that experiential purchases ( $M = 8.04, SD = 0.99$ ) generally elicit greater happiness than material purchases ( $M = 7.50, SD = 1.00, t(115) = -2.946, p < 0.05, d = -0.545$ ). Consistent with expectations (H1), experiential purchases were found to be significantly more hedonic ( $M = 8.21, SD = 0.89$ ) than material purchases ( $M = 6.96, SD = 1.44, t(115) = -5.663, p < 0.001, d = -1.047$ ), while material purchases were more utilitarian (H2) ( $M = 7.42, SD = 1.30$ ) than experiential purchases ( $M = 6.16, SD = 1.23, t(115) = 5.377, p < 0.001, d = 0.994$ ) (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>.

To examine the mediating role of the hedonic and utilitarian properties, we estimated a parallel multiple mediation model (Model 410,000 bootstrapped samples; Hayes, 2022). The results produced a significant indirect effect through the hedonic nature of purchases ( $b_{PurchaseType \rightarrow Hedonic \rightarrow Happiness} = 0.47, SE = 0.14, 95\% \text{ BCI: } 0.23, 0.78$ ) but not the utilitarian ( $b_{PurchaseType \rightarrow Utilitarian \rightarrow Happiness} = -0.09, SE = 0.1, 95\% \text{ BCI: } -0.30, 0.1$ ), indicating that the positive effect of purchase type on happiness ( $c = 0.54, p < 0.05$ ) is only mediated by the hedonic nature (H3) (Figure 2). Finally, probing a formal comparison between the indirect effects of the parallel mediation



**FIGURE 2** The mediating role of the hedonic and utilitarian nature on the purchase type-happiness relationship (Study 2) (\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.001$ ).

model yielded a statistically significant difference of  $\Delta_{\text{indirect\_effect}} = 0.56 (SE = 0.16)$  with 95% BCI between 0.26 and 0.87.

The findings conform to the experience recommendation but reveal that the experiential purchases typically reported are more hedonic than material purchases and that this underlying asymmetry mediates the relationship between purchase type and happiness. We find that only hedonic aspects drive happiness. Utilitarian properties, which are significantly more pronounced for material purchases, are not associated with perceived happiness. Taken together, hedonism appears to be the only significant mediator in the relationship between purchase type and consumers' happiness and has a significantly stronger effect in relation to utilitarianism. Overall, Study 2 offers correlational evidence for the role of hedonism in driving purchase-induced happiness by measuring how consumers naturally see purchases. Study 3 directly tests this relationship by explicitly manipulating the hedonic/utilitarian nature of purchases.

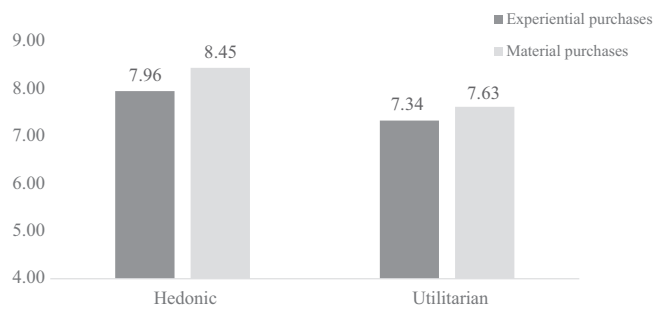
## 5 | STUDY 3

Study 3 aims to provide causal evidence for the relationship between hedonism and happiness and focuses on the relative efficacy of hedonic material purchases against hedonic and utilitarian experiential purchases. We expect that hedonic purchases will elicit higher happiness than utilitarian purchases regardless of the experiential or material purchase type (H4), and that hedonic material purchases will outperform utilitarian experiential purchases in terms of happiness (H5). Thus, in contrast to the experience recommendation, we expect that experiential purchases have no advantage over material purchases, unless the latter is overtly utilitarian.

### 5.1 | Method

Ninety university students participated in this pen and paper study ( $M_{\text{age}} = 26.58, 55.6\%$  female) in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of four between-subjects experimental conditions based on a 2 (purchase type: material vs.

<sup>1</sup>We have accounted for potential differences in the monetary value of the elicited purchase examples by operationalizing cost as an ordinal variable which produced an identical results pattern. For brevity, the analysis is not discussed here. All subsequent studies explicitly account for cost as a continuous covariate.



**FIGURE 3** Mean happiness scores by purchase type and nature (hedonic, utilitarian) (Study 3).

*experiential*)  $\times$  2 (purchase nature: *hedonic* vs. *utilitarian*) design. Similar to Study 2, participants were asked to think of a material/experiential purchase they made in the past. They were further instructed that this purchase had to be hedonic or utilitarian based on the Voss et al. (2003) operationalization: “Specifically, think of an object/experience that was very interesting and exciting for you, and gave you great pleasure or enjoyment” (hedonic), and “...that was very useful and practical for you, and that you found necessary or effective” (utilitarian). As in Study 2, participants then indicated how happy the purchase made them and rated it on how hedonic and utilitarian they considered it to be. Cost of purchase was also assessed and utilized as a covariate.

## 5.2 | Results

The manipulation was successful, as purchases in the hedonic conditions, both experiential and material, were rated as significantly more hedonic ( $M = 8.08$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) than those in the utilitarian conditions ( $M = 6.73$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ,  $t(88) = 4.816$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.015$ ). Similarly, purchases in the utilitarian conditions were rated as more utilitarian ( $M = 7.95$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) than purchases in the hedonic conditions ( $M = 6.90$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ,  $t(88) = -3.626$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = -0.764$ ).

The analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) results indicate a non-significant effect for the cost of purchase ( $F(1,85) = 1.042$ ,  $p = 0.31$ ), a significant main effect for the nature of a purchase (hedonic vs. utilitarian) ( $F(1,85) = 10.39$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ),  $\eta_p^2 = 0.109$ ), but not for the purchase type (experiential vs. material) (Figure 3). Hedonic purchases elicited greater happiness than utilitarian purchases, irrespective of purchase type (H4). Both the main effect of purchase type and the interaction of purchase type with the purchase nature were non-significant ( $F(1,85) = 2.945$ ,  $p = 0.090$  and  $F(1,85) = 0.134$ ,  $p = 0.716$ , respectively). Further  $t$ -test analysis indicated significantly higher happiness levels for hedonic materials ( $M = 8.45$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) than utilitarian experiences ( $M = 7.34$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $t(37) = 3.209$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 1.028$ ) (H5).

Study 3 offers direct evidence for the role of hedonism in influencing purchase-related happiness. We find that hedonic purchases, both experiential and material, elicit higher happiness than utilitarian purchases. Importantly, the results indicate that hedonism overrides the effects of purchase type, such that when the

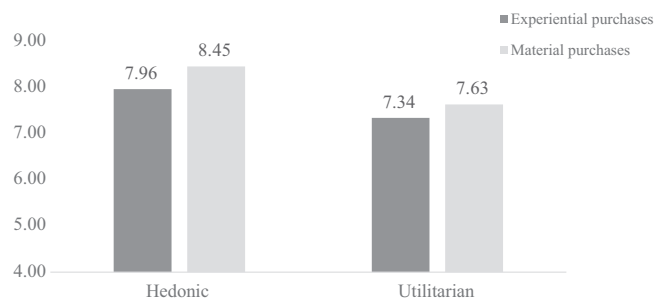
hedonic nature is held constant, the type of the purchase does not influence perceived happiness. Thus, purchases that are equal in hedonic/utilitarian properties elicit similar levels of happiness regardless of being experiential or material. Experiential purchases were found to outperform material purchases only if the latter are explicitly utilitarian. In fact, hedonic material purchases equal hedonic experiential ones and are even more effective than experiential purchases with no clear hedonic nature. As long as material purchases are comparably hedonic/utilitarian to experiential purchases, they do not have a relative happiness disadvantage and contribute to happiness equally.

## 6 | STUDY 4

Study 3 examined hedonic and utilitarian purchases with reference to the product per se. Consistent with the notion that a stimulus object's hedonic/utilitarian value is malleable (Khan et al., 2005), relevant literature indicates that hedonic and utilitarian properties often coexist (Alba & Williams, 2013; Crossen, 2006) with the dominant property being determined by the individual's underlying motivation, namely pleasure-seeking versus practical need satisfaction. Along similar lines, Batra and Ahtola (1991) and Pham (1998) highlight a goal-based perspective in determining hedonic/utilitarian value, suggesting that this is based on the *objective* consumers have in pursuing a purchase. Hence, instead of focusing on the purchase *nature* (Study 3), we now operationalize hedonism and utilitarianism by manipulating the *motivation* behind the purchase, namely pleasure-seeking/want (hedonic) or need-satisfaction (utilitarian), respectively. Study 4 conceptually replicates and extends the findings of the previous studies, showing that purchase-related hedonism, regardless of whether it is instigated by product attributes or consumers' motives, significantly impacts happiness (H4), with hedonic materials performing equally (or better) against hedonic (utilitarian) experiences (H5).

### 6.1 | Method

Ninety-five participants were recruited through MTurk ( $M_{\text{age}} = 36.9$ , 35.8% female) and were randomly assigned to one of the four between-subjects conditions based on a 2 (purchase type: *material* vs. *experiential*)  $\times$  2 (motivation: *pleasure-seeking* vs. *practical need-satisfaction*) design. The procedure was identical to the previous two experiments, except that now participants were explicitly told that the purchase reported had to be motivated by pleasure-seeking (“Think of an object (experience) that you bought because you liked it and really wanted it, and not because you needed it”), or by need-satisfaction (“... because it was necessary and you really needed it, and not because you wanted it”). The measures were similar to those used in the previous studies. As a manipulation check participants indicated their degree of agreement with two statements: “I made my



**FIGURE 4** Mean happiness scores by purchase type and nature (hedonic, utilitarian) (Study 4).

purchase to experience pleasure” and “I made my purchase to cover a practical need”, respectively.

## 6.2 | Results

The manipulation was successful, as purchases in the pleasure motivation conditions were indeed rated significantly higher in terms of a pleasure motivation ( $M = 7.84$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) than those in the need motivation condition ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = 2.78$ ,  $t(93) = -7.004$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = -1.438$ ). Similarly, purchases in the need motivation conditions were also rated significantly higher in terms of a need motivation ( $M = 7.67$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) compared with purchases in the pleasure motivation conditions ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ,  $t(93) = 11.807$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 2.424$ ).

The ANCOVA results revealed a non-significant effect for the cost of purchase ( $F(1, 90) = 0.048$ ,  $p = 0.827$ ) and a significant main effect for the type of motivation ( $F(1, 90) = 21.23$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.191$ ) showing that overall purchases motivated by pleasure-seeking elicited greater happiness than purchases motivated by need-satisfaction (H4) (Figure 4). Both the main effect of purchase type and the interaction between purchase type motivation were non-significant ( $F(1, 90) = 0.39$ ,  $p = 0.533$  and  $F(1, 90) = 0.33$ ,  $p = 0.565$ , respectively), indicating that purchases driven by pleasure-seeking (vs. need-satisfaction) goals elicit higher levels of happiness for both purchase types and in a similar fashion. As predicted in H5, planned contrasts showed that hedonic materials ( $M = 7.52$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) elicit higher happiness levels than utilitarian experiences ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 2.35$ ,  $t(45) = 2.682$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.783$ ).

The findings conceptually and empirically replicate those of Study 3, highlighting the independent positive influence of hedonism. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that such positive effects go beyond the type of the purchase and hold true regardless of whether the source of hedonism lies in the product and/or in consumers' underlying motivation.

## 7 | STUDY 5

Study 5 serves as a robustness check, replicating the findings of the previous studies with a preregistered, more conservative experimental design that calibrates power across the empirical studies. An a

priori power analysis (G\*Power 3.1) showed that with a  $n = 246$  and above we can achieve at least 80% statistical power to detect small-to-medium effect sizes (Cohen's  $f = 0.18$ ) at a 5% alpha level. Full details regarding effect size estimates, power calculations, sample size determination for Studies 2-5 are provided in the Supporting Information: Section 8.

## 7.1 | Method

Two hundred and sixty-one participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.97$ , 58.2% female) were recruited through Prolific in a preregistered online experiment (see, [https://aspredicted.org/4FH\\_WXV](https://aspredicted.org/4FH_WXV)) following the same procedures as in Study 3. Participants were asked to report a past purchase corresponding to one of four conditions of a 2 (purchase type: material vs. experiential)  $\times$  2 (purchase nature: hedonic vs. utilitarian) between-subjects design, indicate how happy the purchase made them feel, rate it on how hedonic and utilitarian they considered it to be, and finally indicate its cost. As preregistered, two independent judges blind to the purpose of the study reviewed participants' response protocols to ensure that they conform to the definitions of material and experiential purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Six participants did not follow the instruction about the corresponding purchase type (experiential or material) and were, thus, excluded from the analysis. Any differences between the judges were resolved through discussion to reach consensus.

## 7.2 | Results

The manipulation was successful, as purchases in the hedonic conditions, both experiential and material, were rated as significantly more hedonic ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ) than those in the utilitarian conditions ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ,  $t(253) = 6.643$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.832$ ). Similarly, purchases in the utilitarian conditions were rated as more utilitarian ( $M = 5.93$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than purchases in the hedonic conditions ( $M = 4.87$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ,  $t(253) = -6.894$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = -0.864$ ).

The ANCOVA results revealed a significant effect for the purchase cost ( $F(1, 250) = 5.058$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.020$ ), a significant main effect for the hedonic vs. utilitarian nature of a purchase ( $F(1, 250) = 20.043$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.074$ ), a non-significant main effect of purchase type ( $F(1, 250) = 2.695$ ,  $p = 0.102$ ), and a significant interaction between the purchase type (material or experiential) and the purchase nature (hedonic or utilitarian) ( $F(1, 250) = 5.479$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.021$ ). These results suggest that (a) hedonic purchases offer higher levels of happiness compared to utilitarian ones (H4), (b) purchase type alone does not influence the levels of happiness, and that (c) the impact of hedonism appears to be significantly stronger for material purchases. Indeed, pairwise comparisons indicated that for material purchases happiness is significantly higher when the purchase is primarily hedonic as opposed to utilitarian ( $M = 8.07$ ,  $SE = 0.15$  vs.  $M = 7.06$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 0.845$ ). This was not true for experiential purchases, where no difference between



hedonic and utilitarian purchases was observed ( $M = 7.97$ ,  $SE = 0.15$  vs.  $M = 7.65$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = 0.142$ ).

Most importantly, planned contrasts show that not only was there no significant difference between material and experiential purchases when both were characterized as hedonic, but also hedonic materials ( $M = 8.07$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ) elicited significantly higher happiness than utilitarian experiences ( $M = 7.65$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = -0.381$ ) (H5). These results further corroborate the idea that hedonism overrides the distinction between experiential and material purchases and can render material purchases equally or even more effective than experiential purchases in eliciting happiness.

## 8 | DISCUSSION

The experience recommendation posits that experiential purchases, compared to material ones, lead to higher happiness levels and should therefore be prioritized (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). This implies a handicap for material purchases which, however, is hardly obvious in real market data. Contrary to the experience recommendation, people invest significant financial resources on material objects. In fact, material goods like books and vinyl records are gaining momentum against their digital counterparts (Handley, 2019; Vole, 2021). It appears that tangibility and material possession are embedded in human life, so downplaying material purchases in favor of experiential ones may not be an effective approach. Instead, the challenge lies in how marketers can generate and how consumers can receive more happiness from their material purchases. We address this question by examining the crucial role of hedonism.

While hedonic/utilitarian properties have been acknowledged as an important potential influence, relevant research has not empirically addressed how these properties intertwine with experiential and material purchases to contribute to consumers' happiness. Our study focuses on hedonism/utilitarianism as an important driver of happiness and offers the first empirical evidence to document the overriding influence of hedonism in conjunction with experiential and material purchases. Our findings show that experiential (vs. material) purchases consumers consider are more often associated with high hedonism and this imbalance seems to result in a happiness edge. However, unlike the experiential/material distinction, hedonism is a natural part of human nature and goes beyond the more fluid differences between purchase types constructed within the consumption context. In line with this, we find that the hedonic-utilitarian value attached to a purchase dominates happiness influences, rendering the experiential-material distinction trivial. We observe that the experience recommendation holds true only to the extent that experiential and material purchases are imbalanced in terms of their hedonic value. Once this asymmetry is corrected, the experiential advantage is eliminated and even reverses when *hedonic objects* are contrasted to *utilitarian experiences*. We support this notion by operationalizing hedonism both as a purchase property and as a consumer-driven motivation and find that imbuing hedonism can make material

purchases elicit equal levels of happiness as hedonic experiential purchases and outperform utilitarian ones.

Moreover, drawing on the idea that perceptions about an object's hedonic/utilitarian properties are malleable (Khan et al., 2005), our studies reveal that the material purchases consumers make can also contain a highly hedonic value, equal to that involved in experiential purchases. In this context, relevant literature suggests that hedonic and utilitarian properties are often simultaneously present in a purchase (Alba & Williams, 2013; Crossen, 2006; Khan et al., 2005) and which one eventually dominates perception lies in the motivation behind that purchase. This notion is explicitly captured in our studies which investigate both stimulus-based and situational sources of hedonism/utilitarianism.

Contributing to a stream of studies that decompose the relationship between happiness and purchase type (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Weidman & Dunn, 2016), our article emphasizes the properties (as opposed to the type) of a purchase (cf., Caprariello & Reis, 2013) and highlights the overriding influence of hedonism across experiential and material purchases. As such, it challenges conventional beliefs that encourage investing disposable income predominantly in experiential purchases. Not only do hedonic material purchases *not* have a disadvantage against experiential purchases, but they can even outweigh utilitarian experiential purchases. These findings imply that instead of prioritizing one purchase type over the other to elicit happiness, consumers—and marketers alike—should pay attention to the hedonic aspects that material purchases can carry.

Although our findings demonstrate that material purchases can elicit similar levels of happiness as experiential ones, it is important to note that the two purchase types do differ along some parameters that are not happiness related. For example, Han et al. (2023) identify feelings of power as an antecedent for the preference for experiential but not material purchases, Ho and Wyer (2021) point to the different pathways through which these purchase types influence goal pursuit, while Agarwal et al. (2022) examine the differential impact of experiential and material purchases on the decision to make group purchases online.

From the consumers' perspective, our study encourages the mindful assessment of potential material purchases about whether they can also incorporate hedonic benefits. For example, when purchasing a utilitarian object like a cooking apron, consumers could also consciously consider aspects that delight their senses, such as a fabric that feels nice to the touch, or a design that is unconventional or more artistic. The recommendation for a mindful assessment naturally also extends to experiential purchases, highlighting the importance of having the appropriate mindset, and being attuned to notice and appreciate hedonic elements of even the most mundane utilitarian experiences: for example, a beautiful décor or ambient fragrance at a doctor's office, a joke or funny story the receptionist said, or one's favorite song playing in the waiting room. Moreover, it is also important to raise awareness of the potential "dark side" of experiential purchases, and related damages to consumers' wellbeing caused by mindless consumption of experiential purchases, such as

excessive eating, repeatedly eating out (vs. cooking), gambling, excessive (video) gaming, going fanatically to sports events (e.g., soccer), and constantly seeking adrenaline-inducing activities which may have detrimental effects on people's long-term happiness.

For marketers of material goods, the findings offer a strategy to overcome their apparent happiness disadvantage and meaningfully contribute to consumers' wellbeing. Two elements of the marketing mix become relevant tools for the manager: product and promotion (communication). Products can have hedonic elements that are independent from and do not interfere with their intended functionality. Marketers can potentially close the happiness gap by augmenting products through features that aim to thrill and delight (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Voss et al., 2003). For example, employing unique or unconventional designs, or adding vibrant colors, stickers, personalized badges and quote prints on a surgical face mask or a toolbox may introduce playfulness and increase the enjoyment of the product. Makers of children's products excel at adding hedonic sensory elements to, otherwise functional, products. For example, turning a toothbrush handle into a giraffe's neck to make it fun for the consumer to use. Alessi, the Italian houseware brand, uses this principle, blending playful aesthetics with function, making utilitarian kitchen tools like saltshakers and wine openers fun, playful, and engaging. Similarly, more recently, LG teamed up with artists to launch exclusive products that explicitly transform simple utilitarian goods, such as a corkscrew, into exciting and aesthetically pleasing items (LG Electronics, 2020).

At the same time, and as Study 4 implies, marketers should bear in mind that the hedonic or utilitarian value of a purchase often lies in the eye of the beholder. As such, brand positioning and communication strategies can effectively be used to emphasize the pleasurable aspects of a product and make them more salient. Apple has successfully utilized this approach in the past promoting the (now discontinued) iPod; while the initial positioning of the product focused on utilitarian benefits (i.e., "1000 songs in your pocket," Wilkins, 2021), subsequent advertising imagery featured people dancing to the tunes they loved, focusing purely on the enjoyment the product offers (Mullaly, 2022).

## 8.1 | Limitations and future research

Future research should consider several interesting issues pertinent to this investigation. First, our analysis does not account for cultural differences that impact perceptions of wellbeing: hedonism plays a stronger role in happiness in individualistic (vs. collectivist) cultures (Joshadoo & Jarden, 2016). As our studies were conducted within individualistic cultural contexts, further research in a collectivist setting would shed further light. Moreover, financial constraints may lead to a different consumer assessment of pleasure and utility. Future research should examine whether this impacts experiential and material purchases differently.

Although our work focuses on hedonic material purchases, it leaves room for further investigation of utilitarian experiential

purchases, which seem to have a happiness disadvantage. Future research could examine this category of purchases and offer further insights into how consumers and marketers can increase the happiness elicited. Finally, longitudinal research could examine whether the effects of hedonism on material and experiential purchases can be sustained equally.

A potential criticism against prioritizing hedonic purchases is that it encourages wasteful and indulgent consumption. Such an interpretation stems from regarding hedonic purchases as luxuries and utilitarian purchases as necessities (Okada, 2005)—even though both hedonic and utilitarian purchases are discretionary. That said, our study advocates for a more conscious approach to spending, prioritizing purchase characteristics (rather than certain types) that elicit happiness. Despite recent societal shifts toward more sustainable consumption, the amount of resources spent on material goods remains strong, and will most likely not abate soon. Thus, it is important to inform consumers on how to maximize happiness from their purchases which, consequently, can lead to satiation and reduced (over)consumption. Future researchers are strongly encouraged to investigate whether hedonic characteristics can indeed contribute to this end.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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