

Happiness from Ordinary and Extraordinary Experiences

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Contribution Statement

Although prior research has found that people enjoy greater happiness from experiences than possessions, limited empirical work has examined *which* experiences are associated with greater happiness. The current research is one of the first to categorize types of experiences, and it identifies the extent to which an experience is extraordinary (uncommon and infrequent) versus ordinary (common and frequent) as a meaningful dimension along which experiences vary. The current findings reconcile literatures that separately address the benefits of attaining extraordinary experiences and savoring ordinary experiences, highlighting the important role of age in determining the relative impact of these experience types on happiness.

Prior research indicates that experiences lead to greater happiness than material possessions, but *which* experiences result in the greatest happiness? The current research is one of the first to categorize types of experiences and investigates one important distinction: the extent to which an experience is ordinary (common and frequent) versus extraordinary (uncommon and infrequent). Eight studies examine the experiences individuals recall, plan, imagine, and post on Facebook, and find that the relative happiness enjoyed from ordinary and extraordinary experiences depends on age. Younger people, who view the future as extensive, gain more happiness from extraordinary experiences; however, ordinary experiences are increasingly associated with happiness as people get older, such that ordinary experiences produce as much happiness as extraordinary experiences when individuals have limited time remaining. Self-definition drives these effects: although extraordinary experiences are self-defining throughout life, as people get older they increasingly define themselves by the ordinary experiences that comprise their daily lives.

“The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.”

— Eleanor Roosevelt

How should individuals spend their time and money to maximize happiness? A growing set of findings in psychology and consumer research advises that despite the allure of acquiring material possessions, people should acquire experiences to enjoy greater happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Although there is ample evidence for the hedonic benefits of experiences, existing research provides little guidance about *which* experiences will offer greatest happiness. What types of experiences should individuals pursue to extract the greatest enjoyment from life: The extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime experiences that people tell others about and often commemorate in photographs on their (actual or virtual) walls? Or the simple, ordinary experiences that make up the fabric of people’s daily lives?

As people move through their lives deciding how to fill their next hour, weekend, or vacation, they are frequently reminded by proverbs and popular culture to spend their time wisely because their days are numbered. For instance, the catchphrase “YOLO (You Only Live Once)” is often invoked as a call to extraordinary action. Similarly, in the movie *Dead Poets Society*, Robin Williams’s teacher character urges his students, “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary!” Another movie, *The Bucket List*, offers a different perspective. It follows Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman’s terminally ill characters as they set off on extraordinary adventures (e.g., peaking mountains, sky diving), only to find their greatest fulfillment upon returning home, where they spend quiet moments at the kitchen table and in the backyard with their families. How can we reconcile these seemingly opposing recommendations? Should people choose extraordinary or ordinary experiences in their pursuit

of happiness?

This research is one of the first to categorize types of experiences, and begins to explore the fundamental question of which experiences offer greatest happiness (cf. Caprariello and Reis 2012). A series of eight studies, across which people were asked to recall, plan, or imagine happy experiences, reveals that this distinction between ordinary and extraordinary is a meaningful dimension along which experiences vary. Not only can individuals readily generate experiences within each category, but these experiences differ systematically and are accurately recognized by others. Results also identify the critical role of age in determining the happiness associated with each. Although happiness from extraordinary experiences does not change with age, ordinary experiences elicit greater happiness as people get older and their time remaining becomes limited. An exploration into potential explanations for this effect reveals the role of self-definition and the extent to which these experiences help define who people are at different stages of life. These findings thus help reconcile the separate literatures that highlight the happiness from achieving the extraordinary and savoring the ordinary.

EXPERIENCE AND WELL-BEING

The age-old question of what brings happiness in life has received a growing amount of empirical attention in the fields of economics, psychology, and consumer research in recent years (Dunn, Gilbert and Wilson 2011; Dunn and Norton 2013; Easterlin 2003; Hsee, Yang, Li and Shen 2009; Labroo and Mukhopadhyay 2009; Labroo and Patrick 2009; Liu and Aaker 2008; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade 2005; Mogilner 2010; Raghunathan and Corfman 2006). Despite this interest from researchers across disciplines, there is still much to learn about

happiness, with conventional wisdom from the scholarly literature continuing to be updated. For instance, whereas absolute income was thought to have no influence on happiness (Easterlin 2003; Easterlin et al. 2011), recent evidence suggests a positive relationship (Aknin, Norton, and Dunn 2009; Kahneman and Deaton 2010; Sacks, Stevenson, and Wolfers 2012); and whereas children were thought to have a negative impact on their parents' happiness (Kahneman et al. 2004), recent evidence suggests that having children can increase happiness (Nelson et al. 2013).

Even though much about happiness remains unclear, the literature does provide consistent evidence for the benefits of purchasing experiences over material possessions. The consensus is that positive experiences tend to bring greater enduring happiness than positive material purchases (Howell and Hill 2009; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Compared to material purchases, experiential purchases have been shown to be more self-defining (Carter and Gilovich 2012), more interpersonally connecting (Chan and Mogilner 2013), harder to compare against forgone alternatives (Carter and Gilovich 2010), more unique (Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012), and subject to slower rates of hedonic adaptation (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009). Though this emphasis on pursuing experiences is informative, it provides little guidance as to *which* experiences offer the greatest happiness.

Besides a recent paper that began exploring this question, which found shared experiences to be more enjoyable than solitary experiences (Caprariello and Reis 2012), the bulk of the research examining the hedonic impact of experiences focuses on how people feel over the course of an individual experience. For instance, an influential stream of research has shown that peak and end affect contribute to evaluations of an experience much more than its duration (Fredrickson and Kahneman 1993; Redelmeier and Kahneman 1996), but this tells us little about the choices individuals should make between experiences over the course of their lives (White

and Dolan 2009). Thus, the objective of the current research is to further differentiate between types of experiences to determine how they respectively contribute to happiness.

ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

To answer the question of how individuals should select experiences to enjoy the greatest happiness, we identify a dimension along which experiences vary: the extent to which an experience is *ordinary* or *extraordinary*. We define ordinary experiences as those that are common, frequent, and within the realm of everyday life. Extraordinary experiences, on the other hand, are uncommon, infrequent, and go beyond the realm of everyday life. This definition borrows from the distinction proposed by Sussman and Alter (2012), which arrays purchases along a continuum ranging from ordinary (common or frequent) to exceptional (unusual or infrequent). Importantly, the distinction we are making between ordinary and extraordinary experiences contains no intrinsic value judgment. That is, even though lay definitions and usage by marketing practitioners (LaSalle and Britton 2003) suppose extraordinary experiences to be both unusual and inherently superior to ordinary experiences (also see “special,” as defined by Zauberan, Ratner, and Kim 2009), our definition relies only on frequency and how common an experience is, rather than any inherent superiority.

Though limited past work has explicitly focused on categorizing experiences, some research has emphasized the importance of rare and extraordinary experiences for overall well-being (Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Tversky and Griffin 2000; Zauberan et al. 2009). For instance, consumers are motivated to collect unusual and extreme experiences to build their “experiential CV” (Keinan and Kivetz 2011), and momentous events such as graduation ceremonies or the

birth of a child often come to mind when individuals reflect nostalgically on their past (Leboe and Ansons 2006; Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, and Routledge 2006). In fact, consumers strategically protect their memories of such “special” experiences by acquiring cues to serve as reminders and by avoiding similar experiences that could alter their memories (Zauberman et al. 2009). Zauberman et al. (2009, 715) thus argue that happiness often comes from the acquisition of extraordinary experiences, writing, “Whereas memories of mundane experiences help individuals navigate through daily life, memories of extraordinary and meaningful life events have important consequences for self-definition, well-being, and life satisfaction.”

Conversely, another stream of literature highlights the central role of consistently noticing and appreciating mundane, ordinary moments in achieving greater happiness (Bryant 2003; Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, and Mikolajczak 2010; Tugade and Fredrickson 2007). For instance, savoring ordinary moments has been shown to increase happiness (Quoidbach et al. 2010), while the inability to appreciate such moments has been found to undermine happiness (Gilbert 2006; Parducci 1995; Quoidbach, Dunn, Petrides, and Mikolajczak 2010). This perspective supports the notion that consumers should stop and smell the roses, since happiness often comes from simple, ordinary experiences (DeVoe and House 2012). Moreover, filling one’s life with many small enjoyable experiences takes advantage of the psychophysics of hedonic experiences. That is, since diminishing marginal utility (Kahneman 1999; Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Mellers 2000) and hedonic adaptation (Galak, Redden, and Kruger 2009; Nelson and Meyvis 2008) naturally reduce the happiness enjoyed from experiences, breaking up these positive experiences into smaller pieces can boost the resulting enjoyment (Dunn et al. 2011; Nelson, Meyvis, and Galak 2009). Indulging in one substantial pleasure may thus result in less happiness than when that experience is reduced to many small pleasures (Morewedge,

Gilbert, Keysar, Berkovits and Wilson 2007; Thaler 1999).

Pulling together these literatures, the current investigation first demonstrates that this ordinary–extraordinary dimension is meaningful and resonates with consumers, and then explores the relative happiness associated with each type of experience.

THE ROLE OF AGE

Although each of our opening movie examples promotes a different type of experience, both *The Dead Poets Society* and *The Bucket List* remind viewers that they must be deliberate about how they spend their time because their days are numbered. Indeed, life is invariably finite, making time the most precious resource of all (King, Hicks, and Abdelkhalik 2009). Notably, however, the high schoolers in *The Dead Poets Society* and the old men with terminal cancer in *The Bucket List* differ greatly in the number of days they likely have left. Therefore, in an effort to reconcile the two movies' perspectives and the disparate streams of research previously discussed, we examine the role of age in the relative impact of ordinary and extraordinary experiences on happiness.

Importantly, recent findings demonstrate that age impacts the very definition of happiness, which systematically shifts as people advance through life (Mogilner, Kamvar, and Aaker 2011). While younger people tend to define happiness in terms of excitement, enthusiasm, and high states of arousal, older people define happiness in terms of calm, peacefulness, and low states of arousal (Mogilner et al. 2011; Scheibe et al. 2013). The theoretical basis for this shift rests on age-related differences in the amount of time individuals feel they have left in life: younger people tend to perceive their futures as more extensive, whereas older people perceive

their futures as more limited (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999). This sense of remaining time in life profoundly impacts the goals that individuals pursue and the decisions they make in order to achieve happiness (Carstensen 2006; Mogilner, Aaker, and Kamvar 2012). For instance, younger people with ample time remaining tend to pursue goals that will prepare them for the future, while older people with limited time left tend to pursue goals that are emotionally satisfying in the present (Carstensen et al. 1999). Accordingly, younger people are likely to pursue happiness through novel social interactions, new information, and unfamiliar or exciting consumption choices, whereas older people are likely to seek happiness by prioritizing existing social relationships, emotional fulfillment, and familiar or calming consumption choices (Fredrickson and Carstensen 1990; Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010; Mogilner et al. 2012; Williams and Drolet 2005). Hence, age is likely to play an important role in determining which types of experiences afford the greatest happiness.

We thus predict that age (and the amount of time people perceive themselves as having left) will impact the happiness people enjoy from extraordinary and ordinary experiences. Specifically, we test whether younger people will associate extraordinary experiences with greater happiness than ordinary experiences. Since extraordinary experiences tend to be more novel, exciting, informative, and likely to contribute to one's experiential CV, they are likely to resonate more with those building towards their future (Carstensen et al. 1999; Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Mogilner et al. 2012). In contrast, when time is scarce, people are likely to spend it more carefully and savor the familiar, peaceful, ordinary events that comprise their daily lives and reflect who they are in the present (Gino and Mogilner 2013; Kurtz 2008; Mogilner 2010; Mogilner et al. 2012). Therefore, we also test the possibility that as people get older, they will start to derive greater happiness from ordinary experiences, such that ordinary experiences will

be associated with as much happiness as extraordinary experiences when they have limited time remaining.

Thus, we refined our initial research question to examine not just *which* type of experience is associated with greater happiness, but to further examine *when* each type of experience will be more closely tied to happiness. We conclude the paper by exploring *why* each type of experience contributes to happiness when it does.

OVERVIEW

Eight studies explore how age determines whether extraordinary or ordinary experiences are associated with greater happiness. After confirming that this dimension spanning from ordinary to extraordinary is a meaningful and natural way to distinguish between happy experiences (studies 1A and 1B), we examine the happiness associated with experiences that participants recall (studies 1A, 1C, and 2B), plan (study 2B), imagine (studies 1B and 2C), and share on Facebook (study 2A). We test for the role of age by measuring actual age (studies 1A-1C, and 3A-3B), and by measuring (studies 2A-2B) and manipulating (study 2C) psychological age through how much time people feel they have left. Across these various methods, our findings show a consistent pattern of results: extraordinary experiences generate greater happiness than ordinary experiences when individuals are young and have extensive time left; however, ordinary experiences generate increasing happiness as people get older, such that happiness does not differ between ordinary and extraordinary experiences when individuals have limited time remaining. Studies 3A and 3B then explore potential explanations for this pattern of results and identify the underlying role of self-definition.

STUDY 1A: ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

To first examine which type of experience makes people happiest, we simply asked them. Adapting the procedure used in Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) study 1, which examined whether experiential or material purchases lead to greater happiness, we asked participants to recall either the most recent extraordinary experience or the most recent ordinary experience that made them happy, and to rate how happy that experience made them.

Method

A sample of 221 individuals from across the United States between the ages of 18 and 79 ($M = 37$; 69% female) were recruited on MTurk to participate in the experiment in exchange for \$1. This participant pool has been shown to be reliable for experimental research (Goodman, Cryder, and Cheema 2013) and to be more representative of the broader population than traditional convenience samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011).

Participants were randomly assigned to recall an experience that was either extraordinary or ordinary. Those in the extraordinary experience condition were instructed, "Think about the most recent extraordinary experience that made you happy. By extraordinary, we mean an experience that was unusual and went beyond the realm of your regular everyday life." Those in the ordinary experience condition were instructed, "Think about the most recent ordinary experience that made you happy. By ordinary, we mean an experience that was usual and within the realm of your regular everyday life."

After describing the experience, participants indicated how much the experience contributed to their happiness in life (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), how meaningful the experience was, and how personally fulfilling the experience was (1 = not at all, 9 = very much; three-item index $\alpha = .89$). Then, amongst other ancillary measures pertaining to the experience, participants rated on separate scales how extraordinary and ordinary the experience was (1 = not at all, 5 = very much) as manipulation checks.

Results and Discussion

The manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the extraordinary condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = .85$) recalled an experience that was more extraordinary than participants in the ordinary condition ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.47$; $F(1, 220) = 128.34$, $p < .001$). Likewise, participants in the ordinary condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.46$) recalled an experience that was more ordinary than participants in the extraordinary condition ($M = 1.44$, $SD = .90$; $F(1, 220) = 137.03$, $p < .001$).

Although the experiences described were unique to participants' lives, the experiences represented 12 broad categories (listed in table 1). Two independent coders who were blind to condition assigned each experience to one of these categories. Initial inter-rater reliability was very good ($\kappa = .79$, $p < .001$), and disagreements were subsequently resolved through discussion. Many experiences (42%) involved spending time with others and the enjoyment of relationships—some romantic, and some with family or friends. Some (13%) represented life milestones, such as a wedding or graduation; some (12%) involved travel or other forms of cultural entertainment, such as going to a concert; and others (7%) involved indulging in a treat, like “enjoying a cool and tasty Frappuccino” or a nice meal out.

More importantly, the sorts of experiences recalled differed significantly by condition ($\chi^2(11) = 77.05, p < .001$), supporting the notion that this distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences resonates with people. Examining the experiences generated within each condition provides insight into the nature of the ordinary-extraordinary distinction. For instance, although romantic love comprised both experience types, non-romantic social relationships were more central to ordinary experiences. Indulging in treats was also identified as more ordinary, whereas life milestones, travel, and cultural endeavors tended to be viewed as extraordinary experiences.

 Insert table 1 about here

Though glancing at participants' reported happiness suggests that extraordinary experiences simply made participants happier than ordinary experiences, a closer examination reveals the moderating role of age. A regression analysis showed a main effect of extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience on happiness ($\beta = .57, t(217) = 3.25, p = .001$), a main effect of age ($\beta = .28, t(217) = 3.14, p < .01$), and a significant interaction between experience type and age ($\beta = -.42, t(217) = -2.25, p < .03$).

To better understand this pattern of results, we conducted a spotlight analysis to examine the effect of experience type on happiness among younger and older participants (i.e., those one standard deviation below and above mean age; Aiken and West 1991). Among younger participants, extraordinary experiences ($M = 7.87, SD = 1.08$) resulted in greater happiness than ordinary experiences ($M = 6.63, SD = 1.97; t(217) = 3.81, p < .001$); however, among older participants, happiness levels did not differ between ordinary experiences ($M = 7.63, SD = 1.59$) and extraordinary experiences ($M = 7.83, SD = 1.97; t < 1$). Looked at differently, extraordinary

experiences resulted in similar levels of happiness between younger and older participants ($t < 1$), whereas ordinary experiences led to greater happiness for older participants than for younger ones ($t(111) = 2.97, p < .01$). In other words, although happiness from extraordinary experiences did not vary with age ($r(108) = -.01, p = .90$), happiness from ordinary experiences increased as people got older ($r(113) = .27, p < .01$).

Insert figure 1 about here

Together, these results provide a basis for distinguishing between ordinary and extraordinary experiences: people naturally recalled different sorts of experiences for each. Moreover, these results offer initial support for the predicted role of age. Although extraordinary experiences are associated with greater happiness than ordinary experiences when individuals are young, ordinary experiences elicit greater happiness as people age, producing as much happiness as extraordinary experiences among older individuals.

STUDY 1B: OUTSIDERS AGREE

Continuing to follow the approach of Van Boven and Gilovich (2003), we presented a separate group of participants with the experiences generated in study 1A. This outside group identified the extent to which these experiences were ordinary or extraordinary and rated how happy that experience would make them. Since the findings in study 1A relied on the idiographic meanings of people's own recalled experiences, it was unclear whether outsiders without this information would categorize the experiences similarly. This "outsiders" approach thus provides

a stronger test of whether people naturally recognize and distinguish between extraordinary and ordinary experiences. We also examined the robustness of the observed effect of age.

Method

We presented participants ($N = 121$; ages 20-78, $M = 45$, 60% female) with 20 randomly selected experience descriptions generated by participants in study 1A, removing any mention of the words “extraordinary” and “ordinary” (see appendix A for examples). These “outsider” participants were also recruited through MTurk and given the same definition of extraordinary and ordinary experiences as the previous study’s participants. Participants rated the extent to which they viewed each experience as ordinary or extraordinary (1 = purely ordinary, 5 = equally ordinary and extraordinary, 9 = purely extraordinary). They also rated how happy each experience would make them, assuming that the details of the experience could apply to them (1 = not at all happy, 9 = extremely happy).

Results and Discussion

Participants were able to correctly distinguish between others’ ordinary and extraordinary experiences, rating the extraordinary experiences as more extraordinary (significantly above the scale midpoint; $M = 6.61$, $SD = 1.40$; $t(120) = 12.66$, $p < .001$), and the ordinary experiences as more ordinary (significantly below the scale midpoint; $M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.67$; $t(120) = -9.09$, $p < .001$). This suggests not only that people can readily distinguish ordinary from extraordinary experiences, but that the categories themselves are meaningful and used as expected.

We next examined whether outsiders' anticipated happiness from these experiences resembled the ratings of the people who recalled them. A 2 (experience type) \times age (measured) repeated-measures ANOVA on anticipated happiness from these experiences showed a similar pattern to that in study 1A. There was a main effect of experience type with extraordinary experiences eliciting greater happiness than ordinary experiences ($F(1, 119) = 21.88, p < .001$), a marginal effect of age ($F(1, 119) = 2.80, p < .10$), and a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 119) = 10.57, p = .001$).

To better understand this interaction, we conducted a spotlight analysis to examine the effect of experience type on anticipated happiness as a function of age. Younger participants believed that the extraordinary experiences ($M = 6.98, SD = 1.26$) would make them happier than the ordinary experiences ($M = 6.20, SD = 1.36; F(1, 119) = 31.59, p < .001$); however, older participants reported no differences in anticipated happiness between the ordinary experiences ($M = 6.85, SD = 1.02$) and the extraordinary experiences ($M = 6.99, SD = 1.12; F(1, 119) = 1.03, p = .31$; see figure 2). Although anticipated happiness from extraordinary experiences showed no relation with age ($r(121) = .00, p = .97$), anticipated happiness from ordinary experiences increased significantly as people got older ($r(121) = .26, p < .01$).

Insert figure 2 about here

These results not only provide confirmation that the ordinary–extraordinary dimension of experience is meaningful and recognizable, but also demonstrate the robustness of the moderating effect of age. Indeed, imagining the happiness one would enjoy from others' ordinary and extraordinary experiences produced the same pattern of results found amongst those reporting the happiness they actually experienced.

STUDY 1C: EXPERIENCE TYPE IS INDEPENDENT OF SHARING

The experiences generated in study 1A suggests that ordinary experiences are more likely to involve (non-romantic) others. Hence, one possibility is that the ordinary–extraordinary experience distinction, as well as its effect on happiness as a function of age, is simply driven by the extent to which these experiences are shared with others. This possibility is consistent with recent research that argues that the greater happiness shown to result from experiential (vs. material) consumption is largely due to its social nature: whereas experiences tend to be shared, material possessions tend to be consumed alone (Caprariello and Reis 2012).

In order to test whether the effects of ordinary versus extraordinary experiences on happiness observed in studies 1A and 1B depend on the involvement of others, we adapted the procedure employed by Caprariello and Reis (2012), orthogonally manipulating whether the experience participants were instructed to recall was shared. Accordingly, we used a 2 (experience type: ordinary vs. extraordinary) \times 2 (sociality: experienced alone vs. experienced with others) between-subjects design.

Method

As in study 1A, we asked a sample of participants ($N = 272$; ages 18-75, $M = 32$; 31% female) recruited on MTurk to recall a happy experience that was either extraordinary (i.e., unusual and beyond the realm of regular life) or ordinary (i.e., usual and within the realm of

regular everyday life). In addition, the instructions further specified that this experience either “involved other people” or was “experienced by yourself” (Caprariello and Reis 2012).

After describing their experience, participants indicated how happy the experience made them using the same three items from study 1A ($\alpha = .82$). We then asked those in the shared experience conditions to indicate who was involved with their experience by rating on separate scales the extent to which it was experienced with others they knew well, experienced with others they did not know well, experienced with friends, experienced with family, and romantic (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). We also asked how close they felt with those involved at the time of the experience (1 = not at all close, 7 = very close). Lastly, as manipulation checks, all participants rated on separate scales how extraordinary and ordinary the experience was, as well as the extent to which it was experienced alone (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Results and Discussion

The manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the extraordinary conditions ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .96$) recalled an experience that was more extraordinary than those in the ordinary conditions ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.25$; $F(1, 271) = 220.02$, $p < .001$). Likewise, participants in the ordinary conditions ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.17$) recalled an experience that was more ordinary than those in the extraordinary conditions ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 1.22$; $F(1, 271) = 106.18$, $p < .001$). Additionally, those in the solitary conditions ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.59$) were more likely to recall an experience that was experienced alone than those in the social conditions ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.03$; $F(1, 271) = 120.91$, $p < .001$).

An examination of participants' reported happiness suggests that the findings in the previous studies did not depend on whether the experience was shared with others. A regression analysis on happiness with experience type, sociality, age, and their interactions showed a main effect of experience type ($\beta = .73$, $t(264) = 4.88$, $p < .001$), a main effect of age ($\beta = .19$, $t(264) = 3.43$, $p = .001$), and a non-significant effect of whether the experience was shared ($\beta = .12$, $t(264) = .80$, $p = .43$). The only significant interaction was the experience type \times age effect observed in the previous studies ($\beta = .45$, $t(264) = 2.97$, $p < .01$); age did not interact with whether the experience was shared ($\beta = .16$, $t(264) = 1.06$, $p = .28$), and the three-way interaction was not significant ($\beta = .06$, $t(264) = 1.03$, $p = .30$).

A spotlight analysis to clarify the significant interaction effect replicated the pattern of results found in studies 1A and 1B. Planned contrasts showed that younger participants enjoyed greater happiness from extraordinary experiences ($M = 7.61$, $SD = 1.19$) than ordinary experiences ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.71$; $t(270) = 8.55$, $p < .001$). However, among older participants, happiness levels did not differ for ordinary experiences ($M = 7.30$, $SD = 1.65$) and extraordinary experiences ($M = 7.68$, $SD = 1.51$; $t(270) = 1.23$, $p = .21$). And as before, the happiness elicited by extraordinary experiences did not differ by age ($t < 1$), whereas ordinary experiences elicited greater happiness for older participants than for younger participants ($t(130) = 4.17$, $p < .001$). In other words, happiness from extraordinary experiences was not correlated with age ($r(140) = .03$, $p = .69$), but happiness from ordinary experiences increased significantly with age ($r(132) = .31$, $p < .001$).

Insert figure 3 about here

These results suggest that the effects of extraordinary and ordinary experiences on happiness demonstrated in studies 1A and 1B do not depend on their social nature. Even though the experiences generated by participants in study 1A suggest that a greater proportion of ordinary experiences tend to be social, the involvement of others in each type of experience is not responsible for the relative happiness enjoyed by younger and older individuals.

Though it was surprising that the social nature of the recalled experiences did not affect reported happiness in light of recent research (Caprariello and Reis 2012), the current study focused specifically on happy experiences rather than experiential purchases more broadly. This key difference may have restricted the experiences recalled to a range beyond which sharing would impact happiness, producing a ceiling effect. To better understand the role of sociality in our study, we examined who was involved in the events recalled by participants reporting shared experiences. Few clear differences emerged between extraordinary and ordinary experiences. Ordinary and extraordinary experiences did not differ in the involvement of well-known others, friends, or family ($p > .10$), how romantic the experience was ($p > .10$), or how close participants felt to the others involved ($p > .10$). The only difference that emerged was that compared to ordinary experiences ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.28$), extraordinary experiences ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.33$) were more likely to include others whom the participant did not know well ($F(1, 134) = 21.85$, $p < .001$), which hints that others may play divergent roles in each experience type. Hence, although the experiences generated in study 1A show that a larger proportion of ordinary experiences (vs. extraordinary experiences) tend to be shared with non-romantic others, an examination of just those experiences that were shared suggests that the experience type distinction is about more than just who is involved.

STUDY 2A: EXPERIENCES POSTED ON FACEBOOK

In the previous studies, participants either recalled (studies 1A and 1C) or read about another's (study 1B) happy experience, then rated just how happy the experience made (or would make) them. We adopted a different approach in this study, taking advantage of a natural data source to help determine which experiences are most associated with happiness: the experiences that people share on their Facebook walls. Although our focus is not on sharing per se, research has shown that people post content on Facebook that reflects what makes them happy in order to present themselves positively to others, enhancing their self-esteem (Wilcox and Stephen 2013).

The previous studies show that age influences the happiness that individuals attain from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Although the psychology of aging is primarily tied to the amount of time people feel they have left in life (Carstensen 2006), other factors also vary over the course of life. For instance, relative to younger people, older people tend to have more financial resources, worse physical health, and a greater focus on family (Fung, Carstensen, and Lutz 1999; Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz 2010). To further investigate the role of age while ruling out such other factors, the next three studies assess psychological age by directly measuring (studies 2A and 2B) and manipulating (study 2C) how much time people feel they have left in life (Carstensen et al. 1999).

Method

Two-hundred and thirty regular Facebook users (ages 18-81, $M = 40$; 47% female) were recruited through MTurk to participate in exchange for \$1. Participants used Facebook

frequently: 68% visited the website at least once a day, and 87% posted a status update at least once a month, with 53% posting a status update at least once a week.

Participants were instructed to open their personal Facebook page and to describe their most recent status update. Fifty-three participants were not included in the analysis because they either did not describe a status update or they described one that did not reflect a personal experience (e.g., an opinion about a news item or celebrity). After describing what they had posted, participants rated the extent to which it captured an experience that was ordinary or extraordinary (1 = purely ordinary, 5 = equally ordinary and extraordinary, 9 = purely extraordinary). Lastly, participants completed the ten-item future time perspective scale (Lang and Carstensen 2002), which measures the extent to which they perceive their future as limited or extensive (e.g. “Most of my life lies ahead of me;” “My future seems infinite to me;” 1 = very untrue, 7 = very true; $\alpha = .92$). The scale was negatively associated with age, confirming that as people get older, they perceive their future to be more limited, $r(177) = -.46, p < .001$.

Results and Discussion

A regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between individuals' future time perspective and the extent to which they were likely to post experiences that were extraordinary (vs. ordinary; $\beta = .16, t(175) = 2.11, p < .04$). We also looked at the ordinary–extraordinary ratings as a categorical variable (excluding those on the scale midpoint). A logistic regression found consistent results ($\chi^2(1) = 4.81, p < .03$): individuals with a more extensive future time perspective were more likely to report an extraordinary experience on Facebook, whereas those who perceived a more limited future were more likely to post an ordinary experience.

In light of recent research on the socio-emotional function of Facebook posts (Wilcox and Stephen 2013), these results are consistent with the idea that extraordinary experiences are associated with greater happiness when time is perceived as extensive, but ordinary experiences become more associated with happiness as time becomes limited. These findings complement work showing that extraordinary experiences are especially likely to be preserved through the creation of memory cues (Zauberman et al. 2009), and further suggest that the sorts of experiences viewed as worthy of commemorating and sharing may vary over the course of life.

Although this data source is compelling in that individuals naturally selected these experiences as worth sharing (i.e., they were not generated specifically for a study), there may be social norms around sharing particular content on Facebook that are unrelated to happiness. As a more direct test, the next study again measured future time perspective but explicitly asked participants to report an experience that has or will make them happy.

STUDY 2B: RECALLED AND PLANNED EXPERIENCES

Conducted among a sample of students of similar ages, this study tests the robustness of the previous study's finding by again examining the relationship between individuals' perceived time remaining and the types of experiences they view as happy. Additionally, since our prior studies have examined only past experiences, a natural question is whether this pattern will hold for future experiences that people want to have. Therefore, a second objective of this study was to test whether the effects we have documented will emerge for planned future experiences as well as those that have already occurred.

Lastly, we changed the way we measured the ordinary and extraordinary nature of an experience by using two separate unipolar scales. This eliminates the ambiguity of a response on the mid-point of the bipolar scale, which could reflect the experience being either highly ordinary and highly extraordinary or neither ordinary nor extraordinary. It also minimizes the potential of the survey inadvertently communicating that extraordinary experiences are inherently better because the extraordinary label is on the right (high) endpoint of the scale.

Method

One hundred and six undergraduates (ages 19 – 24, $M = 21$; 67% female) completed this study for course credit. Participants were instructed to describe a happy experience. To test for a potential difference between past and future experiences, half were instructed to describe a recent experience that made them happy, while the others were instructed to describe an experience they plan to have that will make them happy. All participants then rated the extent to which the experience was [will be] extraordinary, and the extent to which it was [will be] ordinary (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). Participants' responses on these two scales were negatively correlated ($r(106) = -.65, p < .001$). The extraordinary ratings were therefore subtracted from the ordinary ratings to create a single extraordinary-to-ordinary experience measure, with positive scores reflecting a more ordinary experience and negative scores reflecting a more extraordinary experience. Following ancillary questions, participants completed the future time perspective scale to gauge how much time they felt they have left (Lang and Carstensen 2002; $\alpha = .85$).

Results and Discussion

The extent to which the happy experiences that participants reported were extraordinary versus ordinary was regressed on participants' future time perspective ($\beta = -.28$, $t(102) = -2.90$, $p < .01$), whether the experience already had happened or will happen ($\beta = .39$, $t(102) = .67$, $p = .50$), and the interaction ($\beta = -.26$, $t(102) = -.45$, $p = .65$). Results held when the individual measures of ordinary and extraordinary (rather than the combined measure) were used.

Importantly, these findings indicate a consistent effect of future time perspective on experience type, irrespective of whether the experience had already happened or had yet to happen. The more extensive individuals perceived their future to be, the more likely they were to report a happy experience that was extraordinary, whereas the more limited individuals perceived the future to be, the more likely they were to report a happy experience that was ordinary.

STUDY 2C: EXPERIENTIAL PRODUCTS AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

This study explores a potential implication for marketers, who are increasingly looking to make their products more experiential (LaSalle and Britton 2003; Schmitt 1999, 2011). We tested whether consumers' reactions to products associated with each experience type would follow the same pattern found in the previous studies. Accordingly, we manipulated an advertisement to position the product as either helping consumers enjoy ordinary experiences or extraordinary experiences and measured purchase intentions.

In addition, rather than measuring future time perspective (as in studies 2A and 2B), we sought convergent evidence for the role of (psychological) age in this experiment by manipulating the amount of time participants perceive they have left.

Method

Two hundred and fourteen individuals (ages 18-34, $M = 21$; 65% female) participated in this study as part of an hour-long session conducted at a university behavioral lab. We first manipulated participants' perceptions of how much time they have left in life by presenting them with a 3-inch line representing the average life span, and instructing them to indicate where they currently fall on the line using a slider (Kim, Zauberger, and Bettman 2012). Participants in the extensive time condition viewed a line representing 80 years and were told, "Recent research has found that the life expectancy (e.g., average length of survival) of people living in North America has reached 80 years of age." Participants in the limited time condition viewed a line representing 40 years and were told, "Recent research has found that the optimal life expectancy (e.g. average length of life before brain functioning starts to decline) of people living in North America has reached 40 years of age." Those in the extensive condition moved their slider a shorter distance along the line, representing the greater amount of time they have remaining in life, compared to those in the limited condition who moved their slider closer to the end of the line highlighting their limited time left.

Then, participants were presented with an advertisement for a Flip video camera, with the tagline manipulated between participants: "Capture life's everyday [extraordinary] moments."

Participants then reported how likely they were to purchase a Flip Video camera (1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely likely).

Results and Discussion

We conducted a 2 (experience type: ordinary vs. extraordinary) \times 2 (future time perspective: extensive vs. limited) ANOVA on purchase intentions and found only a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 210) = 5.94, p < .02$; see figure 4). When participants perceived their future as extensive, they were more likely to purchase the product if it was associated with extraordinary experiences ($M = 3.30, SD = 1.57$) than ordinary experiences ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.45; F(1, 210) = 5.69, p < .02$). However, for participants who perceived their future as limited, purchase likelihood did not differ for the product associated with extraordinary experiences ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.68$) and ordinary experiences ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.79; F(1, 210) = 1.14, p > .28$). Although future time perspective did not influence purchase intentions for the product associated with extraordinary experiences ($F < 1$), participants were more likely to purchase the product associated with ordinary experiences if they perceived their future as limited rather than extensive ($F(1, 210) = 7.70, p < .01$).

Insert figure 4 about here

These results show the same pattern found in studies 1A through 1C, suggesting that consumers' reactions to products associated with each type of experience reflect the happiness they gain from the experiences in their lives. Thus, it behooves marketers to understand what types of experiences resonate with which consumer segments when highlighting the experiential

aspects of their products. Furthermore, whether identified via actual age (studies 1A -1C) or psychological age (studies 2A – 2C), we establish a consistent effect: as people get older and their time becomes more limited, ordinary experiences are increasingly associated with happiness.

WHAT DRIVES HAPPINESS FROM EXPERIENCES?

What explains the changing hedonic impact of extraordinary and ordinary experiences? Though our definition centers on commonness and frequency (cf. Sussman and Alter 2012), there are other dimensions that likely vary with this distinction that might help explain these effects. For instance, extraordinary and ordinary experiences may also differ in the extent to which they are self-defining (Belk 1988; Zauberan et al. 2009), exciting versus calming (Mogilner et al. 2011), risky versus certain (Ratner, Kahn, and Kahneman 1999), newsworthy versus private (Berger and Milkman 2011), financially costly (Tumbat and Belk 2011), physically demanding (Tumbat and Belk 2011), solitary versus social (Caprariello and Reis 2012), and novel versus nostalgic (Wildschut et al. 2006).

Given the likely differences between extraordinary and ordinary experiences along these dimensions, the question is which drives the impact of these types of experiences on happiness. One possibility comes from research exploring reasons for the greater happiness enjoyed from experiences over material goods, which found self-definition to play a significant role (Carter and Gilovich 2012). The researchers describe how experiences are central to the self: “A person’s experiences live on “in here,” in their memories and narratives. They become parts of our autobiography and, hence, part of us” (Carter and Gilovich 2012, 1304). Thus, the extent to

which an experience creates a memory that contributes to an individual's self-defining narrative may determine the resulting happiness.

Since extraordinary experiences are more unusual and special, they are more likely to be protected in memory, thus helping to build one's "experiential CV" and definition of self (Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Wildschut et al. 2006; Zauberman et al. 2009). Actively seeking to define oneself is particularly important when young, before one's self-concept becomes stable and clarified (Campbell et al. 1996). After people have achieved their life milestones and accumulated an array of new and interesting experiences, their self-definition may draw more from the familiar activities that reflect their daily life (Carstensen et al. 1999; Lambert-Pandraud and Laurent 2010; Mogilner and Aaker 2009). That is, as people get older, their focus may shift from exploring and discovering who they are through noteworthy achievements like graduating cum laude and unique endeavors like ziplining through the rainforest, to living who they are by spending time in their preferred ways, such as reading sci-fi, gardening, or singing in the church choir. Self-definition is thus a promising candidate to explain why extraordinary experiences lead to high levels of happiness at any age, and why ordinary experiences lead to increasing happiness as people get older.

The subsequent exploratory study (3A) tests for the various factors that differ between the two experience types and identifies self-definition as a mechanism underlying the influence of age on happiness from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Our final study (3B) seeks confirmatory evidence by manipulating the extent to which an experience is self-defining and measuring its likelihood of being extraordinary or ordinary for people of different ages.

STUDY 3A: THE ROLE OF SELF-DEFINITION

In order to explore the mechanism underlying the effects shown thus far, this study followed the same procedure as study 1A and asked participants to evaluate their recalled experience on multiple dimensions that potentially distinguish ordinary and extraordinary experiences. The objective was to find which of these factors is responsible for the influence of age on the happiness enjoyed from the two experience types.

Method

As in study 1A, we asked a sample of participants ($N = 249$; ages 18-87, $M = 35$; 45% female) recruited on MTurk to describe a happy experience that was either extraordinary or ordinary and to rate how happy the experience made them using the same items ($\alpha = .85$).

To capture other potential differences between experience types, participants then rated the extent to which 39 descriptors each described their experience (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). An exploratory factor analysis with a varimax rotation revealed ten distinct factors (with eigenvalues > 1). Of these, eight factors included multiple cleanly-loading items (with factor loadings > 0.6 and crossloadings < 0.4) that were combined into indices. Factor eigenvalues (λ), scale items (R denotes reverse-scoring), and reliabilities were as follows: 1) self-defining (self-defining, a personal accomplishment, related to my place in the world; $\lambda = 6.96$; $\alpha = .85$); 2) calming (calming, peaceful, serene, relaxing; $\lambda = 5.51$; $\alpha = .92$); 3) other-focused (focused on connecting with others, with others I know well, solitary_R, experienced alone_R; $\lambda = 3.31$; $\alpha = .76$); 4) high-risk (high-risk, unlikely to turn out positively, guaranteed to turn out positively_R; $\lambda = 2.26$; $\alpha = .69$); 5) private (private, to be kept to myself; $\lambda = 1.93$; $\alpha = .81$); 6) expensive

(expensive, inexpensive_R, free_R; $\lambda = 1.77$; $\alpha = .76$); 7) with many others (with others I do not know well, with a lot of others; $\lambda = 1.24$; $\alpha = .70$); 8) physically demanding (physically demanding, tiring; $\lambda = 1.14$; $\alpha = .89$). Remaining items were dropped from subsequent analyses.

Besides rating how extraordinary and ordinary the experience was as manipulation checks, participants also indicated its frequency on four items (common, occurs frequently, rare_R, almost never occurs_R; $\alpha = .89$).

Results and Discussion

The manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the extraordinary condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.02$) recalled an experience that was more extraordinary than participants in the ordinary condition ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.35$; $F(1, 248) = 133.53$, $p < .001$). Likewise, participants in the ordinary condition ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.30$) recalled an experience that was more ordinary than participants in the extraordinary condition ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .79$; $F(1, 248) = 121.20$, $p < .001$). Consistent with our definition, the ordinary experiences ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.04$) occurred more frequently than the extraordinary experiences ($M = 1.80$, $SD = .76$; $F(1, 248) = 170.06$, $p < .001$).

An examination of the eight factors revealed that relative to ordinary experiences, extraordinary experiences were more self-defining, less calming, higher risk, less private, more expensive, more likely to be shared with many less-known others, and more physically demanding. Consistent with study 1C, ordinary and extraordinary experiences did not differ in the extent to which they were focused on connecting with close others (see table 2 for details).

Insert table 2 about here

We next examined the effects on happiness. An initial regression analysis replicated the effects observed in the prior studies, showing a main effect of experience type ($\beta = .73$, $t(245) = 5.46$, $p < .001$), a main effect of age ($\beta = .39$, $t(245) = 5.36$, $p < .001$), and a significant interaction between experience type and age ($\beta = -.40$, $t(245) = -2.89$, $p < .01$). To investigate drivers of the interaction effect, we conducted a multiple mediation analysis with the eight factors entered simultaneously as potential mediators, using the bootstrap mediation technique (Preacher and Hayes 2008). Results revealed only a significant indirect effect through self-definition (indirect effect = -0.018 , standard error = $.006$, 95% CI [-0.031 , -0.006]), with no other indirect effects reaching significance. Sobel tests (which assume normality and allow for standard p-values) yielded consistent results, with a significant indirect effect on happiness through self-definition (indirect effect = $-.009$, standard error = $.003$, $Z = -3.05$, $p < .01$) and no other effects (all $ps > .13$; see figure 5). We repeated this analysis on just ordinary experiences to examine whether the positive effect of age on the happiness gained from ordinary experiences can be explained by self-definition. Indeed, self-definition was the only factor that mediated the effect of age on happiness (indirect effect = $.016$, standard error = $.005$, 95% CI [$.0083$, $.028$]; Sobel $Z = 3.08$, $p < .01$), with no other indirect effects (Sobel $ps > .30$).

 Insert figure 5 about here

Looking at how age influenced the extent to which ordinary and extraordinary experiences were viewed as self-defining, a regression analysis showed a main effect of experience type ($\beta = .72$, $t(245) = 5.05$, $p < .001$), a main effect of age ($\beta = .30$, $t(245) = 3.90$, $p < .001$), and a significant interaction between experience type and age ($\beta = -.48$, $t(245) = -3.27$, $p < .001$). Spotlight analyses (Aiken and West 1991) showed that younger participants

viewed extraordinary experiences ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.38$) as more self-defining than ordinary experiences ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.55; t(245) = 5.83, p < .001$); however, among older participants, ordinary experiences ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.46$) and extraordinary experiences ($M = 3.08, SD = 1.48$) did not differ in the extent to which they were viewed as self-defining ($t(245) = 1.09, p > .27$; see figure 6). Looked at another way, extraordinary experiences were seen as highly self-defining by both younger and older participants ($t < 1$), showing no association with age ($r(105) = -.09, p = .37$). Conversely, ordinary experiences were viewed as more self-defining by older participants than younger ones ($t(245) = 2.46, p < .02$), becoming increasingly self-defining with age ($r(144) = .34, p < .001$).

Insert figure 6 about here

These results further clarify the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Besides frequency, these experiences systematically differ on at least seven different factors. More importantly, among these various factors, mediation analyses revealed that only self-definition drives the effect of experience type and age on happiness. While extraordinary experiences are self-defining throughout life, ordinary experiences become more self-defining as people age, thus contributing to happiness as much as extraordinary experiences later in life.

STUDY 3B: SELF-DEFINING EXPERIENCES

To gain additional support for the role of self-definition in driving the effects of experience type on happiness, in this study we manipulated self-definition and measured the extent to which the experience was ordinary or extraordinary as a function of age.

Method

Participants ($N = 316$; ages 18-78, $M = 37.9$; 52% female) recruited on MTurk were instructed to either describe a recent experience that was self-defining or to simply describe a recent experience, which served as a control condition.

We measured happiness using the same items from study 1A ($\alpha = .87$). Participants then rated the extent to which the experience they described was ordinary and extraordinary (1 = not at all, 5 = very much; $r(316) = -.55$, $p < .001$). The ordinary ratings were subtracted from the extraordinary ratings to create a single ordinary-to-extraordinary experience measure, with positive scores reflecting a more extraordinary experience and negative scores reflecting a more ordinary experience. Lastly, the three self-definition items from study 3A were included as a manipulation check (i.e., self-defining, a personal accomplishment, related to my place in the world; $\alpha = .83$).

Results and Discussion

The manipulation check confirmed that participants in the self-defining experience condition ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .81$) recalled experiences that were more self-defining than those in the control condition ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.06$; $F(1, 315) = 229.73$, $p < .001$). Self-defining

experiences ($M = 7.36$, $SD = 1.68$) were also associated with greater happiness than general experiences ($M = 6.40$, $SD = 2.30$; $F(1, 315) = 29.04$, $p < .001$).

Of central interest, we examined the influence of age on the extent to which self-defining experiences were ordinary versus extraordinary. A regression analysis showed a main effect of condition with self-defining experiences being more extraordinary ($\beta = .61$, $t(315) = 4.51$, $p < .001$), a main effect of age ($\beta = .18$, $t(315) = 2.23$, $p < .03$), and a significant interaction effect ($\beta = -.47$, $t(315) = -3.12$, $p < .01$). Although the control condition experiences grew more extraordinary with age ($\beta = .16$, $t(149) = 2.02$, $p = .05$; our theory makes no predictions about experiences in general), self-defining experiences, as predicted, became increasingly ordinary and less extraordinary as people got older ($\beta = -.19$, $t(165) = -2.44$, $p < .02$). Logistic regressions analyzing the ordinary–extraordinary ratings categorically (excluding those at the scale midpoint) showed consistent results: whereas the likelihood of reporting an extraordinary experience increased with age in the control condition ($B = .024$, $\chi^2(1) = 4.52$, $p < .05$), self-defining experiences were more likely to be ordinary as people got older ($B = -.036$, $\chi^2(1) = 10.37$, $p < .001$). Together, these results further support the central role of self-definition in determining the extent to which people’s experiences contribute to their happiness.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The novelist Thomas Wolfe (1929) memorably expressed that “we are the sum of all the moments of our lives—all that is ours is in them.” Indeed, experiences sum up to people’s lives, making people who they are. Although each experience is unique to a particular individual at a particular moment, the infinite different possible experiences—ranging from adventurous

vacations, to career accomplishments, to life milestones such as graduation, getting married, or having a baby, to annual birthdays and holidays, to a particularly moving aria at the opera, to a particularly inventive wine-paired meal at a world famous restaurant, to a particularly comfy meal at a favorite neighborhood restaurant, to a pizza night on the couch with the family, to a knowing smile from a best friend—can all be meaningfully grouped into one of two categories: the extraordinary or the ordinary. And the extent to which these two types of experiences contribute to people’s happiness depends on age, and thus how much time they have left in their life. Extraordinary experiences, which are rare and fall outside of life’s routines, capture people’s memories, imaginations, and attention, affording happiness at any stage of life. Ordinary, mundane moments that make up everyday life tend to be overlooked when the future seems boundless; however, the potential for these ordinary experiences to contribute to happiness increases as people come to realize their days are numbered.

The original purpose of this research was to identify a meaningful way to categorize experiences so as to inform individuals which they should pursue to feel happy. Following the approach taken in Van Boven and Gilovich’s (2003) seminal article on the hedonic advantage of experiences over material purchases, we asked people to recall experiences that were either extraordinary or ordinary and measured their associated happiness (study 1A). Subsequent results showed that outsiders could accurately identify each experience type and predicted similar levels of associated happiness (study 1B), and that this distinction was not confounded by the social nature of the experience (study 1C). Together, our results suggest that this ordinary versus extraordinary distinction is meaningful, resonates with people, and matters for consumers’ intentions to purchase experiential products as well as individual happiness (study 2C).

Although this distinction is well supported by the results of these studies, one potential limitation is that participants' responses may have been influenced by the lay definition of extraordinary as intrinsically superior to ordinary. Though we were careful in each study to define these terms with regard to frequency for our participants, it is still possible that responses were systematically biased, obscuring our ability to interpret responses and directly compare levels of happiness from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. In particular, happiness from ordinary experiences may be understated, relative to extraordinary experiences. In light of this possibility, we interpret these happiness levels with caution. Notably, however, this possibility makes the high level of happiness from ordinary experiences among older participants especially remarkable, since it was reported as no different than that generated by potentially inherently superior extraordinary experiences.

Perhaps most importantly, this investigation revealed individuals' age to play a critical role in determining the relative happiness enjoyed from each experience type. These findings thus contribute a temporal context to help reconcile the different perspectives proposed in prior research highlighting the benefits of special (Zauberman et al. 2009) or collectible experiences (Keinan and Kivetz 2011) versus mundane experiences (Quoidbach et al. 2010). Extraordinary experiences, which are more special and collectible, are associated with greater happiness than ordinary experiences, but only among younger people who perceive their futures as expansive. Conversely, the increased savoring of ordinary, mundane experiences is likely to naturally occur as people age.

Our exploration into potential reasons for the influence of age on the happiness associated with these experience types revealed the critical role of self-definition (studies 3A and 3B). Young people actively look to define themselves and thus find it particularly rewarding to

accumulate extraordinary experiences that mark their progression through life milestones and help them build an interesting experiential CV. Once people are older and have established a better sense of who they are from this process, the experiences they view as self-defining are just as likely to include the routine events that reveal how they like to spend their time. In other words, if seeking the extraordinary represents the questions people ask about who they are, living the ordinary may represent some of the answers on which they ultimately settle. Notably, defining oneself through one's experiences becomes no less important as people age (our experiences compose the story of our lives regardless of where we are in that story); rather, the experiences that best define one's self seem to shift from the extraordinary to the ordinary over time.

These findings are broadly consistent with research on the psychology of aging. Socioemotional selectivity theory argues that younger people are more future-oriented and prioritize knowledge goals, often seeking novel social interactions to develop their future-ready selves. Meanwhile, older people are more present-oriented and prioritize emotional goals, often seeking emotionally fulfilling social interactions with familiar others (Carstensen 1992). Although a shift in goals within the social domain (i.e., prioritizing close social relationships vs. novel social interactions; Carstensen 2006) seems to map onto the ordinary–extraordinary distinction, the results from our study 1C suggest that this distinction captures differences that cannot be fully explained by the social nature of the experience. For instance, a life milestone like a daughter's college graduation, and a typical Sunday dinner with the same daughter, may not vary in terms of the social actors involved or their relevance to emotional goals, but they do differ in their frequency of occurrence and potential impact on happiness. Another interesting possibility that bears further investigation is that each type of experience may differ beyond

simply whether and with whom the experience is likely to be shared. In particular, the greater inclusion of distant others in extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experiences found in studies 1C and 3A suggests that extraordinary experiences may be less focused on deepening social relationships, and more focused on other aspects of the experience itself. In other words, deepening social ties may be more incidental to extraordinary experiences and more integral to ordinary experiences.

Just as other dimensions of experience warrant future investigation, multiple dimensions of well-being are also worth exploring. For instance, though recent work distinguishing between a happy life and a meaningful life has found self-definition to be more critical to meaning than happiness (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky 2013), in our studies happiness and meaning moved together and were combined into one indicator of how to best allocate one's time. However, future research should more specifically examine which aspects of experience affect which dimensions of well-being, and when.

Managerial Implications

Brand managers are increasingly recognizing the benefits of experiential marketing and seeking to strategically manage the full range of subjective consumer touch points (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; LaSalle and Britton 2003). Framing consumption as an experience rather than a single purchase decision is seen as a way for brands to provide greater value and forge deeper connections with consumers (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schmitt 1999). Brands are thus attempting to craft and position themselves around messages that resonate with consumers' life experiences.

In doing so, marketing practitioners often define extraordinary experience as inherently superior and higher impact than ordinary experience (e.g., LaSalle and Britton 2003). According

to this view, transforming ordinary consumption experiences into extraordinary experiences should necessarily increase connection with consumers. Is this really the right strategy for every brand? Our findings suggest that association with the ordinary is not necessarily undesirable.

We conducted a follow-up study to more closely examine how brands' associations with extraordinary or ordinary experiences impact consumer happiness and brand connection. We asked 162 individuals (age 18-46, $M = 21$; 50% female) to rate logos of the top 30 most valuable brands (Interbrand 2010) on their association with either "everyday experiences" or "extraordinary experiences." All participants then rated how happy the brand makes them and their feelings of personal connection to the brand. Using participants' ratings, we identified the top five brands that are distinctly associated with ordinary experiences (i.e., Coke, Microsoft, McDonalds, Pepsi, and GE) and the top five brands that are distinctly associated with extraordinary experiences (i.e., Disney, BMW, Mercedes, Nike, and LV; see table 3). (Google and Apple were rated among the top five for both ordinary and extraordinary experiences and were excluded for the sake of discriminant validity.) For ease of interpretability, we compared combined responses for the top five extraordinary versus ordinary brands. Participants reported greater happiness from the extraordinary brands ($M = 4.69$) than the ordinary brands ($M = 4.42$, $t(161) = -3.33$, $p = .001$); however, they reported a deeper sense of personal connection with the ordinary brands ($M = 4.43$) than the extraordinary brands ($M = 4.04$, $t(161) = 4.25$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that appealing to consumer experience may not be straightforward. To realize the benefits of experiential marketing, brands must draw consumers' attention to the type of experience that is appropriate for their target segment and desired dimension of connection.

Insert table 3 about here

Conclusion

Despite our technological advancement as a society, we are quite far from constructing Nozick's (1974) fabled "experience machine," which would feed people a constant stream of simulated pleasurable experiences. Philosophical considerations aside, even if people wanted to plug into such a machine and program the experiences of their choice, which experiences should they choose to maximize their happiness? Reality may pose more constraints, but the choices are similar: over the course of their lives, people must do their best to select experiences that are likely to make them happy. Even amidst the dizzying, infinite array of possible experiences, our findings suggest that there is underlying order. A happy life includes both the extraordinary and the ordinary, and the central question is not only which, but when.

APPENDIX A**EXPERIMENT 1B: EXAMPLES OF ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES**

Ordinary experiences generated in Study 1A

Got a good morning hug and kiss from my fiance this morning before he left for work
Went out on my back porch to a bright sun shining
I noticed my plants were successfully growing in my garden.
Spent time with my wife watching a movie
Getting a yummy frappachino! It was perfect for that day, as it was really hot and muggy, and the drink was cold and icy. I love frappachinos!!!
I had a long and fun conversation with my son.
Went for a bike ride
Taking a shower after a very hot and very humid day. I used luke warm water.
Received a text from a good friend
My dog came and cuddled with me on the couch.

Extraordinary experiences generated in Study 1A

Giving birth to my son, my second child. It was my first at-home birth, unassisted.
I got to see Bob Dylan in concert in Kansas City.
Went on a vacation to Hawaii
When I applied to college, I was awarded merit based scholarship.
I went fishing at a lake in Alaska and caught a pike. It was the first fish I'd ever caught.
I gutted him out and fried him for dinner.
I got married.
I dove the blue hole in Belize.
I've always been interested in cars and I got invited to test a \$100,000 vehicle.
Taking pictures from the very top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris.
Watching the birth of kittens being born from onset of labor through to Momma Kitty quietly nursing her new babies.

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TABLE 1

Study 1A: Experiences Recalled as Ordinary and Extraordinary

Experience Category	Type of Experience		Difference (z-statistic)
	Ordinary	Extraordinary	
Social relationships	38.1%	13.0%	4.26***
Indulging in treats	12.4%	0.9%	3.39***
Life milestones	0%	25.9%	-5.79***
Travel and culture	1.8%	21.3%	-4.58***
Romantic love	16.8%	14.8%	0.41
Prosocial expressions	9.7%	7.4%	0.62
Luck and unexpected events	7.1%	3.7%	1.11
Career	4.4%	5.6%	-0.39
Hobbies	4.4%	3.7%	0.27
Overcoming hardship	1.8%	2.8%	-0.50
Relaxation	2.7%	0%	1.71 [†]
Nature	0.9%	0.9%	-0.03
Total	100.0%	100.0%	

Note: [†] $p < .10$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed z-test for difference in proportions.

TABLE 2

Study 3A: Recalled Experiences and Self-Rated Descriptors

Experience Descriptions	Type of Experience		Difference (t-statistic)
	Ordinary	Extraordinary	
Self-defining	2.49 (1.14)	3.21 (1.29)	-4.64***
Calming	3.25 (1.13)	2.81 (1.17)	2.99**
Other-focused	3.40 (1.03)	3.61 (1.09)	-1.58
High-risk	1.73 (0.69)	2.33 (1.07)	-5.30***
Private	2.16 (1.13)	1.84 (1.11)	2.18*
Expensive	2.23 (1.05)	3.17 (1.41)	-6.04***
With many others	1.79 (1.04)	2.54 (1.34)	-4.99***
Physically demanding	1.66 (1.06)	2.38 (1.38)	-4.64***

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, two-tailed t-test. Means are listed with standard deviations in parentheses.

TABLE 3

Follow-up Study: Ratings of Brands Associated with Ordinary or Extraordinary Experiences

Ordinary Brands		Extraordinary Brands	
Google	6.52	Disney	6.15
Coke	6.02	Apple	5.51
Microsoft	5.79	BMW	5.41
Apple	5.72	Mercedes	5.35
McDonalds	5.40	Google	5.34
Pepsi	5.38	Nike	5.06
GE	5.34	LV	4.65
Gillette	5.33	Coke	4.45
Toyota	5.26	Microsoft	4.36
Nike	5.26	Intel	4.30
Ikea	5.20	Amex	4.28
HP	5.18	Ikea	4.25
Amex	5.18	Bud	4.23
Honda	5.01	Samsung	4.15
Disney	5.01	Toyota	4.09
Bud	4.96	Honda	3.96
Samsung	4.91	HM	3.95
Nescafe	4.85	HP	3.93
Intel	4.77	Nescafe	3.93
HM	4.74	JPMorgan	3.93
Nokia	4.62	Pepsi	3.91
IBM	4.61	GE	3.85
BMW	4.11	Cisco	3.85
Cisco	4.09	Oracle	3.80
Marlboro	4.01	IBM	3.73
Oracle	3.85	SAP	3.69
SAP	3.77	Gillette	3.64
Mercedes	3.61	Nokia	3.21
JPMorgan	3.50	McDonalds	3.10
LV	2.60	Marlboro	2.65

FIGURE LEGENDS PAGE**FIGURE 1**

STUDY 1A: HAPPINESS FROM ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES
BY AGE

FIGURE 2

STUDY 1B: HAPPINESS FROM OTHERS' ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY
EXPERIENCES BY AGE

FIGURE 3

STUDY 1C: HAPPINESS FROM ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY \times SOLITARY VS.
SOCIAL EXPERIENCES BY AGE

FIGURE 4

STUDY 2C: LIKELIHOOD TO PURCHASE A PRODUCT ASSOCIATED WITH
ORDINARY OR EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

FIGURE 5

STUDY 3A: SELF-DEFINITION MEDIATES EFFECTS OF ORDINARY VS.
EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES BY AGE ON HAPPINESS

FIGURE 6

STUDY 3A: SELF-DEFINITION THROUGH ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY
EXPERIENCES BY AGE

FIGURE 1

STUDY 1A: HAPPINESS FROM ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES
BY AGE

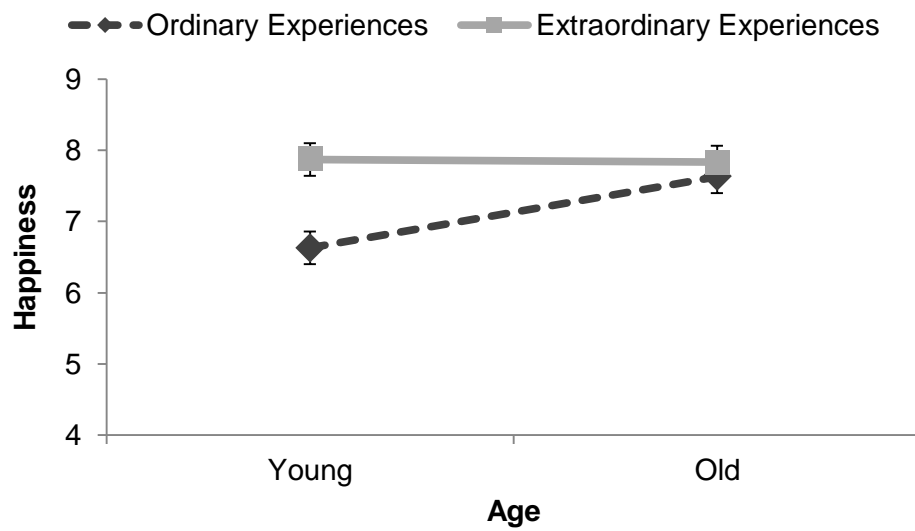


FIGURE 2

STUDY 1B: HAPPINESS FROM OTHERS' ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES BY AGE

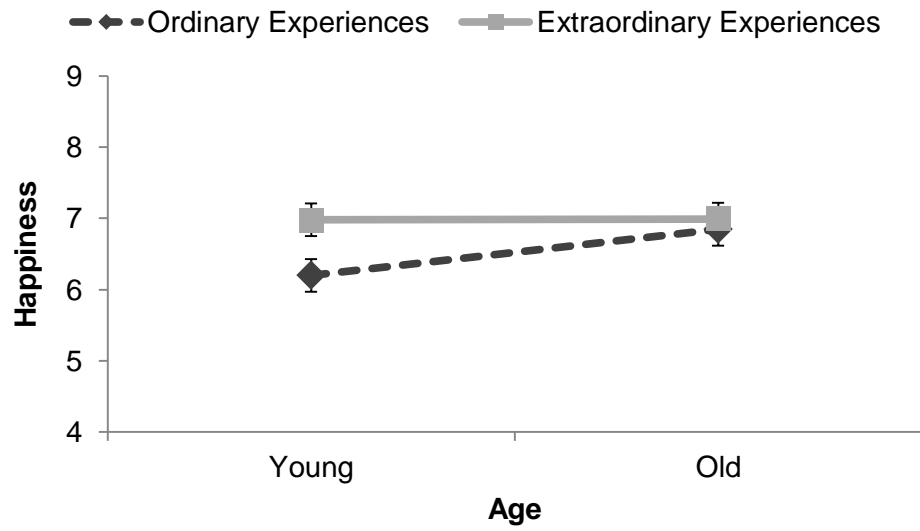


FIGURE 3

STUDY 1C: HAPPINESS FROM ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY \times SOLITARY VS. SOCIAL EXPERIENCES BY AGE



FIGURE 4

STUDY 2C: LIKELIHOOD TO PURCHASE A PRODUCT ASSOCIATED WITH ORDINARY OR EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

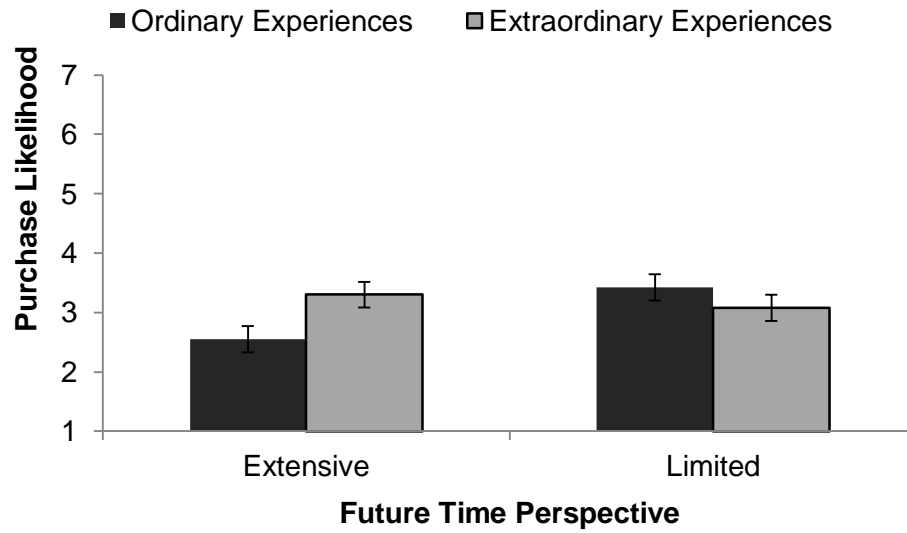


FIGURE 5

STUDY 3A: SELF-DEFINITION MEDIATES EFFECTS OF ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES BY AGE ON HAPPINESS

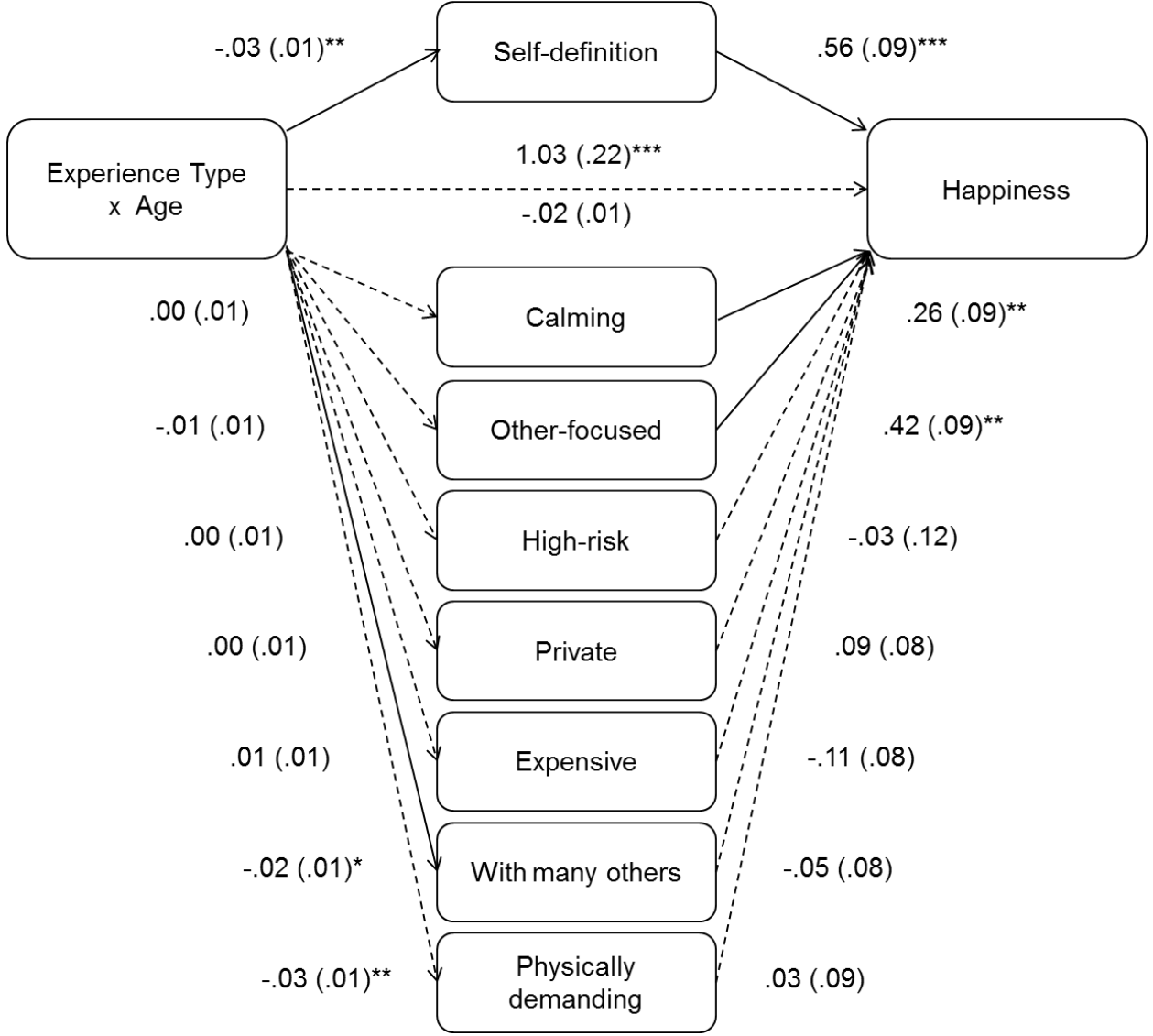


FIGURE 6**STUDY 3A: SELF-DEFINITION THROUGH ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES BY AGE**