

# Anticipation: The Psychology of Waiting in Line

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We all spend a lot of time waiting in lines—way more than we'd like. We wait for motor vehicle registration, for tables at popular restaurants, for Black Friday sales, groceries—and of course, we wait on hold for the cable company.

It's fair to say that most of this waiting is tedious and unpleasant. But what if we're waiting for something new and exciting—a new curved-screen TV or that vacation to Tulum? Doesn't waiting for new purchases become a positive experience, where we actually savor the anticipation so much that it trumps our impatience?

Well, yes and no, says Cornell University psychological scientist Thomas Gilovich, who has been investigating when and why new purchases give us pleasure. It's well known that people derive more happiness from experiences than from stuff, and Gilovich wondered if this might also be true of anticipation. Is waiting for an experience more pleasurable and less aversive than waiting for a new material possession?

Gilovich and his colleagues ran a series of experiments to test out this notion. In one, for example, the scientists simply asked young men and women to think about a purchase they intended to make in the very near future—either a life experience or a tangible possession. The participants then rated their anticipatory state of mind: Were they more excited than impatient? The opposite? Was waiting pleasant?

The participants named a variety of planned purchases—both material goods like laptops and clothing, and experiences like concert tickets and ski lift passes. Importantly, they did not differ in cost, but they did differ noticeably in their effects. Looking forward to a concert or ski vacation was much more enjoyable than looking forward to owning a new laptop. And waiting for new experiences was infused with relatively more excitement and less impatience.

To be sure, anticipating a new laptop or new clothing was a positive experience, too. But waiting for anything new brings mixed emotions, both impatience and excitement, and anticipating a possession was tinged with impatience; anticipating an experience, tinged with excitement. Given this nuanced difference, the scientists wanted to double-check their findings, so they ran another study using experience sampling: At random times during waking hours, the scientists pinged the participants' phones and asked them what they were thinking and feeling right at the moment. The 2000-plus participants were taking part in a much larger study, but the relevant questions here were: How are you feeling right now? Are you currently thinking about an intended purchase and, if so, what will you buy? Is waiting for this purchase more pleasant or more unpleasant? Are you experiencing impatience or excitement as you look forward to this new purchase?

The results echoed those from the first study. Anticipation of experiences was linked to greater happiness, more pleasantness, more excitement and less impatience than was anticipation of material

possessions. Looking forward to a vacation or other such experience was also more positive overall than not thinking of any new purchase.

Gilovich and his colleagues wondered about the implications of these findings. That is, does the greater impatience of people waiting for new stuff make them act impatiently, more impulsively? To investigate this question, the scientists analyzed archival newspaper stories of people waiting in line to buy something, noting any reported comments on the mood and behavior of those waiting. They expected that those waiting for an experience would be better behaved and in a better mood than those waiting for a material possession, and that is exactly what they found. Indeed, overtly negative acts, like rioting, were more strongly linked to material goods, while clearly positive actions, like singing, were more strongly linked to awaiting experiences. The scientists ruled out the possibility that shoppers waiting for material goods were ill-behaved because of scarcity—and fear of running out of a coveted good.

There is a certain irony in these results, reported in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*. We often spend our money on stuff, rather than on experiences, because we believe that experiences are fleeting. A week in the Caribbean may be glorious, but then it's gone. The high-end couch or TV will last a long time. But this reasoning is fallacious. It may be true in a strictly material sense, but psychologically, experiences are more joyful, more memorable—and now we know, more exciting to look forward to. We must know this intuitively, because we actually prolong the wait for experiences. New stuff triggers a “give-it-to-me-now” mindset, but we naturally savor how wonderful an upcoming vacation or concert will be.

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