

# Why Wanting Expensive Things Makes Us So Much Happier Than Buying Them



Reuters

The idea that you can't buy happiness has been exposed as a myth, [over](#) and [over](#). Richer countries are happier than poor countries. Richer people within richer countries are happier, too. The evidence is unequivocal: Money makes you happy. You just have to know what to do with it.

So what should you do with it?

Stop buying so much *stuff*, renowned psychologist Daniel Gilbert [told me](#) in an interview a few years ago, and try to spend more money on experiences. "We think that experiences can be fun but leave us with nothing to show for them," he said. "But that turns out to be a good thing." Happiness, for most people not named Sartre, is other people; and experiences are usually shared -- first when they happen and then again and again when we tell our friends.

On the other hand, objects wears out their welcome. If you really love a rug, you might buy it. The first few times you see, you might admire it, and feel happy. But over time, it will probably reveal itself to be just a rug. Try to remember the last time an old piece of furniture made you ecstatic. For me, at least, it's a difficult exercise. The wonder of my potted plants certainly wanes with time. "Psychologists call this *habituation*, economists call it *declining marginal utility*, and the rest of us call it mar-

riage," Gilbert wrote in *Stumbling on Happiness*.

But there might be another reason why buying objects rather than experiences tends to disappoint. For the most materialistic people, there might be something dull -- even *disappointing* -- about the act of buying itself.

"Materialists are more likely to overspend and have credit problems, possibly because they believe that acquisitions will increase their happiness and change their lives in meaningful ways," Marsha L. Richins of the University of Missouri concludes in her new paper, "When Wanting Is Better Than Having," published this month in the *Journal of Consumer Research*. But in three separate studies, materialists reported significantly more happiness thinking about their purchase beforehand than they did from actually owning the thing they wanted.

"Thinking about acquisition provides momentary happiness boosts to materialistic people, and because they tend to think about acquisition a lot, such thoughts have the potential to provide frequent mood boosts," Richins wrote, "but the positive emotions associated with acquisition are short-lived. Although materialists still experience positive emotions after making a purchase, these emotions are less intense than before they actually acquire a product."

Once again, it would seem that experiences makes us happier than stuff -- even in the act of buying.

The finding that paying for something is less satisfying than wanting it shouldn't be confused with the idea that buying things *makes us sad*. It's hard to find a study showing that "retail therapy" (i.e.: shopping your way out of a bad mood) doesn't work; most research [suggests](#) that a well-timed excursion to the mall can lift one's spirits. But if Gilbert and Richins are right, then the bulk of the therapy provided by shopping is everything that happens before the check-out counter. You don't have to go into debt to achieve nearly the same emotional gains from materialism.

In my column for *The Atlantic* this month, [Death of the Salesmen](#), I found that the retail space is generally divided between stores racing to the price bottom to attract lower-income consumers and stores clinging to the patina of a shopping experience to lure richer shoppers. Maybe those stores, and their customers, understand Richins' research, intuitively. When we're shopping, not for the things we need, but for the things we merely want, it's the experience of shopping and buying that makes us tru-

ly happy.