EXTENDING THE SELF VIA EXPERIENCES:
UNDERMINING ASPECTS OF ONE'S SENSE OF SELF
IMPACTS THE DESIRE FOR UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

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Defining one’s self is an important but challenging task, due to the self’s intangible nature. One of the means to overcome this challenge is to extend the self to more tangible manifestations. The present studies examined whether unique experiences can promote such self-extensions, by assessing the relation between people’s self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundaries, and their desire for different ways of consuming unique experiences. Study 1 revealed significant negative correlations between participants’ self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, and their desire for social (e.g., sharing with others) and permanent aspects (e.g., documentation in pictures) of unique experiences. Studies 2–3 showed that experimentally undermining self-certainty increased participants’ desire for experiences’ social aspect, and undermining self–other boundary increased the desire for the consumption of unique experiences in general. Together, these results demonstrate that by functioning as sources of extension, unique experiences help affirm the self, thus serving as antidotes to damages to one’s sense of self.

Keywords: experiences, self-extension, self-certainty, self-other boundary

Descartes’s famous epiphany—“I think therefore I am”—helped solve a profound philosophical question, but instigated an enormous psychological one: if what I am is definable by my thoughts, and my thoughts are inferable only by me, how can I be certain of what I am? Sartre (1943/1956) offered a “solution” to this ques-
tion: People can extend their selves onto material and public things, and by doing so, substantiate their self. Following this insight, psychologists and social scientists have noted that people often treat their possessions as extensions of their selves—defining possessions not only as material objects, but also loved ones, and even less tangible items such as ideas and experiences (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; James, 1890; Winnicott, 1953).

One clear implication of this symbiotic relationship between self and its extensions is that loss of such extensions may hurt people’s sense of self, and vice-versa, damages to people’s sense of self may strengthen their ties to extensions. In particular in this latter regard, if certain aspects of one’s sense of self are undermined, one may cling to or pursue extensions that may help restore the injured self. Numerous studies have addressed this dynamic in the realm of material possessions (Bauer, Wilkie, Kim, & Bodenhausen, 2012; Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Norris, Lambert, DeWall, & Fincham, 2012). The present studies examine this dynamic in the realm of experiences. Specifically, we evaluate whether unique experiences—and particular characteristics of them—can function as antidotes for insults to different aspects of one’s sense of self.

ASPECTS OF A SENSE OF SELF

As implied above, an aspect of one’s sense of self that might be particularly critical for self-extension is self-certainty, that is, the degree of certainty one has about the attributes one possesses. Am I a creative person? Am I smart, optimistic, energetic? Being certain about who one is, is a non-trivial psychological challenge. In fact, uncertainty regarding the self is an uncomfortable, aversive, and sometimes paralyzing state, as people feel incapable of making decisions about how to behave and what to choose (Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990). Consequently, people are motivated to minimize their feelings of self-uncertainty (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Morrison, Johnson, & Wheeler, 2012). Studies indicate that self-certainty can be regained by a variety of means, such as by selecting tasks that may maximize certainty regarding a particular ability (Trope, 1979, 1980), having greater conviction about different aspects of the self (McGregor & Marigold, 2003), declaring extreme commitment to values and attitudes (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001), and strongly identifying with social groups (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Hogg et al., 2007).

A further way by which self-certainty can be boosted is via various extensions of one’s self, for example, possessions (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). For instance, Morrison and Johnson (2011) manipulated subjects’ sense of self-certainty by giving them bogus feedback regarding the ability to build a clear picture of who they are, based on their responses to different questionnaires. Morrison and Johnson found that in individualistic cultures, uncertainty regarding the self motivated people to perceive their material possessions as expressing their self to a large extent, and conversely, thinking of a possession which expresses the self increased self-certainty.
A second aspect of people’s sense of self that might be particularly critical for self-extension is the sense of clearness of the boundary between one’s self and the outside world. As Burris and Rempel (2010) described, the human sense of self is a product of a psychological boundary that separates the self from others, contains it, and protects it against external threats. This boundary is somewhat ambiguous and unclear, however: On the one hand, it can be manifested in the body’s physical contours, as the skin represents the place where the person ends and the rest of the world, and especially other people, begin. On the other hand, this boundary is not so clear and permanent, as there are different bodily apertures that allow constant exchange and flow of food, fluids, and microorganisms between the two (Rozin, Nemeroff, Horowitz, Gordon, & Voet, 1995; Waldby, Rosengarten, Treloar, & Fraser, 2004). Moreover, as Burris and Rempel (2004, 2010) point out, people’s distinction between the self and not-self involves not only the bodily, but also the social and symbolic aspects of the self. Specifically, one’s social relationships and one’s relations to objects, values, beliefs, and experiences, may all affect the basic differentiation between the self and not-self, which becomes a differentiation between the extended self (that is, me and what is mine) and not-self (that is, not me and not mine).

There are individual differences in people’s beliefs about the clearness of self–other boundaries, as some people have a clear definition of their bodily boundaries, whereas others are less clear about their differentiated identity (Fisher & Cleveland, 1958). Furthermore, there are also individual differences in the extent of people’s sensitivity to different types of threats to the self–other boundary (Burris & Rempel, 2004). In general, however, loss of differentiation markers may damage one’s sense of self, and conversely, damages to one’s sense of self–other boundary may prompt the desire for such markers so as to restore the clearness of the boundary (Burris & Rempel, 2004, 2010).

Taken together, to the extent that people extend their selves to material and public manifestations as means for substantiating the self, it seems that self-certainty and the clearness of one’s self–other boundary are aspects of one’s sense of self particularly susceptible to invite such extensions. That is, insults to these two aspects of the self likely incur attempts to restore them via self-extensions. As reviewed above, a handful of studies have examined this dynamic with regard to material objects as self-extensions (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Gao et al., 2009; Morrison & Johnson, 2011). Here we examine this dynamic with regard to another possible source of self-extension that is arguably even more central to one’s self-concept; namely, experiences.

EXPERIENCES AS SOURCES OF SELF-EXTENSIONS

Much empirical attention has been devoted lately to the benefits of experiences (e.g., going on a vacation), in comparison to material purchases (e.g., buying a watch; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Studies have shown that relative to material purchases, experiences bring greater and more lasting happiness and satisfaction
(Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), are more resistant to habituation (Nicalo, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009), and generate pleasure even before the consumption takes place (Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014). Within the category of experiences, extraordinary experiences (that is, once in a lifetime experiences, that are unusual and special) are especially beneficial, as young adults derive greater happiness from them than from ordinary everyday experiences (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014).

One of the main factors suggested to explain why experiences have such an impact on people’s well-being in comparison to material possessions has to do precisely with the centrality of experiences to people’s sense of self (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015). People view their experiences as more self-defining than material possessions (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), and hold their experiences much closer to their self-concept, being more likely to include them in their narratives regarding who they are (Keinen & Kivetz, 2011), and becoming upset if they were to lose their memory of an experience (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). In line with this conclusion, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner (2014) found that the value of extraordinary versus ordinary experiences varied with age, arguably because of their centrality to people’s sense of self. Specifically, although extraordinary experiences were seen as highly self-defining throughout life by both young and old people, ordinary experiences were seen as more self-defining by older people than by younger people, thus contributing to happiness as much as extraordinary experiences in the later stages of life. Relatedly, it has been found that compared to material objects, experiences are pursued more for their intrinsic (e.g., one’s own fulfillment), than for their extrinsic (e.g., impress others) value (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). For instance, people’s enjoyment of experiential purchases is less affected by social comparison than are material purchases (Howell & Hill, 2009).

A second factor raised as potentially contributing to the desirability of experiences is their ephemerality. In particular, the fact that experiences are transient in nature makes them more open to positive reinterpretations than material possessions (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Material possessions have a concrete and physical presence, and thus, it is less possible to embellish them or to think more highly of them over time. Experiences, in contrast, remain only as mental representations, and can therefore be positively reinterpreted over time, thus producing greater and more prolonged happiness (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015).

Crucially, although the “self-centrality” and “ephemerality” of experiences is what grants them great value in general, these two aspects may not be enough to affirm the self in the face of self-uncertainty and loss of clearness regarding self–other boundaries. In particular, feeling uncertain about the self or about the boundaries between oneself and the outside world, might call for more concrete and public manifestations of experiences in order to restore one’s sense of self. In other words, given that unique experiences are part of one’s self, they may not be enough in the face of threats to one’s self, and should lead one to extend the self via unique experiences, and by that, receive affirmation for the self. The present
studies will investigate two manners by which the self can be extended via unique experiences: making them public, and making them concrete.

WAYS OF EXTENDING THE SELF VIA EXPERIENCES

One way in which the self can be extended via experiences is by sharing the experiences with others, as others can serve as an important mirror through which people see their selves (Belk, 1988). In general, experiences help people feel more related and connected to others, fostering social relationships (Howell & Hill, 2009). Experiences also generate more favorable impressions in comparison to possessions, such that people tend to like others who are associated with experiences more than those who are associated with material purchases (van Boven et al., 2010). Finally, the possibility of telling others about one’s experience is crucial for one’s desire to partake in the experience, much more so than it is the case for material purchases (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015).

In the present study we test the possibility that this social aspect of experiences is particularly valued when a need for self-extension arises (Belk, 1988). In particular, we assess two ways of consuming experiences—primarily for one’s own (self) enjoyment versus for the experience’s social value—and test the hypothesis that damages to one’s self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundaries may make the social function of experiences even more salient. While both ways of consuming experiences can be useful remedies in this context, it is the social-focused aspect that can perhaps be of most value, since it is not part of the self that was damaged. Particularly, analogous to how people reduce uncertainty about an outside target by communicating about it and creating a shared reality with their audience (Kopietz, Hellmann, Higgins, & Echterhoff, 2010), we believe that when people feel uncertain about their self and its boundaries, they can turn with their unique experiences to others, and by doing so, receive affirmation for their self.

A second means for extending the self via experiences is by attempting to overcome their ephemerality, thus obtaining more concrete and permanent manifestations of one’s self (Belk, 2013). Indeed, with the spread of digital social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.), experiences are not only lived, but can also acquire a physical representation and be readily shared. And although this permanence and concreteness can undermine the ability to positively reinterpret the experience over time, the desire for permanent aspects of unique experiences may be particularly bolstered when the self is threatened. The present studies thus investigate also this possibility. Namely, we assess how much people value different ways of consuming experiences that vary in the extent of their ephemerality, and which way can better help cope with damages to the self. We hypothesize that consumption of unique experiences that remains in the ephemeral level might be less effective for validating the self, than consumption at a more concrete level, which can serve as a permanent and substantive reminder of the uniqueness of the self.
THE CURRENT STUDIES

The primary goal of the present studies was to examine the potential of unique experiences to promote self-extensions. To that end, we examined how two aspects of people's sense of self might be related to their desire for the consumption of unique experiences: (a) the degree to which people feel certain about who they are, and (b) the degree to which people feel the boundaries between their self and the outside world are clear.

We chose unique experiences specifically, because they have been found to be especially cherished and central to adults' self-concept (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Zauberman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009). In particular, unique experiences can help define the self–other boundary, as uniqueness enables people to distinguish themselves from others (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Snyder & Endelman, 1979). Moreover, it has been shown that acting in ways that enhance one's uniqueness (e.g., by holding original or minority opinions; Rios, Markman, Schroeder, & Dyczewski, 2014; Rios, Wheeler, & Miller, 2012) helps people regain their sense of self-certainty.

A secondary goal of the present studies was to examine whether particular ways of consuming unique experiences can function as extensions of the self and be especially effective in restoring people's sense of self. Specifically, we assessed two different ways of consuming experiences: (a) the extent to which the experience can be shared with others, and (b) the extent to which the experience can provide tangible and permanent evidence. We contrasted these two potential extensions of experiences with the "natural" form of experiencing them; that is, by and for oneself, and in an ephemeral manner. Thus we designed the study as in fact entailing two dimensions of experiences. The first—so-called "focal motivation"—dimension, was assessed by asking people whether they want to partake in the consumption of unique experiences mainly for their own sake, with no explicit mention of others (i.e., self-focus), or mainly for the sake of sharing the experience with others (i.e., social-focus). The second—ephemerality—dimension was assessed in terms of whether no evidence of the experience remained after its conclusion (e.g., the person simply participated in the experience), or instead, permanent evidence was produced (e.g., in the form of a picture or of social media feedback). Table 1 displays the $2 \times 2$ grid formed by the crossing of these two dimensions of experience, with brief descriptions of the questions used to assess each quadrant.

As an initial step toward our goal, in Study 1 we assessed correlations between participants' self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, and their desire for the different dimensions of a unique experience. In Studies 2 and 3, we experimentally manipulated each of the aspects of one's sense of self—self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary—and assessed their effects on participants' desire for the different dimensions of the consumption of experiences. As discussed above, we hypothesized that unique experiences could serve as antidotes to restore people's sense of self. Thus, our general hypotheses were that the less certainty about the self, and the less clear the boundary, the more people would want to consume unique experiences. More specific hypotheses had to do with whether particular aspects of the consumption of experiences would be more effective in
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having such restorative effect. In particular, although we did not have a clear hypothesis regarding which aspects of the unique experience would be preferred by participants in general, we did hypothesize that permanent and socially public aspects of experiences would independently be most effective in remedying low self-certainty and blurred self–other boundary.

STUDY 1

In Study 1, participants filled out questionnaires assessing their self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, and were then asked to rate their desire for different aspects of a unique experience that varied along two dimensions: focal motivation (self vs. social) and ephemerality (ephemeral vs. permanent). We predicted that less self-certainty and less clearness of self–other boundary would be positively related with participants’ desire for the different aspects of the unique experience, and specifically to the social-focused and permanent aspects.

METHOD

Participants. Participants were 80 adults (Mean age = 28.1, 55.0% female) who were recruited via advertisement among psychology students and Facebook, and participated in the study voluntarily.

Materials and Procedure. This study consisted of two sessions, both of which participants completed online, via the research software “Qualtrics.” In the first session, participants completed in random order two questionnaires, assessing self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, respectively: the Self-Concept Clarity scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996), which measures the extent to which people feel they have a consistent and coherent self-concept; and the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), which measures the degree to which people feel a clear differentiation between themselves and others. Ratings for each questionnaire were averaged into one index (SCC Cronbach’s α = .90; DSI Cronbach’s α = .81. See Appendix A for the complete questionnaires).

In the second session, approximately one week later, participants were asked to imagine a unique experience, according to the following instructions: “You have the opportunity to take a vacation on a desert island in the Pacific Ocean, where only few people have been in the past. You can go to the highest observation point

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<tr>
<th>Focal motivation</th>
<th>Self</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ephemerality</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ephemeral</td>
<td>Desire to participate in the experience</td>
<td>Desire to tell friends about the experience; Desire that friends will respond enthusiastically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Disappointment from the deletion of a picture from the experience</td>
<td>Desire to upload a picture to Facebook; Desire to receive likes for the picture</td>
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| **TABLE 1. The Different Dimensions of Experiences, and the Questions Used to Assess Them** |
on the island, look at the spectacular scenery and listen to the sounds of the ocean and birds, all the while knowing that only few people have seen the sights you are seeing.”

After reading these instructions, participants were asked to answer a series of questions in order to estimate their desire for this unique experience. The questions tapped into the different dimensions described earlier, that is, self- or social-focus, ephemeral or not: “How much would you like to participate in this unique experience?” (self/ephemeral); “How much would you be disappointed if a picture you took capturing yourself with the entire island in the background had been accidentally deleted from the camera, before you got a chance to save it?” (self/permanent); “How much would you want to tell your friends about this vacation while having dinner with them?” and, “How much would you want to tell your friends about this vacation knowing that they will respond enthusiastically to your story” (both, social/ephemeral); and finally, “How much would you like to upload that picture to Facebook (had it not been deleted)?” and, “How much would you want other people to ‘like’ your picture on Facebook?” (both, social/permanent). Participants responded on a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = very much). The correlation between the two “friends” questions ($r = .85, p < .001$), and between the two “Facebook” questions ($r = .82, p < .001$), were highly significant, suggesting that they indeed tapped into the same aspect (presumably, social/ephemeral and social/permanent, respectively). In light of that, we used the average score of the questions related to each aspect. For the Facebook questions, the answer “not relevant” was also available, for participants who do not use Facebook at all.

Finally, it should be noted that in this and in the other two studies, including gender in the analysis did not yield significant effects, and thus gender was removed from the final analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We first submitted participants’ answers to a 2 (focus: self vs. social) × 2 (ephemerality: ephemeral vs. permanent) within-subjects ANOVA. The analysis revealed that participants desired self-focused aspects of the unique experience ($M = 6.63, SD = .18$) more than socially focused aspects of the experience ($M = 5.87, SD = .21$), $F(1, 79) = 18.21, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .187$, and desired ephemeral aspects of the unique experience ($M = 7.10, SD = .18$) more than permanent aspects of the experience ($M = 5.40, SD = .24$), $F(1, 79) = 47.66, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .376$. The interaction between focus and ephemerality was not significant, $F(1, 79) = 3.61, p = .061, \eta^2_p = .044$.

For our main analyses, we assessed the correlations between participants’ self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, and their desire for different aspects of the unique experience. As can be seen in Table 2, there was a significant negative correlation between self-certainty and participants’ desire for the socially focused and permanent aspect of the experience, so that the less self-certainty participants had, the more they wanted to share their pictures from the experience on
Facebook and receive “likes.” Furthermore, significant negative correlations were also found between participants’ clearness of self–other boundary and their desire for the self-focused and permanent aspect of the experience, as well as the desire for both ephemeral and permanent socially focused aspects. Namely, the less clear participants were regarding the self–other boundary, the more they were disappointed from the deletion of their picture, and the more they wanted to share their experience with friends, receive feedback from them, share their pictures on Facebook, and receive “likes.” (Correlational analyses using only the DSI’s “fusion-with-other” subscale rendered almost identical results.)

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that in general, people prefer the self-focused aspects of unique experiences, as opposed to the socially focused ones, and the ephemeral aspects, as opposed to the permanent ones. This is in line with the results from the “experiential purchases” literature (Gilovich & Kumar, 2015), indicating that despite the ample technologies now available for “materializing” experiences, adults still prefer to consume experiences for intrinsic motives, and to maintain less tangible memories of those experiences. These general tendencies notwithstanding, the correlational findings provide preliminary evidence that people’s sense of self is differentially related to what people look for in unique experiences. In particular, self-uncertainty was associated with the desire for sharing experiences with others in a tangible fashion (i.e., via Facebook), and low clearness of self–other boundary was associated with a desire to have unique experiences publicly acknowledged in both tangible and intangible ways, and to have physical reminders for one’s own sake (i.e., having a picture).

STUDY 2

Whereas Study 1 examined the relations between characteristics of the self and the desire for unique experiences in a correlational way, Study 2 assessed this relation experimentally by manipulating participants’ self-certainty. The manipulation was similar to the one used by Morrison and Johnson (2011), and involved giving participants bogus feedback regarding the ability to build a clear personality profile based on their responses to several questionnaires. Following the manipulation, participants rated their desire for the different aspects of a unique experience. Based on the literature on self-extension, and the results of the first study, it was hypothesized that participants in the self-uncertainty condition

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Correlation coefficients</th>
<th>Self-focused, ephemeral aspect</th>
<th>Self-focused, permanent aspect</th>
<th>Socially focused, ephemeral aspect</th>
<th>Socially focused, permanent aspect</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-certainty</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.37**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearness of self-other boundary</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-0.24*</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
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Note. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01.
would rate their desire for the different aspects of the unique experience, and especially their desire for the permanent socially focused aspect, as higher than participants in the self-certainty condition. The rationale being that public and permanent acknowledgments of one’s unique experiences might be a particularly effective mean for re-establishing one’s injured sense of self-certainty.

METHOD

Participants. Participants were 81 adult volunteers (Mean age = 26.19, 71.6% female), recruited via advertisement among psychology students and Facebook. Four participants declined to participate in the second session, leaving 77 participants in the final sample. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions: self-uncertainty (N = 38) and self-certainty (N = 39).

Materials and Procedure. This study consisted of two sessions, both of which participants completed online, via the research software “Qualtrics.” In the first session, as part of the certainty manipulation, participants were informed that the study examines the relation between personal characteristics and behavior. For that purpose, the instructions continued, the study uses a new software with a sophisticated algorithm, designed to calculate participants’ response consistency and build their personality profile. Participants were told that this software would try and build such a profile based on their answers to the following questions, and that they will receive this profile in the second session of the study. The questions were the ones from the questionnaires used in the first session of Study 1.

In the second session, approximately one week after the first session, participants received an e-mail with a link referring them back to the “Qualtrics” software. There, they read a brief report regarding their response consistency, based allegedly on their responses from the first session. Participants in the self-uncertainty condition read that the consistency of their responses was not high enough to construct a clear picture of who they are. They further read that this is uncommon, because most of the time the computer program is able to construct a clear profile. Participants in the self-certainty condition read the opposite: That the consistency of their responses was high enough thus allowing the construction of a clear picture of who they are, and that this is uncommon because most of the time the computer program is unable to construct a clear profile.

After reading this bogus feedback, participants were asked to imagine the unique experience on the desert island and answer the same set of questions as in the previous study, with one difference: The question regarding the desire to tell friends about the experience knowing that they will respond enthusiastically to their story, was slightly rephrased so that participants were now asked how much they would want their friends to respond enthusiastically to their story. This was done so as to make the question structurally more similar to the other questions. After answering the questions, participants were debriefed.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We submitted participants’ answers to a 2 (condition: self-uncertainty vs. self-certainty) × 2 (focus: self vs. social) × 2 (ephemerality: ephemeral vs. permanent) mixed ANOVA. As in the previous study, the analysis revealed that participants desired self-focused aspects of the unique experience (\(M = 6.66, SD = .16\)) more than socially focused aspects of the experience (\(M = 5.76, SD = .19\)), \(F(1, 75) = 15.00, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .167\), and they desired ephemeral aspects of the unique experience (\(M = 7.23, SD = .14\)) more than permanent aspects of the experience (\(M = 5.19, SD = .21\)), \(F(1, 75) = 72.96, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .493\). Somewhat different from Study 1, here the analysis also revealed a significant two-way interaction between focus and ephemerality, \(F(1, 75) = 14.55, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .162\), indicating that the preference for self over socially focused aspects was reliable when aspects were permanent, \(t(76) = 4.69, p < .001\) (\(M = 6.01, SD = 2.20\), and \(M = 4.36, SD = 2.55\) for self and social, respectively), but not when aspects were ephemeral, \(t(76) = .64, p = .52\) (\(M = 7.31, SD = 1.86\), and \(M = 7.15, SD = 1.41\), respectively).

Most importantly, the analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction between condition and focus, \(F(1, 75) = 4.25, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .054\) (see Figure 1). Paired samples \(t\)-tests revealed that whereas participants in the self-certainty condition had a preference for the self (\(M = 6.86, SD = 1.49\)) over the socially focused aspects (\(M = 5.48, SD = 1.73\)), \(t(38) = 4.19, p < .001\), participants in the self-uncertainty condition did not have such a preference, desiring the self-focused aspects (\(M = 6.46, SD = 1.28\)) to the same extent as the socially focused ones (\(M = 6.04, SD = 1.58\)), \(t(37) = 1.28, p = .21\). There were no other significant effects.

In sum, these results demonstrate again that, in general, people prefer the self-focused aspects, as well as the ephemeral aspects of unique experiences. Furthermore and more importantly, the findings demonstrate that the above pattern regarding focal motivation occurs only when people’s sense of self-certainty is unharmed. Undermining people’s sense of certainty led them to desire self-focused
aspects of a unique experience just as much as the socially focused ones. In other words, the extent to which one enjoys an experience for its intrinsic value depends on one’s sense of self-certainty. When that is damaged, then others’ appreciation of the uniqueness of an experience becomes as important as one’s own, arguably as a means for reaffirming one’s self-certainty. It is in this sense that unique experiences can be a source for extensions of the self.

STUDY 3

Analogous to Study 2, Study 3 experimentally manipulated participants’ clearness of self–other boundary, and tested its influence on their desire for the different aspects of a unique experience. The study manipulated clearness of self–other boundary using a priming paragraph that emphasized blurred or clear boundaries. The hypothesis was that participants who read a paragraph emphasizing blurred boundaries, as opposed to clear boundaries, would seek unique experience to a larger extent, so as to reaffirm the boundary. Moreover, we hypothesized that having physical and public acknowledgments of the unique experiences would be especially effective means for accomplishing such reaffirmation.

METHOD

Participants. Participants were 74 adult volunteers (Mean age = 25.81, 68.9% female), recruited via advertisement among psychology students and Facebook. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two between-subjects conditions: blurred boundaries (N = 38) and clear boundaries (N = 36).

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed all experimental materials online from their home computers via the research software “Qualtrics.” At the beginning, they were informed that the study concerns the relation between memory abilities and personal preferences. Participants were then presented with a bogus memory assignment, asking them to read a paragraph and remember as many details as possible. This paragraph served as the priming for blurred or clear boundaries.

Participants in the blurred boundaries condition read a paragraph which emphasized the fact that people have blurred boundaries, whereas participants in the clear boundaries condition read a paragraph which emphasized the fact that people have clear boundaries (for the complete paragraphs, see Appendix B). The text for these paragraphs was drawn from Burris and Rempel’s (2004, 2010) definition of the amoebic self. The paragraphs were accompanied by pictures depicting the notions expressed in them.

After reading the paragraph, participants were asked a couple of questions regarding it, in order to ensure that they in fact read the paragraph and to help persuade them that this was a memory task. Participants were then told they would now address an unrelated subject: As in Study 2, they were asked to imagine the unique experience on the desert island and answer the same set of questions, after which they were debriefed.
EXTENDING THE SELF VIA EXPERIENCES

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We submitted participants’ answers to a 2 (condition: blurred boundaries vs. clear boundaries) × 2 (focus: self vs. social) × 2 (ephemerality: ephemeral vs. permanent) mixed ANOVA. As in the previous studies, the analysis revealed that participants desired self-focused aspects of the unique experience (M = 6.62, SD = .21) more than socially focused aspects of the experience (M = 5.73, SD = .24), F(1, 72) = 17.22, p < .001, η^2_p = .193, and desired ephemeral aspects of the unique experience (M = 7.05, SD = .19) more than permanent aspects of the experience (M = 5.29, SD = .27), F(1, 72) = 56.82, p < .001, η^2_p = .441. Here the interaction between these two factors was not significant.

More importantly, the analysis revealed a main effect for condition, so that overall, participants who read the paragraph emphasizing blurred boundaries desired all aspects of the unique experience (M = 6.59, SD = .28) more than participants who read the paragraph emphasizing clear boundaries (M = 5.76, SD = .29), F(1, 72) = 4.22, p < .05, η^2_p = .055.

These results provide further evidence that in general, people prefer the self-focused aspects as well as the ephemeral aspects of unique experiences. More importantly, they provide evidence that contesting participants’ clearness of self–other boundary increased their desire for a unique experience. In fact, the above effect held for all aspects of the unique experience, suggesting the strong capacity of unique experiences to restore the self–other boundary.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

One of the fundamental psychological challenges people face is attaining a clear definition of one’s self. One’s sense of self is just that, a “sense,” a hypothesis, an idea. This phenomenological characteristic of the self arguably drives people to pursue various means for reaffirming their sense of self. One such method is to extend the self (James, 1890; Sartre, 1943/1956). Much attention has been given to people’s tendency to extend the self onto material possessions, so as to substantiate the self (Belk, 1988; Chang & Arkin, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Ferraro et al., 2011; Gao et al., 2009). Since experiences have been found to be more connected to the self, and more beneficial for one’s well-being than material possessions (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), the primary goal of the present studies was to assess whether unique experiences can be a source for extensions of the self, and more specifically, whether they can help restore one’s sense of self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary.

The findings of all three studies indicate that indeed, unique experiences can be a source for extensions of the self. Study 1 revealed significant correlations between people’s sense of self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, and their desire for different ways of consuming unique experiences. Studies 2 and 3 further investigated these relations via experimental manipulations of these two aspects of the self, and showed that undermining the sense of certainty and clearness of
self–other boundary increased people’s desire for different ways of consumption of unique experiences. These findings indicate that unique experiences can in fact help cope with self-uncertainty and blurred boundaries, perhaps by serving as a mirror to one’s self of its uniqueness. If a person is uncertain about who he or she truly is as a singular individual, then doing ordinary activities is less likely to help attain certainty, especially at a younger age, when ordinary experiences are considered less self-defining (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Participating in unique experiences, however, might. It will be important in future work to more directly compare the effectiveness of unique versus ordinary experiences as sources for self-extension, and as a means for coping with damages to the self.

In a sense, the above conclusion can be taken to provide a further perspective on the value of experiential purchases (Gilovitch & Kumar, 2015). Not only are experiences closer to one’s identity, but they might in fact promote extensions of such identity. This perspective also helps explain why people become upset by the idea of losing their memory of an experience (Carter & Gilovich, 2012): what is lost is not only the memory of an experience, but a piece of one’s self. In this regard, the present studies also contributed to our understanding of what dimensions of experiences are especially desired. Specifically, regardless of people’s sense of self-certainty and clearness of self–other boundary, it was found that people’s default preferences were for aspects of the experience that were primarily focused on the self rather than on social feedback, and ephemeral over permanent ones. This default privileged status found with regard to self-focused aspects of experiences is in line with the claim that experiences are pursued more for their intrinsic value (such as the inherent enjoyment they provide) rather than extrinsic value (such as appearing attractive to others; Van Boven et al., 2010). Here, the highest desirability scores were obtained in response to the question about sheer participation in unique experiences. The default privileged status found with regard to ephemeral aspects of experiences is consistent with the idea that experiences are valued precisely because of their non-tangibility, which makes them open to positive reinterpretations and renewed narratives (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Importantly, as per the secondary goal of the present studies, we found that insults to self-certainty and clearness of the self–other boundary affected the pursuit of different aspects of a unique experience. Namely, in accordance with the significant correlation found in Study 1 between self-uncertainty and participants’ desire for the socially focused and permanent aspect of the experience, in Study 2 we found that experimentally undermining self-certainty led participants to desire socially focused aspects of an experience as much as self-focused ones. In comparison to the default pattern, it seems that losing the sense of self-certainty drove participants to search for an external—social—affirmation of their self. In turn, undermining the self–other boundary (as done in Study 3), did not change the overall default pattern of preference described above, and instead increased the desire for all aspects of a unique experience. This effect was similar to the significant correlations found in Study 1 between participants’ clearness of self–other boundary and almost all aspects, except for the self-focused ephemeral aspect.
One possible interpretation for the differential effects of the manipulations on people’s desire for the different aspects of experiences has to do with what aspects of the self the manipulations damaged. Specifically, undermining one’s self-certainty might have left people not knowing who they are, and thus invited turning to the outside world for an external affirmation of their self. In turn, undermining the clearness of the boundary between oneself and others might have threatened the very notion of being a differentiated entity. In that case, then, all aspects of the unique experience are valuable, as they all represent unique attributes one possesses but others do not. In this sense, it seems that while self-uncertainty relates to the question of “who I am,” clearness of self–other boundaries might relate to the question of “that I am.” In this light, the latter perhaps undermines most directly the sense of being a phenomenal self, that is, the subjective experience of being a distinct and holistic entity (Blanke & Metzinger, 2008).

In general, the finding that the social-focused aspects of unique experiences can help people cope with damages to the self (and especially the undermining of self-certainty), is in line with our hypothesis. It seems that in the face of a threat to the self, people indeed use their unique experiences to turn to others and receive an external affirmation for their self. However, differently from our hypothesis, the permanent aspects did not have a privileged status in the face of threat, a finding that was a bit puzzling. Although experiences are valued for their non-tangibility (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), it would seem that a “materialization” of experiences would make them more effective extensions of the self, as people would have concrete evidence of their uniqueness (Belk, 1988; Chang & Arkin, 2002; Gao et al., 2009; Morrison & Johnson, 2011). Moreover, in today’s industrialized societies, it would seem that people are constantly engaged in precisely such materialization of experiences, taking and sharing pictures of even trivial activities. In fact, communication with others via the Internet has been found to be more beneficial than face-to-face encounters, since it enables people to better present their true selves to others and even to like each other better (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Thus, the finding that insults to different aspects of the self did not lead participants to want to share unique experiences via Facebook any more than to share it with friends directly, remains a puzzle for future studies.

In fact, we believe the above puzzle perhaps points to a more general issue, having to do with the relation between one’s experiences and the extent to which one desires to record these experiences. As Kahneman (2011) suggested, there is often a dissociation between one’s “experiencing self” and one’s “remembering self.” Current technologies arguably allow approximating these two senses of self. It will be interesting to examine what factors—personal, demographic, cultural—affect the pursuit of such approximation.

Speculatively, we offer that one such factor might be age. The current studies included participants between the ages of 18–60, with most of them being in their 20s. Although social media is readily available and commonly used by young adults, social media usage—and perhaps especially instant sharing apps—is nowadays particularly prevalent among children and adolescents (O’Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). A more theoretical reason to examine this issue among adolescents
has to do with the developmental task they face, of forming an identity (Erikson, 1950). In other words, to the extent that unique experiences can be a source for extensions of the self—in the various ways explored here—it would seem that those engaged in defining their selves would be especially susceptible to their effect.

Furthermore, it would be extremely valuable to expand the investigation of the relation between self and experiences to even younger children. Already prior to entering school, children manifest some forms of extension of self to objects. For instance, they prefer their attachment objects over perfect duplicates (Hood & Bloom, 2008), and their willingness to part with favorite objects is affected by manipulations of their self-esteem (Diesendruck & Perez, 2015). These findings have been taken as evidence that self-extension might not be a “culturally learned” process, for instance, deriving from materialism or consumerism. We believe that investigating this process vis-à-vis experiences would offer further insights regarding its origins. In particular, if children, too, were to reveal the default preferences for ephemeral and self-focused aspects of experiences, we would be able to ascertain with greater confidence that self-extension is an instinctive process deriving not from the extrinsic value of the extensions, but from the epistemological challenge of knowing one’s self.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRES

The Self-Concept Clarity scale (SCC; Campbell et al., 1996):

The scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and includes the following items:

1. My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another.
2. One day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day I might have a different opinion.
3. I spend a lot of time wondering about what kind of person I really am.
4. Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.
5. When I think about the kind of person I have been in the past, I’m not sure what I was really like.
6. I seldom experience conflict between the different aspects of my personality.
7. Sometimes I think I know other people better than I know myself.
8. My beliefs about myself seem to change very frequently.
9. If I were asked to describe my personality, my description might end up being different from one day to another day.
10. Even if I wanted to, I don’t think that I would tell someone what I’m really like.
11. In general, I have a clear sense of who I am and what I am.
12. It is often hard for me to make up my mind about things because I don’t really know what I want.

Items 6 and 11 are reverse-scored items.
The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998):
The scale ranges from 1 (not at all true of me) to 6 (very true of me), and includes the following items:

1. People have remarked that I’m overly emotional.
2. I have difficulty expressing my feelings to people I care for.
3. I often feel inhibited around my family.
4. I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress.
5. I’m likely to smooth over or settle conflicts between two people whom I care about.
6. When someone close to me disappoints me, I withdraw from him or her for a time.
7. No matter what happens in my life, I know that I’ll never lose my sense of who I am.
8. I tend to distance myself when people get too close to me.
9. It has been said (or could be said) of me that I am still very attached to my parent(s).
10. I wish that I weren’t so emotional.
11. I usually do not change my behavior simply to please another person.
12. My spouse or partner could not tolerate it if I were to express to him or her my true feelings about some things.
13. Whenever there is a problem in my relationship, I’m anxious to get it settled right away.
14. At times my feelings get the best of me and I have trouble thinking clearly.
15. When I am having an argument with someone, I can separate my thoughts about the issue from my feelings about the person.
16. I’m often uncomfortable when people get too close to me.
17. It’s important for me to keep in touch with my parents regularly.
18. At times, I feel as if I’m riding an emotional roller coaster.
19. There’s no point in getting upset about things I cannot change.
20. I’m concerned about losing my independence in intimate relationships.
21. I’m overly sensitive to criticism.
22. When my spouse or partner is away for too long, I feel like I am missing a part of me.
23. I’m fairly self-accepting.
24. I often feel that my spouse or partner wants too much from me.
25. I try to live up to my parents’ expectations.
26. If I have had an argument with my spouse or partner, I tend to think about it all day.
27. I am able to say no to others even when I feel pressured by them.
28. When one of my relationships becomes very intense, I feel the urge to run away from it.
29. Argument with my parent(s) or sibling(s) can still make me feel awful.
30. If someone is upset with me, I can’t seem to let it go easily.
31. I’m less concerned that others approve of me than I am about doing what I think is right.
32. I would never consider turning to any of my family members for emotional support.
33. I find myself thinking a lot about my relationship with my spouse or partner.
34. I’m very sensitive to being hurt by others.
35. My self-esteem really depends on how others think of me.
36. When I’m with my spouse or partner, I often feel smothered.
37. I worry about people close to me getting sick, hurt, or upset.
38. I often wonder about the kind of impression I create.
39. When things go wrong, talking about them usually makes it worse.
40. I feel things more intensely than others do.
41. I usually do what I believe is right regardless of what others say.
42. Our relationship might be better if my spouse or partner would give me the space I need.
43. I tend to feel pretty stable under stress.

*Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 38, and 39 are reverse-scored items.*

The scale comprises four subscales: Emotional reactivity (items 1, 6, 10, 14, 18, 21, 26, 30, 34, 38, 40), I position (items 4, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 41, 43), emotional cutoff (items 2, 3, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 39, 42), and fusion with others (items 5, 9, 13, 17, 22, 25, 29, 33, 37).

**APPENDIX B: CLEARNESS OF SELF–OTHER BOUNDARY MANIPULATION**

The blurred boundaries condition: Participants in this condition read the following paragraph:

Humans face an important survival task—they must balance the inside of their body against the outside, separating the “in” from the “out.” In that sense, they resemble the amoeba: To survive, they need to allow food and oxygen to enter their body on the one hand, and refrain from the entrance of external threats and damaging chemicals on the other hand. For the amoeba, the membrane plays a significant part in the critical distinction of what enters and what stays outside, and thus, it protects the amoeba. For humans, the skin delineates to a certain extent the boundary between the inside and the outside. However, contrary to the amoeba, this boundary is not clear and is very much penetrable. Different body apertures blur at all times the distinction between the person and his environment and enable the passage of different molecules, fluids, and chemicals, so that food, blood, air, and microorganisms pass this boundary at all times. Try and think of a bus drive, for instance. During your bus drive, other people...
emit different types of gas, such as carbon dioxide, on top of other elements, such as microscopic bacteria, dust mite in the seats, different detergents, et cetera. People around you are sneezing, wiping their noses and coughing, so you are actually breathing non-clear air, and can probably catch the flu. You do not know the person sitting next to you, but you are basically sharing his germs, which were left in the air, in the seat he was sitting on, and the handle he touched. At all times your body is actually exposed to the passage of microorganisms, due to the fact that the boundary between your body and the environment is very penetrable. Due to this blurring of the boundaries, usually humans do not succeed in this task, and they are left without sufficient protection against external threats. As a result, when a person does not successfully differentiate the inside from the outside, he does not differentiate well between the self and non-self as well, and his sense of self is damaged.
The paragraph ended with a sentence suited to the participant’s gender, stating that research shows that men/women’s boundaries between the self and the environment are blurred to a larger extent than women/men’s, so that they feel less differentiated and more penetrable. Below the paragraph, participants saw a picture demonstrating the notion of blurred boundaries (see Figure 2a).

The clear boundaries condition: Participants in this condition read the following paragraph:

Humans face an important survival task—they must balance the inside of their body against the outside, separating the “in” from the “out.” In that sense, they resemble the amoeba: To survive, they need to allow food and oxygen to enter their body on the one hand, and refrain from the entrance of external threats and damaging chemicals on the other hand. For the amoeba, the membrane plays a significant part in the critical distinction of what enters and what stays outside, and thus, it protects the amoeba. For humans, the skin protects the body and regulates the entrance and exit of different substances to and from it. The skin in fact delineates the bodily boundaries in a very clear way, so that it protects the body’s balance while interacting with the environment, as well as protects it from external threats. Think of swallowing your saliva in your mouth, or actually do so. Then imagine spitting it into a glass and drinking it. The difference in your responses to these two situations demonstrates the fact that your boundaries are very clear: When your saliva is in your body, it is a part of you; but once it is outside, it is part of the outside environment, mixed with external microorganisms. Your body, which successfully differentiates the inside from the outside, responds with disgust, in order to protect you from the external threats it may carry. These threats are consistently around you, but this clear differentiation, and the skin’s protection of your body, help protect your body and do not enable penetration of external substances. Due to this clear distinction between the inside and the outside, people successfully differentiate themselves from others, and are protected from external threats. This differentiation between the self and non-self is in fact the basis for people’s sense of self.

The paragraph ended with a sentence suited to the participant’s gender, stating that research shows that men/women’s boundaries between the self and the environment are clear to a larger extent than women/men’s, so that they feel more differentiated and less penetrable. Below the paragraph, participants saw a picture demonstrating the notion of clear boundaries (see Figure 2b).
REFERENCES


