


# Buying happiness: How brand engagement in self-concept affects purchase happiness

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## Abstract

In general, experiential purchases have been found to make people happier than material purchases. However, previous research has ignored a crucial issue—the importance of the brand and the consumer–brand relationship in this context. Since many purchases are associated with a brand and the brand is often the main motivation for the purchase, we argue that researchers should include the consumer–brand relationship in studies on the effects of material versus experiential consumption on happiness. Building on the social exchange theory, the current research examines the moderating role of consumers' tendency to include brands as part of the self in the relationship between purchase type and happiness. Across three studies, using different methods (a comparative survey:  $N_1 = 422$  individuals; two experiments:  $N_2 = 206$  and  $N_3 = 177$  individuals), we found that individuals with high levels of brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) derive similar levels of purchase-related happiness from experiential and material purchases, while individuals with low levels of BESC find more purchase-related happiness in experiential than in material purchases.

## KEYWORDS

brand engagement in self-concept, consumer happiness, consumer–brand relationship, experiential purchases, happiness, material purchases

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Just about all people strive to be happy. To achieve this fundamental human goal, they make decisions every day—including purchasing decisions (Mogilner et al., 2012). In this respect, happiness research is also relevant for consumer research (Brakus et al., 2022; Nicolao et al., 2009). Here, one of the more explored areas, which has been studied for about two decades (Dunn et al., 2011), focuses on the relationship between the type of purchase (material vs. experience-oriented) and happiness. Many studies (see Gilovich & Gallo, 2020; Gilovich et al., 2015; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015, 2016; Kumar et al., 2020; Weingarten & Goodman, 2021 for reviews) come to a clear conclusion: a higher level of happiness is associated with experiential purchases (e.g., a stay in a hotel) compared to material ones (e.g., a

new piece of clothing). Such results have also been confirmed in studies in which material and experiential qualities have been treated as separate, unipolar dimensions (Weingarten et al., 2022). This effect is called *experiential advantage*. Previous research has also shown that certain purchase-related variables as well as personality variables can moderate the relationship between material versus experiential purchases and happiness (Lee et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014). However, previous studies (see Gilovich & Gallo, 2020) focused on material versus experiential purchases without taking into account the relevance of brands and consumer–brand relationships in this context. The vast majority of purchases have a brand and often the brand is one of the main motivations for the purchase (Han et al., 2010). Consumers do not buy a car, but, for example, a Mercedes, not a concert ticket but, for example, a ticket to a Sting concert.

Furthermore, some consumers establish close relationships with these brands (Fournier, 1998), which could also have an impact on purchase-evoked happiness. Considering the fact that brands play a very important role in decision-making processes (Fischer et al., 2010; Keller, 1993) as well as in the development of consumers' self-image and self-esteem (Isaksen & Roper, 2016; Schembri et al., 2010), the obtained results on the relationship between purchase type and happiness may not reflect the whole picture. Despite rising interest in purchase-related happiness, the theoretical and empirical understanding of the role of brands and consumer–brand relationships in consumer-oriented happiness research is still limited.

To address this study gap, this paper investigates the role of dispositional brand engagement as a specific form of consumer–brand relationship in the link between purchase type and happiness. As consumers may incorporate more than a single brand into the self-concept, in the current study we analyze the notion of brand engagement in self-concept (BESC; Sprott et al., 2009), which focuses on a generalized view of brands in relation to the self. BESC does not refer to the relationship between a consumer and a particular brand but demonstrates how important brands (in general) are to consumers' self-schemas (Alden et al., 2016). Understanding the role of BESC in the link between purchase type and happiness is important because it will allow to identify more accurate determinants of purchase-related happiness.

Based on previous research (Gilovich & Gallo, 2020; Weingarten & Goodman, 2021), we assume that the experiential advantage applies particularly to individuals with low and average levels of BESC. Since, for these individuals, brands are not relevant to the self-concept and they do not derive additional benefits from brands meaning, we expect higher levels of happiness to be associated with experiential purchases. However, we assume that individuals with high levels of BESC derive similar levels of purchase-related happiness from material and experiential purchases. This assumption is based on the theoretical framework of social exchange theory (SET; Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Research results demonstrate that higher levels of consumer brand engagement generate greater benefits that can be obtained from consumption (Hollebeek et al., 2019). We expect that for highly engaged consumers brands should provide additional benefits for both types of purchases. As brands are present in both material and experiential purchases, we should not observe any differences in purchase-related happiness among individuals with high levels of BESC.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. It contributes to a better understanding of the importance of consumer–brand relationships for purchase-related happiness. Drawing on SET, our research adds to the current body of knowledge of the psychological consequences of BESC as a specific aspect of consumer–brand relationships. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first which focuses on the role of BESC in the association between purchase type and happiness. Most importantly, BESC is identified as a boundary condition in the product type–purchase-evoked happiness relationship. In this way, we advance and clarify the knowledge of how material purchases, compared to experiential purchases, impact purchase-related happiness.

## 2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Purchase and happiness

Literature suggests that marketing can influence consumer's happiness through consumption (Headey et al., 2008). This can be explained by a simple logic: Consumers spend their money on products because they expect and receive something (functionality, need satisfaction, happiness, etc.) in return (Kumar et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown that different types of consumption can lead to happiness, for example, car ownership, usage of luxury goods, and leisure activities (Bettingen & Luedicke, 2009; Dhiman & Kumar, 2022; Kumar et al., 2021). The first researchers who delineated a distinction between types of purchases (experiential and material) were Van Boven and Gilovich. They defined experiential purchases as “those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through,” while material purchases “are those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one's possession” (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194). At the same time, the line between types of purchases is not exact—it exists in the so-called gray zone (in other words, fuzzy boundary) (Gilovich et al., 2015), including material objects which are able to bring experiences, for example, books, bicycles, and boats. Nevertheless, the distinction between material and experiential purchases forms the basis of many studies which provide clear conclusions—a higher level of happiness is associated with experiential purchases rather than material purchases when consumers have covered their basic needs (Gilovich & Gallo, 2020; Gilovich et al., 2015; Kumar & Gilovich, 2016; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

There are several potential explanations for the experiential advantage. Carter and Gilovich (2012) revealed that experiences tend to be more closely associated with one's self than possessions. This manifests among others in the tendency to mention experiences when telling one's life story and feeling that experiential purchases make sense of who we are. The second mechanism is related to the Self-Determination Theory. Howell and Hill (2009) found that experiential purchases (at higher incomes) might satisfy psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which due to Self-Determination Theory are related to psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; see also the theoretical model of the experiential advantage proposed by Weingarten & Goodman, 2021). There is also a different explanation suggested by Kumar et al. (2014) which is connected with the evaluation of waiting for the purchase. They found that consumers derive value from anticipation and waiting for an experience tends to be more pleasurable and exciting than waiting to receive material goods. Another example of why doing things, rather than having things, provides more enduring satisfaction comes from the recently published paper by Gilovich and Gallo (2020) and earlier by Van Boven's (2005). They have presented multiple evidence that experiential purchases foster social connection, and tend to be evaluated less comparatively and more on their own terms. It occurs that experiences are pleasant and easy topics for

conversation (unlike material goods) which results in enhancing social bonds. In addition, they are psychologically perceived as less tied to money which is manifested, among others, in the fact that consumers' willingness to accept a price increase is significantly higher in the case of experiential purchases (Bastos, 2019). Based on the theoretical framework and research findings, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Experiential purchases provide higher levels of purchase-related happiness compared to material purchases.

## 2.2 | Moderators of experiential advantage

The association between experiential purchases and greater happiness does not necessarily hold for all people and in all contexts. Researchers have examined possible moderators of this relationship, which can be divided into two particular groups: personality and purchase characteristics (Zhang et al., 2014). Among the individual moderators, researchers distinguished such variables as socioeconomic status (Lee et al., 2018; Thomas & Millar, 2013), life aspirations (Zawadzka & Duda, 2012), and materialism (Millar & Thomas, 2009; Zhang et al., 2014). The second group of moderators includes characteristics of a purchase, for instance, the valence of the outcome (Nicolao et al., 2009) and the involvement of others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013).

First of all, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) noted that poorer individuals are an exception in the case of experiential advantage. It means that people whose basic needs are unmet will not derive more satisfaction from experiences. Moreover, Thomas and Millar (2013) found that people of lower socioeconomic status who were asked to recall the most recent material or experiential purchase (price higher than \$100) reported more happiness with material than experiential purchases. Such a pattern of results was also supported by Lee et al. (2018). Other studies indicate that experiential purchases may elevate life satisfaction in individuals pursuing external goals (i.e., financial success), and material purchases may elevate life satisfaction in individual pursuing internal goals (i.e., personal growth) (Zawadzka & Duda, 2012). Regarding materialism, Millar and Thomas (2009) found that individuals with high materialism reported similar levels of purchase-related happiness from material and experiential purchases, compared to individuals with low materialism. Subsequent studies confirmed these results (Zhang et al., 2014).

Another moderator of happiness with material versus experiential purchases is the valence of the outcome. Nicolao et al. (2009) provided evidence that in the case of purchases evaluated as positive, experiences led to more happiness than material possessions. For purchases that turned out negatively, experiences did not show an advantage over material goods. The social context also plays a critical role in the effect of experiences on happiness. Studies conducted by Caprariello and Reis (2013) have shown that spending money on experiences shared with other people causes more happiness than spending money on either solitary activities or material purchases. It is worth noticing that solitary experiences have less or same impact on happiness as material possessions.

Evidence from positive psychology suggests that consumer happiness can be influenced by engagement (Peterson et al., 2005; Seligman, 2011), because feelings of happiness are more likely to occur when people are actively involved. Accordingly, brand engagement (both active and passive) has been found to increase consumer happiness (Niedermeier et al., 2019). We hypothesize that BESC may be another moderator of the relationship between material versus experiential purchases and happiness. In the next two sections, we will present this construct and the arguments for its role in the link between purchase type and happiness.

## 2.3 | Brand engagement in self-concept

After gaining traction in the business practice literature, the brand engagement concept has spread to the academic marketing, marketing psychology, and branding literatures (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek, 2011b; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Razmus & Laguna, 2019). Despite the proliferation of conceptual and empirical customer engagement research, there is little consensus regarding the definition of customer brand engagement, as the conceptualizations provided in the extant research vary widely (for recent overviews of conceptualizations, see Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018; Dessart et al., 2016; Loureiro et al., 2020; Obilo et al., 2021). Basically, there are two approaches to conceptualize consumer engagement with brands (Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020; Liu, Sprott, Spangenberg & Czellar, 2018; Razmus & Laguna, 2019). In the first approach, consumer brand engagement relates to a specific brand and is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Bowden, 2009; Cheung et al., 2021; Dwivedi, 2015; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Razmus & Fortuna, 2022). Brand engagement is defined, for example, as "the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in direct brand interactions" (Hollebeek, 2011a, p. 790).

In the second approach, brand engagement is considered an enduring, individual difference in how consumers engage with brands (Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020; Liu, Sprott, Spangenberg & Czellar, 2018). Going beyond the assessment of a consumer's singular connection with a specific brand, Sprott et al. (2009) conceptualize BESC as a consumer's general "propensity to include important brands as part of how they view themselves" (p. 92). Their conceptualization builds on self-schemas to investigate the role of brands in the self-concept. The theoretical background is the cognitive schema theory, in which the self is understood as a set of schemas that represent a stable structure of knowledge (Markus, 1977). Individuals show different self-schemas, and these differences lead to various attitudes and behaviors toward objects relevant to these schemas, such as brands (see also Okazaki et al., 2021; Razmus et al., 2020). Thus, the BESC conceptualization is consistent with the established view that the self can organize and maintain brands as part of the self-schema and associated memory structures

(Keller, 1993; Liu, Sprott, Spangenberg, Czellar & Voss, 2018). In other words, BESC demonstrates how important brands are to consumers' self-schemas (Alden et al., 2016).

Sprott et al. (2009) argue that consumers vary in their tendency to possess brand-related schemas. Accordingly, the authors developed the BESC scale, which places consumers on a continuum ranging from low-level BESC, where consumers do not see brands as important elements of their self-concept, to high-level BESC, where consumers identify with brands and maintain special bonds with them (Sprott et al., 2009). The results reported by Sprott et al. (2009) indeed demonstrate that this distinctive consumer trait affects major steps of the typical consumer decision process toward brands. Specifically, findings show that consumers with high scores on the BESC scale are able to access favorite (vs. least favorite) brands more easily from memory, can recall a greater quantity of branded products that they own, and recall a greater amount of brand names after incidental exposure (Liu, Sprott, Spangenberg & Czellar, 2018; Sprott et al., 2009). BESC was also found to influence consumers' attention to favorite brands that are overtly branded, as well as to increase brand loyalty. More recently, research involving BESC has demonstrated that when a component of the self, unrelated to the branded self, is threatened, the central importance of brands may diminish, potentially shifting preferences away from meaning-laden brands (Liu, Sprott, Spangenberg, Czellar & Voss, 2018). Findings from another recent study indicate that consumers with high BESC are more likely to engage with luxury brands on social media (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). BESC is also related to materialism (Ahuvia et al., 2021; Alden et al., 2016; Goldsmith et al., 2011; Sprott et al., 2009). For example, Alden et al. (2016) report that materialistic consumers from the United States as well as from China and South Korea attach greater importance on brands in terms of defining their self-concepts.

The question of if and how BESC is associated with purchase-related happiness has not been investigated in previous research.

## 2.4 | Brand engagement in self-concept, purchase type, and happiness

Despite increased research on the experiential advantage, to the best of our knowledge, the effect of brand and consumer-brand relationship in the link between purchase type and happiness has been ignored in scientific literature. As demonstrated in previous studies, brands play a crucial role in the decision-making process (Fischer et al., 2010; Keller, 1993) as well as in the development of consumers' self-image and self-esteem (Isaksen & Roper, 2016; Schembri et al., 2010). Moreover, brand experience is related to hedonic emotions (e.g., excitement, joyfulness; Ding & Tseng, 2015), and as a recent study shows, brands can make consumers happy (Kumar et al., 2021). All these research results show a need to put the brand into research on the impact of material versus experiential consumption on happiness.

To address this issue, we build on SET (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958), which shows the interactive nature of the customer-brand relationship (Hollebeek, 2011b). According to this theory, consumers

and brands constantly engage in valuable exchanges, and it is a two-way process. For example, a brand may provide the opportunity to signal high social status for a consumer and thus evoke some future return (e.g., consumer loyalty and brand engagement). Both partners strive for balance in the relationship (Hollebeek, 2011b). Individuals establish relationships based on a cost-benefit analysis. Consumers consider costs and benefits of the relationship with the brand and decide whether or not to engage with the brand. While economic exchange is based on material goods, a social exchange involves tangible and intangible rewards (Chan & Li, 2010; Homans, 1958). A higher level of brand engagement leads to a higher level of benefits which can be obtained both after but also during focal interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2019). For this reason, we assume that BESC plays an essential role in the relationship between purchase type and happiness. This assumption is justified not only by theoretical reasoning but also by empirical research findings. Indeed, research shows that individuals with high levels of consumer-brand relationships, that is those who invest their own personal resources (time, energy, and money), derive, for example, social, self-esteem enhancing, and hedonic benefits from such relationships (Gummerus et al., 2012; Kuo & Feng, 2013) and even have higher levels of emotional well-being (Aureliano-Silva et al., 2018). Moreover, brand engagement (both active and passive) enhances consumer happiness (Niedermeier et al., 2019), which is treated in a marketing context as a central benefit (Schmitt & Van Zutphen, 2012). Individuals with higher levels of BESC focus on brands and their meaning and treat important brands as strongly connected to their self (Sprott et al., 2009). Furthermore, there are some arguments that come from studies on engagement in goal pursuit and well-being. The engagement to achieve a goal is related to the value of the goal object (Higgins & Scholer, 2009). There is also evidence that engagement leads to greater happiness and fulfillment in life (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006).

We assume that for individuals with high levels of BESC, brands are an important element in the evaluation of purchase-related happiness (due to their brand engagement). Based on SET (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958), we expect that for highly engaged consumers, brands, as relationship objects, can provide additional benefits, for example, higher levels of happiness. As brands are present in both material and experiential purchases, we should not observe any differences in purchase-related happiness in the case of individuals with high levels of BESC. This means that brands should provide additional benefits for both types of purchases. However, in the case of individuals with low and average levels of BESC, for whom brands are not relevant for their selves, we expect results consistent with experiential advantage. Based on the theoretical framework and research findings, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with low (H2.a) and average (H2.b) levels of BESC derive higher levels of purchase-related happiness from experiential than material purchases.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals with high levels of BESC derive similar levels of purchase-related happiness from experiential and material purchases.

## 2.5 | Overview of the present studies

We tested these hypotheses across three studies that varied in design (a comparative survey and two experiments). In all studies, we used purchase categories in which it is easy for consumers to identify the brands of these purchases (Fischer et al., 2010). In the first study ( $N = 422$  individuals), after reading the definition of the purchase type (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), we asked people to recall one material and one experiential purchase and then to indicate how happy those purchases made them. Next, participants completed the BESC Scale to assess their tendency to include brands as part of the self-concept. In the second study ( $N = 206$  individuals), we attempted to replicate the findings from the first study in an experimental manner. Respondents were divided into two groups, one asked to recall experiential purchases and the other material purchases (definitions of purchase type were presented). Both groups were then asked to indicate how the purchases influenced their feeling of happiness and to report their BESC scores.

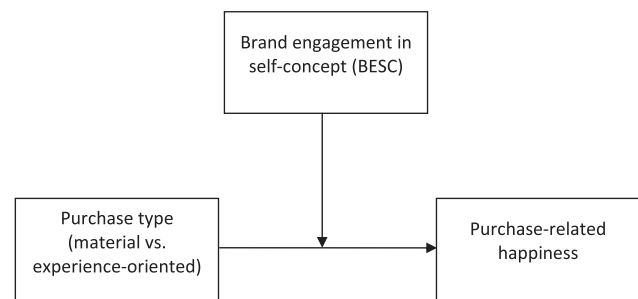
To further test the robustness of our results, in the third study, we employ a procedure that mitigates the potential criticism that the results of the first two studies are based on comparisons of nonequivalent purchases. We deliberately chose not to apply the framing paradigm in which the focal purchase is held constant, as used in previous studies (e.g., Bastos & Brucks, 2017). In our view, this paradigm refers more to the study of the image of the purchase and its consequences. As we wanted to focus on actual purchases (rather than imagined purchases) in the third study ( $N = 177$  individuals), we chose two comparable purchases: using the services of a café as an experiential purchase and buying coffee (ground/grain or instant) as a material purchase. In this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to two groups, with the first group recalling an experiential purchase and the second group recalling a material purchase. Respondents then rated how happy those purchases made them and evaluated their level of BESC. Based on the results of previous studies that have shown that materialism may affect purchase-related happiness (Razavi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2014), in each of the two studies, we controlled for the level of materialism and the selected purchase characteristics. Ethical approval for all research was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at the Institute of Psychology at the first author's university. Our conceptual model is shown in Figure 1.

## 3 | STUDY 1: COMPARATIVE SURVEY

### 3.1 | Method

#### 3.1.1 | Participants

The sample size required for the assessed model ( $N = 129$ ) was calculated considering the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , the desired statistical power of  $1 - \beta = 0.95$ , and the medium effect size 0.03. The sample consisted of 422 individuals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 39.64$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.63$ ; 208 women). Respondents differed in terms of educational attainment, place of residence, and subjective social status (Adler & Stewart, 2007). For details, see Table 1.



**FIGURE 1** Conceptual model of the relationships between purchase type and happiness

### 3.1.2 | Measures

#### 3.1.2.1 | Purchase-related happiness

Purchase-related happiness was measured with the Polish version of the two-item scale adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) and Nicolao et al. (2009): “When you think about this purchase, how happy does it make you?” (1—not happy to 7—very happy) and “How much does this purchase contribute to your happiness in life?” (1—not at all to 7—very much;  $r_{\text{material}} = 0.72$ ;  $r_{\text{experiential}} = 0.82$ ).

#### 3.1.2.2 | BESC

We used the Polish adaptation (Razmus & Laguna, 2019) of the Brand Engagement in Self-Concept Scale (Sprott et al., 2009). It consists of eight items (e.g., *I have a special bond with the brands that I like*; *I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself*) which were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ .

#### 3.1.2.3 | Materialism

The Polish adaptation (Górnik-Durose, 2016) of the nine-item Material Values Scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992) was used to measure materialism. Items (e.g., *I like a lot of luxury in my life*; *I like to own things that impress people*) were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale was used to control for the potential effect of materialism on results. In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.86$ .

#### 3.1.2.4 | Purchase characteristics

Individuals reported the price of the purchase and the time elapsed since the purchase (1—up to 7 days ago; 2—from 7 to 14 days ago; 3—over 14 days to 1 month ago; 4—over 1 month to 6 months ago; 5—over half a year ago).

### 3.1.3 | Procedure

The study was conducted in Poland using the biggest independent nationwide research panel of participants who were rewarded with points in a loyalty program. The panel is actively updated to be representative of the adult Polish population and allows for a random



**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of the respondents (Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3)

Characteristics	Study 1 %	Study 2 %	Study 3 %
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	50.7	36.2	46.9
Female	49.3	63.8	53.1
<b>Education</b>			
Primary	0.9	2.6	3.4
Vocational	8.1	0	0
Secondary	40.8	46.4	35.6
An undergraduate	12.6	28.1	14.7
Postgraduate	35.3	20.4	45.8
Other	2.4	2.6	0.6
<b>Place of residence</b>			
Village	21.6	14.3	20.3
City or town with up to 200,000 people	49.3	34.2	51.4
City with > 200,000 people	29.1	51.5	28.2
<b>Subjective social status<sup>a</sup></b>			
Lower to middle class (rungs 1–4)	25.5	31.8	17.5
Middle class (rungs 5–6)	43.1	49.3	47.5
Middle to higher class (rungs 7–10)	31.2	18.9	35.0

<sup>a</sup>MacArthur Scale of subjective social status (Adler & Stewart, 2007).

sample selection among 300,000 registered and verified people. Individuals were recruited using quota sampling to guarantee a sufficient number of individuals in each age and gender range. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. After participants provided informed consent, they chose one material purchase from five available categories: (1) clothing; (2) footwear; (3) cosmetics/perfumes; (4) electronic devices; (5) jewelry/accessories. Next, they entered the brand of the purchase and answered questions about this purchase. After that, participants chose one experiential purchase from five available categories: (1) using the services of a restaurant/bar/café; (2) tickets for events/concerts; (3) access to platforms with music/books or series/movies; (4) trips/travels with/without using the services of a hotel; (5) participation in courses/training. After the brand was entered, they answered questions about this purchase. We chose not to alternate the presentation of the material and the experiential stimuli because previous studies have found no support for an order effect (Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Hwang et al., 2019). To avoid exceptionally expensive purchases, the respondents were asked to recall a purchase at the price from about 4.50 to 3800 EUR (both for experiential and material purchases). We included in the survey two items that directly evaluated data quality (bogus item

—I was born on February 30 and an instructed item—Please mark “slightly agree” for this item). Moreover, to ensure high-quality data, we set a lower limit response time on an entire questionnaire (minimum 2 s per item) (DeSimone & Harms, 2018). All respondents in the final sample provided logical responses to the bogus item, followed instructions in the instructed item, and met the criterion of response time for each question.

### 3.1.4 | Statistical analyses

First, preliminary analyses were computed using SPSS version 24. Second, an ANOVA repeated measures was conducted to evaluate the effect of BESC on purchase-related happiness. Individuals were divided into three groups based on BESC levels (identified based on equal percentiles): low ( $M = 2.97$ )—184 participants; average ( $M = 4.52$ )—113 participants; high ( $M = 5.63$ )—125 participants. This procedure was chosen to reduce the effect of sample size on the results.

## 3.2 | Results

### 3.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

Respondents chose different types of purchases. The services of a restaurant/bar/café and electronic devices were most often chosen from experiential and material purchases, respectively (Table 2).

The average cost of the experience purchase ( $M = 219$  EUR;  $SD = 445$  EUR) did not differ from the average cost of material purchase ( $M = 207$  EUR;  $SD = 321$  EUR),  $t(419) = -0.54$ ,  $p < 0.592$ . There was a significant difference between experiential and material purchases in time elapsed since the acquisition ( $Mdn_{experiential} = 4.00$ ,  $M_{experiential} = 3.68$ ; and  $Mdn_{material} = 4.00$ ,  $M_{material} = 3.27$ ,  $z = -4.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, we controlled for the time elapsed since the purchase by entering this variable as a covariate in our analysis.

Means, standard deviations of total scores, and zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients between study variables are presented in Table 3. The results indicate that happiness from experiential and material purchases is positively related to BESC and materialism.

### 3.2.2 | Purchase-Related happiness

The results show that participants report significantly greater happiness after choosing an experiential purchase ( $M = 5.56$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ ) compared to a material purchase ( $M = 5.34$ ;  $SD = 1.21$ ),  $F(1, 419) = 5.93$ ,  $p < 0.015$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.01$ . This result replicates the basic phenomenon showing that purchasing experiences rather than material goods lead to consumer happiness. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

**TABLE 2** Frequency of respondents' purchases choices (Study 1 and Study 2)

Purchase	Study 1 (%)	Study 2 (%)
<b>Experiential</b>		
Using the services of a restaurant/bar/café	31.5	21.1
Tickets for events/concerts	10.4	13.3
Access to platforms with music/books or series/movies	20.4	24.4
Trips/travels with/without using the services of a hotel	29.9	35.6
Participation in courses/training	7.8	5.6
<b>Material</b>		
Clothing	16.8	23.3
Footwear	18.7	30.2
Cosmetics/perfumes	13.7	17.2
Electronic devices	45.7	27.6
Jewelry/accessories	5.0	1.7

**TABLE 3** Participants' mean scores, standard deviations, and zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients between study variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Purchase-related happiness (experiential)	5.56	1.29	—			
2. Purchase-related happiness (material)	5.34	1.21	0.54**	—		
3. BESC	4.17	1.34	0.40**	0.49**	—	
4. Materialism	28.02	6.22	0.21**	0.25**	0.34**	—

Abbreviation: BESC, brand engagement in self-concept.  
\*\* $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

### 3.2.3 | BESC and purchase-related happiness

A 2 (purchase type: experiential vs. material)  $\times$  3 (BESC: low vs. average vs. high) analysis of variance (ANOVA repeated measures) was conducted (see Figure 2). The results showed a main effect of purchase type  $F(1, 419) = 11.37, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.03$ . There was no significant interaction between purchase type and BESC  $F(2, 419) = 0.62, p < 0.541, \eta^2 = 0.01$ , but analysis revealed that individuals with low levels of BESC reported significantly greater purchase-related happiness ( $p < 0.001$ ) when they chose an experiential purchase ( $M = 5.08; SD = 1.43$ ) compared to a material purchase ( $M = 4.79; SD = 1.26$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2a was supported. Participants with average and high levels of BESC derived similar levels of purchase-related happiness from experiential and material purchases (average level of BESC:  $M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.62; SD = 1.05$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 5.47; SD = 1.03; p < 0.187$ ; high level of BESC:  $M_{\text{experiential}} = 6.21; SD = 0.91$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 6.04; SD = 0.87; p < 0.121$ ). Thus, the results did not support Hypothesis 2b but supported Hypothesis 3. The pattern of results remains the same when controlling for materialism and time elapsed since the purchase.

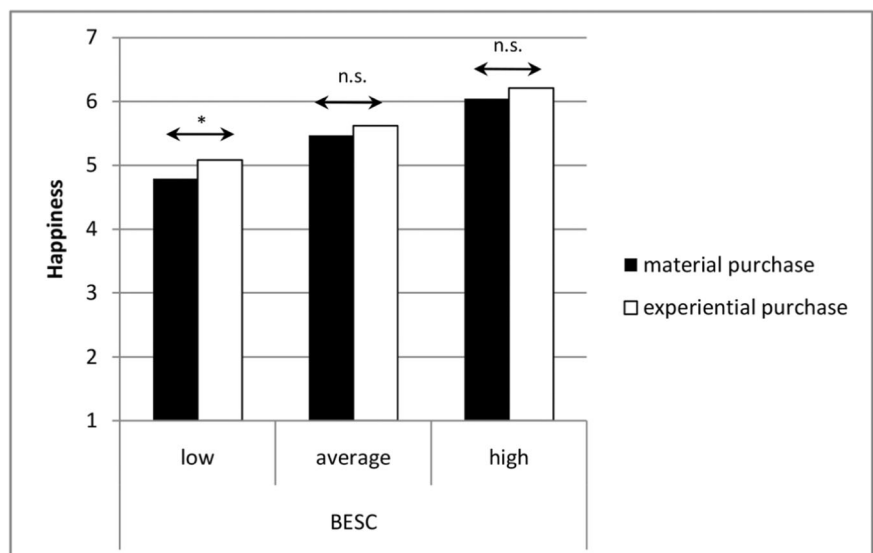
In additional post hoc analyses, we observed that individuals with high BESC scores reported significantly higher levels of happiness from material and experiential purchases than individuals with low BESC scores.

## 4 | STUDY 2: EXPERIMENT

### 4.1 | Method

#### 4.1.1 | Participants

The minimum number of subjects in the sample ( $N = 119$ ) has been computed as a function of the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , the desired statistical power of  $1 - \beta = 0.95$ , and the medium effect size



**FIGURE 2** Purchase-related happiness as a function of either an experiential or a material purchase and brand engagement in self-concept (BESC). \* $p < 0.001$ ; n.s., nonsignificant.

0.15. The sample consisted of 206 individuals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.35$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.81$ ; 125 women). Participants had different levels of education, places of residence, and subjective social status (Table 1).

#### 4.1.2 | Procedure and measures

Participants were randomly assigned to two groups, first recalling an experiential purchase and second recalling a material purchase. Individuals read a definition of the purchase type (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), chose one purchase from five available categories (the same as in Study 1), and entered the brand of the purchase. To avoid exceptionally expensive purchases, the respondents were asked to recall a purchase at a price from about 4.50 to 3800 EUR. Next, participants reported the price of the purchase, the time elapsed since the purchase (1—up to 7 days ago; 2—from 7 to 14 days ago; 3—over 14 days to 1 month ago; 4—over 1 month to 6 months ago; 5—over half a year ago) and assessed purchase-related happiness using the Polish version of two-item scale ( $r = 0.70$ ) adapted from Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) and Nicolao et al. (2009). After that, participants completed the Polish adaptation (Rasmus & Laguna, 2019) of the Brand Engagement in Self-Concept Scale ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) (Sprott et al., 2009). To control for the potential effect of psychological factors on the results, we asked individuals to complete a Polish version of the four-item Subjective Happiness Scale ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), a Polish adaptation (Górnik-Durose, 2016) of the nine-item Material Values Scale ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) (Richins & Dawson, 1992), and a Polish version of the MacArthur Scale of subjective social status (Adler & Stewart, 2007). At the end of the study, we asked participants to indicate whether the recalled purchase was a material or an experiential purchase (manipulation check). All respondents in the final sample indicated the correct purchase type.

Data were collected in Poland through online surveys. All respondents were recruited via personal contacts of the research assistant who encouraged participation in the study by sending invitations to individuals on different social media. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondents did not receive any reward. Before completing the survey, participants gave their informed consent. To increase the response rate, respondents' anonymity was assured. The questionnaire was divided into sections and items related to different constructs were presented on separate pages.

#### 4.1.3 | Statistical analyses

First, preliminary analyses were computed using SPSS version 24. Second, to examine a moderating effect of BESC on the impact of material versus experiential consumption on happiness, a moderation analysis using Hayes PROCESS macro v3.4 (Model 1; Hayes, 2013) was conducted. Analyses were based on 5000 bootstrapping samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI). Hayes's PROCESS macro, as an advanced regression-based technique, is considered as

the standard approach to moderation analysis (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). The advantage of this approach over others is the usage of bootstrap analysis which is very robust against violations of normality assumptions and provides highly accurate results (Hayes, 2013). A simple slopes analysis was utilized to probe the moderation using the 16th, 50th, and 84th percentiles as conditioning values.

## 4.2 | Results

### 4.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

Respondents from both groups chose different types of purchases. Trips/travels with/without using the services of a hotel and footwear were most often chosen from experiential and material purchases, respectively (Table 2). The cost of the purchase did not differ between the experiential ( $M = 156$  EUR;  $SD = 292$  EUR) and material conditions ( $M = 118$  EUR;  $SD = 184$  EUR),  $t(142.10) = 1.07$ ,  $p < 0.288$ .

Participants did not differ across conditions in terms of subjective happiness ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 4.29$ ;  $SD = 1.40$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 4.64$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(204) = -1.77$ ,  $p < 0.078$  and in terms of subjective social status ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.47$ ;  $SD = 1.52$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 5.27$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(199) = 0.93$ ,  $p < 0.355$ . However, participants in the experiential condition obtained higher scores in materialism ( $M = 28.71$ ;  $SD = 7.29$ ) than participants in the material condition ( $M = 26.43$ ;  $SD = 7.47$ ),  $t(203) = 2.19$ ,  $p < 0.030$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.31$ . There was also a significant difference between the conditions in the time elapsed since the purchase ( $Mdn_{\text{experiential}} = 4.00$  and  $Mdn_{\text{material}} = 3.00$ ,  $U = 3433.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, we controlled for materialism and the time elapsed since the purchase by entering these variables as covariates in our analysis.

### 4.2.2 | Purchase-related happiness

The results showed that participants who recalled an experiential purchase ( $M = 5.49$ ;  $SD = 1.25$ ) reported significantly greater happiness than participants who recalled a material purchase ( $M = 4.75$ ;  $SD = 1.38$ ),  $F(1, 205) = 8.75$ ,  $p < 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ . This result again confirmed the experiential advantage, supporting Hypothesis 1.

### 4.2.3 | BESC and purchase-related happiness

The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect of purchase type and BESC on purchase-related happiness ( $b = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.036$ , 95% CI = 0.02–0.48,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.036$ ). At a low level of BESC (point estimate: 1.62) and an average level of BESC (point estimate: 3.00), experimental manipulation (recoded as 1 = an experiential purchase; 2 = a material purchase) influenced the purchase-related happiness ( $b = -0.96$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI = -1.49 to -0.44 and  $b = -0.62$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI = -1.00 to -0.25, respectively). Individuals with low and average levels of BESC reported significantly greater



happiness when recalling an experiential rather than a material purchase. Thus, the results supported Hypotheses 2a and 2b. At a high level of BESC (point estimate: 4.88), experimental manipulation did not influence the purchase-related happiness ( $b = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.568$ , 95% CI =  $-0.69$  to  $0.38$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

In additional post hoc analyses, we observed that individuals with high BESC reported significantly higher levels of happiness from the material but not from experiential purchases than individuals with low BESC.

## 5 | STUDY 3: EXPERIMENT

### 5.1 | Method

#### 5.1.1 | Participants

The minimum number of subjects in the sample was the same as in Study 2 ( $N = 119$ ). The sample consisted of 177 individuals ( $M_{\text{age}} = 37.60$ ;  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.05$ ; 94 women) diverse in terms of levels of education, places of residence, and subjective social status (Table 1).

#### 5.1.2 | Procedure and measures

In this experiment, we chose two comparable purchases: using the services of a café as an experiential purchase and buying coffee (ground/grain or instant) as a material purchase. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to two groups, the first group recalling an experiential purchase and the second group recalling a material purchase (definition of the purchase type was presented). Individuals indicated the brand of the purchase, reported the price of the purchase, the time elapsed since the purchase (1—up to 7 days ago; 2—from 7 to 14 days ago; 3—over 14 days to 1 month ago; 4—over 1 month to 2 months ago; 5—over 2 months to 3 months ago) and assessed purchase-related happiness using the Polish version of two-item scale (Nicolao et al., 2009) used in Study 1 and Study 2 ( $r = 0.69$ ). Participants completed the Polish adaptation of the Brand Engagement in Self-Concept Scale ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ) (Razmus & Laguna, 2019), a Polish version of the four-item Subjective Happiness Scale ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ) (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999), a Polish adaptation of the nine-item Material Values Scale ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) (Górnik-Durose, 2016), and a Polish version of the MacArthur Scale of subjective social status (Adler & Stewart, 2007).

We included an instructed item (*Please mark "slightly agree" for this item*) in the experiment and at the end of the questionnaire, we asked participants to indicate whether the recalled purchase was a material or an experiential purchase (manipulation check). The experiment was directed at people who had used the services of a café and purchased coffee in the last 3 months. The study was conducted with 260 individuals, 51 of whom had not made these purchases in the last 3 months and 32 of whom did not provide

information on the brands of these purchases. All respondents in the final sample followed the instructions in the instructional item and indicated the correct purchase type in the manipulation check. Data were collected in Poland using the panel of participants described in Study 1. Quota sampling was used to ensure a sufficient number of people in each age and gender category. The participants' anonymity was guaranteed.

#### 5.1.3 | Statistical analyses

First, preliminary analyses were computed using SPSS version 24. Second, a moderation analysis using Hayes PROCESS macro v3.4 was employed. Detailed procedures for moderation analysis, as described in Study 2, were followed.

## 5.2 | Results

### 5.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

Participants did not differ across conditions in terms of subjective happiness ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 4.59$ ;  $SD = 1.24$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 4.64$ ;  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $t(130.41) = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.744$ , in terms of subjective social status ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 5.89$ ;  $SD = 1.76$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 5.83$ ;  $SD = 1.62$ ),  $t(175) = 0.24$ ,  $p < 0.815$  and in terms of materialism ( $M_{\text{experiential}} = 30.56$ ;  $SD = 5.78$  and  $M_{\text{material}} = 30.25$ ;  $SD = 5.36$ ),  $t(175) = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.718$ . Moreover, the cost of the purchase did not differ between the experiential ( $M = 10.05$  EUR;  $SD = 8.75$  EUR) and material conditions ( $M = 8.25$  EUR;  $SD = 4.99$  EUR),  $t(109.13) = 1.62$ ,  $p < 0.108$ . There were no significant differences between the groups in the time elapsed since the purchase ( $Mdn_{\text{experiential}} = 2.00$ ; and  $Mdn_{\text{material}} = 2.00$ ,  $U = 3263.00$ ,  $p < 0.082$ ).

### 5.2.2 | Purchase-related happiness

Individuals who recalled an experiential purchase ( $M = 4.80$ ;  $SD = 1.03$ ) reported greater happiness than participants who recalled a material purchase ( $M = 4.60$ ;  $SD = 1.21$ ), but this difference was not statistically significant  $t(175) = 1.12$ ,  $p < 0.263$ . Thus, we did not find support for Hypothesis 1.

### 5.2.3 | BESC and purchase-related happiness

The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect of purchase type and BESC on purchase-related happiness ( $b = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.043$ , 95% CI =  $0.01$ – $0.53$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p < 0.043$ ). At a low level of BESC (point estimate: 3.19) experimental manipulation (recoded as 1 = an experiential purchase; 2 = a material purchase) influenced the purchase-related happiness ( $b = -0.60$ ,  $p < 0.010$ , 95% CI =  $-1.06$  to  $-0.15$ ). Individuals with low levels of BESC reported significantly

greater happiness when recalling an experiential rather than a material purchase. At an average level of BESC (point estimate: 4.63) and at a high level of BESC (point estimate: 5.94), experimental manipulation did not influence the purchase-related happiness ( $b = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.163$ , 95% CI =  $-0.53$  to  $0.09$  and  $b = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.577$ , 95% CI =  $-0.35$  to  $0.62$ , respectively). Thus, the results supported Hypotheses 2a and 3. However, we did not find support for Hypothesis 2b.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Evidence from three studies using different methods suggests that experiential purchases do not lead to greater happiness for individuals with high levels of BESC. Specifically, consumers with high BESC scores reported the same level of purchase-related happiness both from their material and experiential purchases. Otherwise, findings indicate that buyers with low BESC derive more happiness from experiential than from material purchases. The results are inconclusive for people with average levels of BESC (in Study 1 and Study 3, we did not observe differences in happiness between material and experiential purchases, but in Study 2 individuals reported significantly greater happiness when they recalled an experiential purchase compared to a material purchase). At the general level (without taking into account consumer-brand relationships), the experiential advantage holds true in two studies.

### 6.1 | Theoretical implications

Our findings complement and extend prior theorizing and offer unique insights in several areas. First, given the importance of brands to today's shopping experience, we highlight the need of including brands and the consumer-brand relationship in studies on buying and happiness. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first to address brand engagement in the context of material versus experiential consumption and happiness. We point out that BESC, as a specific aspect of consumer-brand relationships, plays an important role in the link between purchase type and happiness. We argue that the moderating role of BESC can be explained in accordance with SET (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1958). Following this line of argument, brands, as relationship objects can offer highly engaged consumers additional benefits, such as higher levels of happiness. Thus, our results are in line with existing research that shows that consumer-brand relationships are positively related to emotional well-being (Aureliano-Silva et al., 2018), self-esteem benefits, hedonic benefits (Kuo & Feng, 2013), and consumer happiness (Niedermeier et al., 2019).

Second, complementing the results of previous studies (Lee et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2014), our research suggests that the experiential advantage is not universal. Consumers with high levels of BESC derive the same level of happiness from material and experiential purchases because of the relevant brands and their

meaning for them. Such consumers treat important brands as strongly connected to their self (Sprott et al., 2009) and, as demonstrated in previous research, obtain diverse additional benefits from such relationships (Gummerus et al., 2012). In our research, we used many diverse brands from different categories and we concentrated on BESC, which describes the psychological disposition to incorporate diverse brands as elements of the self-concept (Sprott et al., 2009). Thus, we add to the current body of knowledge by identifying a new boundary condition for the relationship between product type and purchase-evoked happiness. In this way, we contribute to a better understanding of the determinants of purchase-related happiness.

Third, our paper contributes to the consumer-brand relationship literature by focusing on psychological outcomes of BESC. It is important to emphasize that constructs describing consumer-brand relationships not only constitute a powerful mechanism in building brand loyalty, behavioral intention, or positive word-of-mouth (de Oliveira Santini et al., 2020; Sprott et al., 2009; Vieira et al., 2021), but also play a crucial role in human psychosocial functioning (Razmus & Fortuna, 2022). As we have shown in our studies, consumers with high levels of BESC, in contrast to consumers with low levels of BESC, receive additional benefits from brands and report higher levels of purchase-related happiness. Thus, our research extends the understanding of the psychological consequences of BESC, which have received little attention to date.

### 6.2 | Practical implications

Applying insights from our studies we can draw some conclusions for practice. As engagement is associated with happiness, marketing managers should focus their effort on possibilities to create and strengthen consumer-brand relationships. For actively engaged consumers, companies might encourage them to participate in social media channels by taking part in competitions, posting pictures, telling stories about the brand, and/or commenting on the brand events (Gummerus et al., 2012). Such content generated by companies and actively engaged consumers will allow passive consumers to feel happier as well (Prentice & Loureiro, 2018). As previous research has shown, building customer engagement not only leads to benefits for companies (e.g., Barari et al., 2021) but is also reflected in the experience of purchase-related happiness. This is an important finding in the search for answers to the question of how to make consumers happy.

Our findings also indicate that for potential customers with high levels of BESC, managers should use communication strategies that emphasize the importance of the brand in the purchase, especially for material products. As an additional means, Lee et al. (2021) in another recent study suggest anthropomorphizing material purchases (i.e., endowing material purchases with human-like characteristics) to increase the happiness derived from material purchases. In this way, material purchases, which are usually associated with providing lower levels of happiness, would no longer be disadvantaged compared to

experiential purchases in this regard. However, it should be noted once again that this increase in happiness derived from material purchases is likely to be achieved only for individuals with high levels of BESC.

However, the consequences of selling happiness for consumers and society should not be ignored. Our research shows that shopping can bring purchase happiness, but focusing on the pursuit of happiness through shopping is a short-term strategy for finding happiness in life (Chang & Durante, 2022; Costley et al., 2007; Kasser et al., 2007). According to the concept of hedonic treadmill (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Lyubomirsky, 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011), over time individuals get used to the item purchased and it stops providing happiness. The item that used to give pleasure no longer gives pleasure, and another purchase is needed to feel pleasure again. Thus, purchase-related happiness becomes an illusion and drives the mechanism of constant insatiability, which leads to overconsumption (Lyubomirsky, 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011). Overconsumption, in turn, is harmful to the environment and climate (cf. Brown & Cameron, 2000; Fanning & O'Neill, 2019) since it involves excessive use of goods and services, which leads to the abuse of natural resources.

### 6.3 | Limitations and future research

The current study should be considered in light of a few limitations. First, it has examined the generalized view of brands in relation to the self and did not take into account the meaning of specific brands in the link between purchase type and happiness. For example, considering the fact that individuals with a high level of BESC engage in luxurious brands (Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020), further studies should address the question of to what extent the lack of differences in the level of happiness among individuals with a high level of BESC between material and experiential purchases may be due to the fact that consumers associate both types of purchases with purchasing luxury brands. Moreover, because our results are inconclusive for people with average levels of BESC, analyzing other factors (e.g., engagement with a specific brand) that influence purchase-evoked happiness may be a promising research direction (see also Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2020). Second, the study examined retrospective purchases, whereas, for example, Gilovich et al. (2015) recommend to examine people's enjoyment over time, as well as prospective happiness. Further studies should analyze how BESC is associated with happiness from experiential and material purchases when they are planned or looked forward to. Third, the sample was homogenous in terms of cultural background, while some studies suggest that the benefits associated with buying experiences may depend on culture (Razavi et al., 2020). The vast majority of previous studies on purchase types and purchase-related happiness included American samples only. Thus, the fact that the surveyed group consists of consumers from Central Europe adds value to the presented studies. Fourth, the presentation of the experiential and the material stimuli in Study 1 was not counterbalanced. Although research shows that the

presentation order (experiential vs. material stimuli) did not have a significant effect on study outcomes (Guevarra & Howell, 2015; Hwang et al., 2019), it would be worthwhile to use a counterbalancing technique in future studies.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

People want to be happy and very often they use consumer goods (material and experiential) to reach this goal. Most of the previous research has suggested that consumers should buy more experiences to get more happiness from their money (Dunn et al., 2011). However, our research suggests that this recommendation does not apply to all buyers. Consumers with high levels of BESC reported the same level of purchase-related happiness both from their material and experiential purchases. It can also be concluded from our research findings that one of the ways to increase happiness from consumption is to get more engaged in consumer-brand relationships.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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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