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# Happiness from Ordinary and Extraordinary Experiences

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Prior research indicates that experiences bring greater happiness than material possessions, but which experiences result in the greatest happiness? The current investigation is one of the first to categorize types of experiences and highlights 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 finding that the happiness enjoyed from ordinary and extraordinary experiences depends on age. Younger people, who view their future as extensive, gain more happiness from extraordinary experiences; however, ordinary experiences become increasingly associated with happiness as people get older, such that they 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 one's life span, as people get older they increasingly define themselves by the ordinary experiences that comprise their daily lives.

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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)

**H**ow should we spend our 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, we 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 we pursue to extract the greatest enjoyment from life: the extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime experiences that we might tell others about and commemorate in photographs on our (actual or virtual) walls, or the simple, ordinary experiences that make up the fabric of our daily lives?

As we move through life deciding how to fill our next hour, weekend, or vacation, popular wisdom frequently reminds us that our time is finite and must be spent wisely. 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 and spending quiet moments with their families at the kitchen table and in the backyard. How can we reconcile these seemingly opposing recommendations? Should we choose extraordinary or ordinary experiences in our 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 (see also Caprariello and Reis 2013). A series of eight studies across which people were asked to recall, plan, or imagine happy

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experiences reveals the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences to be stable and meaningful. 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 relative happiness associated with each experience type. Although happiness from extraordinary experiences does not change over one's life span, ordinary experiences elicit greater happiness as people get older and their remaining time becomes limited. An exploration into potential explanations for this effect reveals a key driver to be the extent to which these experiences help define the self at different stages of life. Together, these findings help reconcile the separate literatures that highlight achieving the extraordinary or savoring the ordinary as the path to happiness.

## EXPERIENCE AND WELL-BEING

The age-old question of what brings happiness in life has received increasing empirical attention within economics, psychology, and consumer research (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011; Dunn and Norton 2013; Easterlin 2003; Hsee et al. 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, and conventional wisdom continues to be updated. For instance, whereas 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 reduce 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 that purchasing positive experiences brings 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 one recent paper that began exploring this question, which found shared experiences to be more enjoyable than solitary experiences (Caprariello and Reis 2013), 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 shows that evaluations of an experience are shaped more by peak and end affect than by 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 VERSUS EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES

To answer the question of how individuals should select experiences in order 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 aligns with the distinction proposed by Sussman and Alter (2012), which arrays purchases along a continuum from ordinary (common or frequent) to exceptional (unusual or infrequent). Importantly, the distinction we make between ordinary and extraordinary experiences contains no intrinsic value judgment. That is, though lay and marketing practitioner usage (LaSalle and Britton 2003) assumes extraordinary experiences to be both unusual and inherently superior to ordinary experiences (cf. "special," as defined by Zauberman, Ratner, and Kim 2009), our definition pertains only to relative frequency, independent of any inferiority or superiority.

Though minimal 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; Zauberman 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 during nostalgic reflections on the past (Leboe and Ansons 2006; Wildschut et al. 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 appreciating mundane, ordinary moments in achieving happiness (Bryant 2003; Quoidbach, Berry, et al. 2010; Tugade and Fredrickson 2007). For instance, savoring

ordinary moments has been shown to increase happiness (Quoidbach, Berry, et al. 2010), while the inability to appreciate such moments can undermine happiness (Gilbert 2006; Parducci 1995; Quoidbach, Dunn, et al. 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 experience. 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 happiness from experiences, breaking up positive experiences into smaller pieces can increase total 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 smaller pleasures (Morewedge et al. 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 *Dead Poets Society* and *The Bucket List* remind viewers to be deliberate about how they spend their time because their days are numbered. Life is invariably finite, making time the most precious resource of all (King, Hicks, and Abdelkhalik 2009). Notably, however, the high schoolers in *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 in life. Therefore, in an effort to reconcile the perspectives of these movies and the disparate streams of research above, we examine the role of age in the relative impact of ordinary and extraordinary experiences on happiness.

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 time remaining 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 examine how age (and the perceived amount of time left in life) impacts 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 may be more novel, exciting, informative, and likely to contribute to one’s experiential CV, they should resonate more with those building toward their future (Carstensen et al. 1999; Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Mogilner et al. 2012). In contrast, when time is scarce, people spend it more carefully and should be more likely to 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 is more closely tied to happiness. We conclude the article by exploring *why* each type of experience contributes to happiness when it does.

## OVERVIEW

Eight studies explore how age determines the happiness from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. After confirming that this dimension spanning from ordinary to extraordinary is a meaningful way to distinguish between happy experiences (studies 1A and 1B), we examine the relative 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 the amount of 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 extraordi-

nary 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) initial study, 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 Amazon Mechanical Turk (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 reported their associated happiness by indicating how much the experience contributed to their happiness in life (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), how meaningful it was, and how personally fulfilling it was (1 = not at all, 9 = very much; three-item index  $\alpha = .89$ ). Then, among other ancillary measures pertaining to the experience, participants rated on separate scales how extraordinary and ordinary the experience was as manipulation checks (1 = not at all, 5 = very much).

#### 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, they fell into 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 resolved through subsequent discussion. Many experiences (42%) involved spending time with others and enjoying relationships—some romantic, and some with family or friends. Some (13%) represented life milestones, such as weddings or graduations; 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 by condition ( $\chi^2(11) = 77.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ), supporting the notion that this distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences resonates with people. An examination of the experiences generated within each condition provides initial insight into the nature of the ordinary-extraordinary distinction. For instance, although romantic love comprised both experience types, nonromantic 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.

Though glancing at 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 ( $\beta = -.42$ ,  $t(217) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .03$ ).

**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%	.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%	.41
Prosocial expressions	9.7%	7.4%	.62
Luck and unexpected events	7.1%	3.7%	1.11
Career	4.4%	5.6%	-.39
Hobbies	4.4%	3.7%	.27
Overcoming hardship	1.8%	2.8%	-.50
Relaxation	2.7%	0%	1.71*
Nature	.9%	.9%	-.03
Total	100.0%	100.0%	

\* $p < .10$ .

\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed z-test for difference in proportions.

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 ( $M = 7.83$ ;  $SD = 1.97$ ;  $t < 1$ ; see fig. 1). Looked at differently, extraordinary experiences resulted in similar levels of happiness for 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 ( $r(113) = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

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 meaning of people's own re-

called experiences, it was unclear whether outsiders without this information would categorize the experiences similarly. This 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 on happiness.

## Method

We presented participants ( $N = 121$ , ages 20–78,  $M = 45$ ; 60% female) with 20 randomly selected experience descriptions generated in study 1A, removing any mention of the words “extraordinary” and “ordinary” (see the appendix for examples). These “outsider” participants were also recruited through MTurk and given the same definition of extraordinary and ordinary experiences used in study 1A. 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

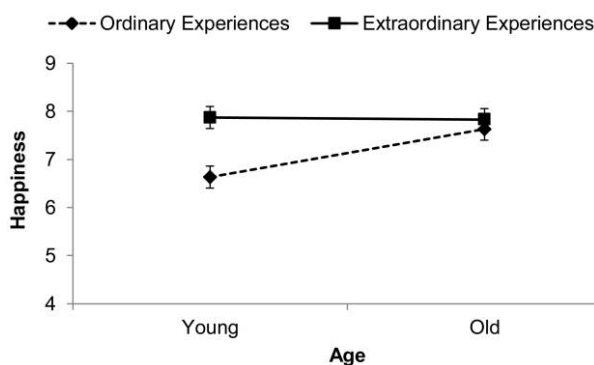
Participants were able to correctly distinguish between others' ordinary and extraordinary experiences, rating the extraordinary experiences as more extraordinary (significantly above the scale midpoint;  $M = 6.61$ ;  $SD = 1.40$ ,  $t(120) = 12.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and the ordinary experiences as more 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 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 ( $F(1, 119) = 10.57$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

A spotlight analysis clarified 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 fig. 2). Although anticipated happiness from extraordinary experiences showed no relation with age ( $r(121) = .00$ ,  $p = .97$ ), anticipated happiness from ordinary ex-

FIGURE 1

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



periences increased significantly as people got older ( $r(121) = .26, p < .01$ ).

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 among 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 (nonromantic) 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 2013).

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 (2013), orthogonally manipulating whether the experience participants were instructed to recall was shared. Accordingly, we used a 2 (experience type: ordinary vs. extraordinary)  $\times$  2 (sharing: experienced alone vs. experienced with others) between-subjects design.

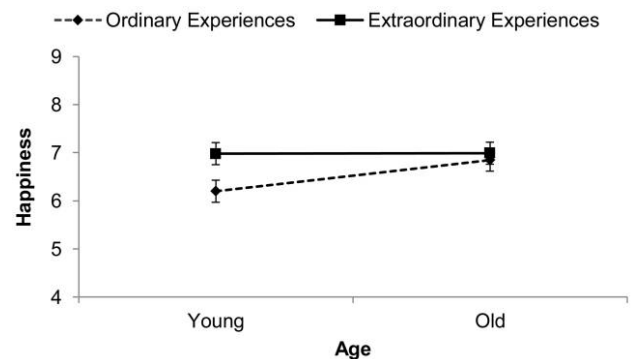
### Method

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 life). The instructions then further specified whether the experience “involved other people” or was “experienced by yourself” (Caprariello and Reis 2013).

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

FIGURE 2

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



much 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, those in the ordinary conditions ( $M = 3.36$ ;  $SD = 1.17$ ) rated their experience as more ordinary than those in the extraordinary conditions ( $M = 1.89$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ,  $F(1, 271) = 106.18, p < .001$ ). Similarly, solitary condition experiences were more likely to be undergone alone ( $M = 3.35$ ;  $SD = 1.59$ ) than those recalled in the shared 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, sharing, 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 no 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 (see fig. 3). 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

FIGURE 3

STUDY 1C: HAPPINESS FROM ORDINARY VERSUS EXTRAORDINARY  $\times$  SOLITARY VERSUS SHARED EXPERIENCES BY AGE



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, happiness from extraordinary experiences did not differ by age ( $t < 1$ ), whereas ordinary experiences elicited greater happiness for older versus younger participants ( $t(130) = 4.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Happiness from extraordinary experiences was uncorrelated with age ( $r(140) = .03$ ,  $p = .69$ ), but happiness from ordinary experiences increased significantly with age ( $r(132) = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

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 shared, 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 2013), 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 sharing in our study, we examined who was involved in the events recalled by participants reporting shared experiences. Few clear differences emerged: ordinary and extraordinary experiences did not differ in the involvement of well-known others, friends, or family (all  $p > .10$ ), 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 ( $F(1, 134) = 21.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ), hinting 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 (vs. extraordinary) experiences tend to be shared with non-romantic others, an examination of just shared experiences 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 recalled (studies 1A and 1C) or read about another's (study 1B) happy experience, then rated how happy the experience made (or would make) them. We adopted a different approach in this study and identified the experiences most associated with happiness using a natural data source: 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).

Additionally, our previous studies show that age influences the happiness that individuals attain from ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Although the psychology of aging is primarily rooted in 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 focus more on family and to have more financial resources and worse physical health (Fung, Carstensen, and Lutz 1999; Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz 2010). To further investigate the role of age while ruling out other such 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 Facebook users (ages 18–81,  $M = 40$ ; 47% female) were recruited through MTurk to participate in exchange for \$1. These people used Facebook frequently: 68% visit the website at least once a day, and 87% post 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 whether it captured an experience that was ordinary or extraordinary (1 = purely ordinary, 5 = equally ordinary and extraordinary, 9 = purely extraordinary). Finally, participants completed the 10-item future time perspective scale (Lang and Carstensen 2002), which measures the extent to which people 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 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 socioemotional 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 this 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.

Finally, 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 bipolar scale midpoint, 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 (i.e., higher) endpoint of the scale.

## Method

One hundred and six undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania (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 on separate scales the extent to which the experience was [will be] extraordinary and 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 had left in life (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 was recalled or planned ( $\beta = .39, t(102) = .67, p = .50$ ), and the interaction ( $\beta = -.26, t(102) = -.45, p = .65$ ). These findings indicate a consistent effect of future time perspective on experience type, regardless 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, while the more limited individuals perceived the future to be, the more likely they were to report a happy experience that was ordinary. These results held when the individual measures of ordinary and extraordinary were used instead of the combined measure.

### STUDY 2C: EXPERIENTIAL PRODUCTS AND PURCHASE INTENTIONS

This study explores a potential implication for marketers who are increasingly looking to position their products and marketing campaigns as more experiential (LaSalle and Britton 2003; Schmitt 1999, 2011). We tested whether con-

sumers' 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 perceived they had 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 at the Wharton 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, Zauberma, and Bettman 2012). Participants in the extensive time condition viewed a line representing 80 years and read, "Recent research has found that the life expectancy (i.e., 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 read, "Recent research has found that the optimal life expectancy (i.e., 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, which represented a greater amount of time remaining in life than those in the limited condition who moved their slider closer to the end of the line, highlighting their limited time left.

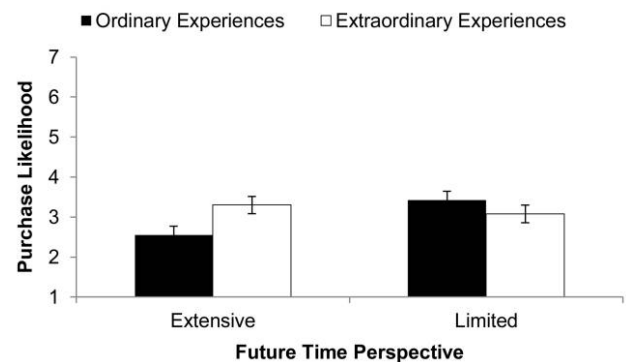
Next, participants were presented with an advertisement for a Flip video camera, with the tagline manipulated between participants: "Capture life's everyday [extraordinary] moments." Participants then reported how likely they were to purchase a Flip Video camera (1 = not at all likely, 7 = extremely 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 fig. 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 when associated with extraordinary experiences ( $M = 3.08$ ;  $SD = 1.68$ ) versus ordinary experiences ( $M = 3.42$ ;  $SD = 1.79$ ;  $F(1, 210) = 1.14, p >$

FIGURE 4

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



.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 ( $F(1, 210) = 7.70, p < .01$ ).

These results parallel those of studies 1A through 1C, thereby 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 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 (Sussman and Alter 2012), other dimensions that likely vary with this distinction 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; Zauberma 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 2013), and novel versus nostalgic (Wildschut et al. 2006).

Given these likely differences between extraordinary and ordinary experiences, *which* is responsible for the impact

on happiness? Research exploring reasons for the greater happiness from experiences over material goods suggests one possibility: self-definition. Carter and Gilovich (2012, 1304) 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." 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 unusual and special, they are more likely to be protected in memory, thus helping to build an individual's experiential curriculum vitae (CV) and definition of self (Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Wildschut et al. 2006; Zauberan et al. 2009). Actively seeking to define the self is particularly important among young people, whose self-concepts have not yet gained stability and clarity (Campbell et al. 1996). Once people have surpassed most of their life milestones and accumulated an array of 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 discovering who they are through achievements like graduating cum laude and unique endeavors like zip-lining 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. Hence, self-definition is a promising candidate to account for why extraordinary experiences bring happiness at any age, as well as why ordinary experiences lead to increasing happiness as people get older.

The subsequent exploratory study (3A) tests the various factors that may 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. The final study (3B) seeks confirmatory evidence by manipulating the extent to which an experience is self-defining and by 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 ( $\alpha = .85$ ). To capture other potential differences between experience types, we compiled a list of 39 face-valid descriptors derived from relevant research (Berger and Milkman 2011; Caprariello and Reis 2013; Mogilner et al. 2011; Ratner et al. 1999; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Wildschut et al. 2006; Zauberan et al. 2009). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which each described their experience (1 = not at all, 5 = very much). An exploratory factor analysis with a varimax rotation revealed 10 distinct factors (with eigenvalues  $> 1$ ). Of these, eight factors included multiple cleanly loading items (with factor loadings  $> 0.6$  and cross-loadings  $< 0.4$ ) that were combined. Factor names, scale items (R denotes reverse-scoring), eigenvalues ( $\lambda$ ), 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;  $\lambda = 1.24$ ;  $\alpha = .70$ ); and (8) physically demanding (physically demanding, tiring;  $\lambda = 1.14$ ;  $\alpha = .89$ ). Remaining items were dropped from subsequent analyses. As manipulation checks, besides rating the experience on how extraordinary and ordinary it was, participants also indicated its frequency on four items (common, occurs frequently, rare\_R, almost never occurs\_R;  $\alpha = .89$ ).

#### Results and Discussion

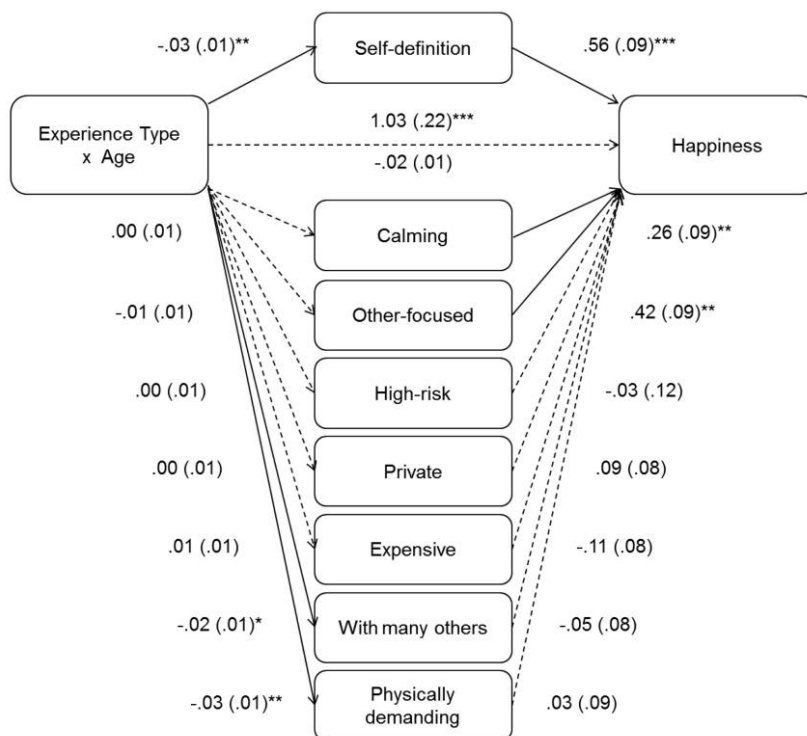
The manipulation checks confirmed that participants in the extraordinary condition ( $M = 4.25$ ;  $SD = 1.02$ ) recalled an experience that was more extraordinary than those in the ordinary condition ( $M = 2.43$ ;  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $F(1, 248) = 133.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, participants in the ordinary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

Next, we examined the effects on happiness. An initial regression analysis replicated the effects observed in the prior studies, showing a main effect of experience type ( $\beta$

FIGURE 5

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



$= .73, t(245) = 5.46, p < .001$ ), 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  $p > .13$ ; see fig. 5). We repeated this analysis on just ordinary experiences to examine whether the positive effect of age on the happiness 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  $p > .30$ ).

Looking at how age influenced the extent to which or-

dinary 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 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 self-defining ( $t(245) = 1.09, p > .27$ ; see fig. 6). Looked at another way, extraordinary experiences were seen as highly self-defining by both younger and older participants ( $t < 1$ ), showing no relationship 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 ( $r(144) = .34, p < .001$ ).

These results further clarify the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary experiences. Besides frequency, these experience types differ systematically on at least seven

different factors. More importantly, among these 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, 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 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. Finally, 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;  $\alpha = .83$ ).

TABLE 2

STUDY 3A: RECALLED EXPERIENCES AND SELF-RATED DESCRIPTORS

Experience descriptions	Type of experience		Difference ( <i>t</i> -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 (.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.—Means are listed with standard deviations in parentheses.

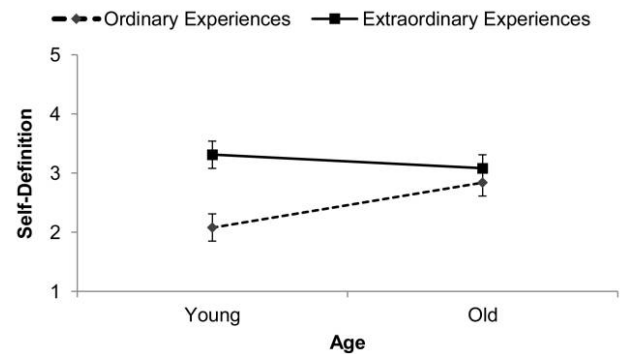
\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , two-tailed *t*-test.

FIGURE 6

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



#### 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 ( $\beta = -.47, t(315) = -3.12, p < .01$ ). As predicted, self-defining experiences 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: self-defining experiences were increasingly likely to be ordinary (vs. extraordinary) 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, people's accumulated experiences make them who they are. Even though each experience is unique to a particular individual at a particular moment, the infinite array of possible experiences—ranging from adventurous vacations, to career accomplishments, to

life milestones like graduations or weddings, to annual holidays, to a particularly moving aria at the opera, to an inventive wine-paired meal at a world famous restaurant, to a comfy meal at a favorite neighborhood restaurant, to a pizza night on the couch with the family—can be meaningfully grouped into one of two categories: the extraordinary or the ordinary. Furthermore, the extent to which each type of experience contributes to people's happiness depends on age. Extraordinary experiences, which are rare and fall outside daily routines, capture people's attention and endure in memories, affording happiness at any stage of life. Ordinary moments that make up everyday life tend to be overlooked when the future seems boundless; however, these ordinary experiences increasingly contribute to happiness 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 in their quest for happiness. Following the approach taken in Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) seminal work, we asked people to recall experiences that were either extraordinary or ordinary and measured their associated happiness (study 1A). Subsequent results found that outsiders accurately identified each experience type and predicted similar levels of associated happiness as those who culled the experience from their own life history (study 1B), and 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 affects intentions to purchase experiential products in addition to affecting individuals' 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 to define these terms for all participants with respect to frequency, it is still possible that responses were systematically biased, obscuring our ability to interpret responses and directly compare levels of happiness across experience types. We therefore interpret these happiness levels with caution. In particular, happiness from ordinary experiences may be understated, relative to extraordinary experiences. Notably, however, this makes the high level of happiness from ordinary experiences among older participants especially remarkable, since it was no different than that generated by potentially inherently superior extraordinary experiences.

Perhaps most importantly, this investigation reveals individuals' age to play a critical role in determining the relative happiness from each experience type. These findings contribute a temporal context to help reconcile the different perspectives proposed in prior research highlighting the benefits of special or collectible experiences (Keinan and Kivetz 2011; Zauberan et al. 2009) versus mundane experiences (Quoidbach, Berry, et al. 2010). Extraordinary experiences, which tend to be more special and collectible, produce greater happiness than ordinary experiences but only among

younger people who perceive an expansive future. Conversely, increased savoring of ordinary, mundane experiences is likely to naturally occur as people age.

Our exploration into potential reasons for this shift revealed self-definition to be critical (studies 3A and 3B). It seems that young people actively looking to define themselves find it particularly rewarding to accumulate extraordinary experiences that mark their progression through life milestones and that help them build an interesting experiential CV. Once people grow older and have established a better sense of who they are, 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. Notably, defining one's self through experiences becomes no less important with age; rather, the experiences that best define the self shift from the extraordinary to the ordinary over one's life span.

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 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). Though a shift in social goals (i.e., prioritizing close social relationships vs. novel social interactions; Carstensen 2006) seems to map onto our ordinary-extraordinary distinction, the results from 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 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 may still differ in their frequency of occurrence and potential impact on happiness.

Future work should investigate other dimensions of experience, as well as multiple dimensions of well-being. For instance, though recent work has found self-definition to be more critical to meaning than to happiness (Baumeister et al. 2013), in our studies happiness and meaning moved together and were combined into one indicator of how to best allocate one's time. Future research might more specifically examine which aspects of experience affect which dimensions of well-being, and when. In addition, because we asked participants to recall happy experiences, their responses may have been influenced by their normative beliefs about what experiences should result in greatest happiness (Wood and Bettman 2007). Future research could assess these potential selection issues by testing whether invoking happiness alters how people recall and categorize experiences.

## Managerial Implications

Brand managers are increasingly recognizing the advantages of experiential marketing (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). Because marketing practitioners assume extraordinary experiences to be inherently superior and higher impact than ordinary experiences (e.g., LaSalle and Britton 2003), they often try to transform ordinary consumption experiences into extraordinary experiences in hopes of increasing their 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 an additional follow-up study to 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 (Coke, Microsoft, McDonalds, Pepsi, and GE) versus extraordinary experiences (Disney, BMW, Mercedes, Nike, and LV; see table 3). (Google and Apple were rated among the top five for both experience types 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 indicate 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 and dimension of connection that is appropriate for their target segment.

## 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 their selection of experiences, *which* experiences should they choose to maximize their happiness? In reality, we are often faced with a similar choice: over the course of our daily lives, we must do our best to select experiences that are likely to make us 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.

## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

Both authors jointly managed the data collection and analyzed the data for all of the studies. Studies 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 3A, and 3B were conducted online using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Studies 1A and 1B were conducted in the summer of 2011; study 1C was conducted in the winter of 2013; study 2A was conducted in the summer of 2012; and studies 3A and 3B were conducted in the summer of 2013. Study 2B was conducted in the second author's class in the spring of 2012. Study 2C and the brand study reported in the General Discussion were conducted by research assistants at the Wharton Behavioral Lab in the fall of 2010.

## APPENDIX

### STUDY 1A: EXAMPLES

#### 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 frappuccino! It was perfect for that day, as it was really hot and muggy, and the drink was cold and icy. I love frappuccinos!!!

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

- 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 lukewarm 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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