



# Moments that Last: Meaningfulness Slows Happiness Decay

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## Abstract

Previous research suggests that in general, happiness is fleeting, and the happiness gained from reflecting on a past experience decreases with time. However, little is known about how to change this trajectory. The results of four field and laboratory experiments reveal that one important factor in the trajectory of happiness is meaning, which can serve as both a moderator and mediator of happiness decay. In general, the happiness gained from reflecting on a past experience decays rapidly – sometimes even after a single day. However, these happiness decay patterns are mitigated when moments are more meaningful. Meaningfulness slows happiness decay, which in turn increases consumer purchase intent. Finally, this process can be facilitated by focusing on meaning through connection with others, which increases meaning, thereby decreasing happiness decay.

## Introduction

- In general, happiness is fleeting, and people adapt to positive experiences in their lives<sup>1-3</sup>, which we refer to as happiness decay
- We propose that meaning can slow this happiness decay, one form of hedonic adaptation
- This prediction is based on research showing that sentimental value (one type of meaning) slows satiation<sup>4</sup>, and prosocial spending (another type of meaningful action) leads to enduring happiness<sup>5</sup>
- In addition, individuals expect benefits of meaningful consumption to last longer<sup>6</sup>
- We focus on happy moments only, based on work suggesting that happy and unhappy moments are different and may effects flip based on valence<sup>7</sup>
- Across studies, we control for initial happiness to isolate the role of meaning

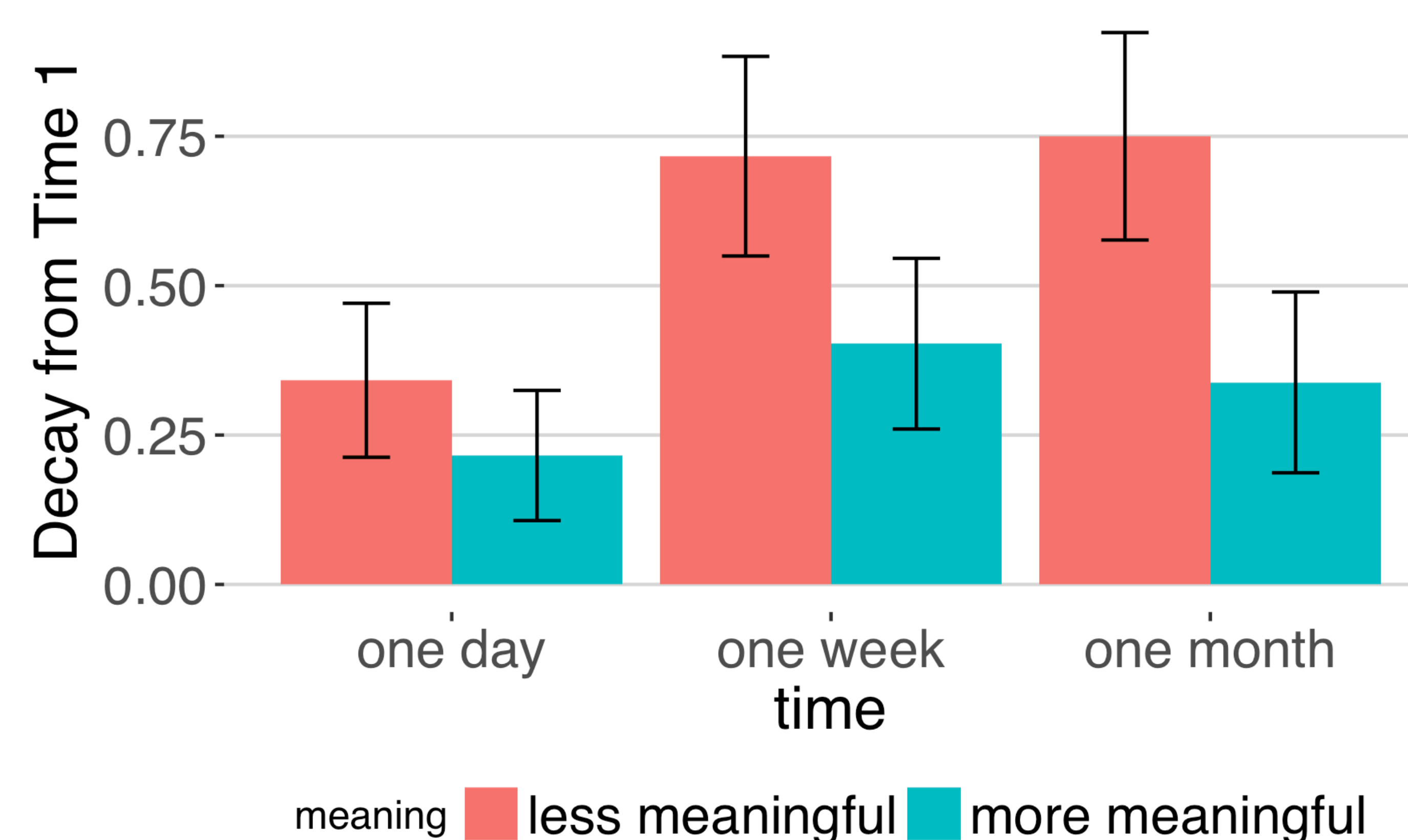
## Hypothesis

Meaning slows happiness decay (a form of hedonic adaptation), thereby improving consumer outcomes

## Study 1: Field Study

- Participants capture 5 moments during day (N = 84)
- Rate each moment on happiness and meaning
- One day, one week, and one month later, shown picture and asked how happy it makes them now
- Calculate happiness decay as decrease in happiness from original experience versus rating at later time point

## Results



## Study 2: Eating a Cupcake

- Study 2: Participants eat a cupcake in-lab (N = 121)
- Rate happiness and meaning during initial experience
- Then rate happiness looking back on moment, one week later

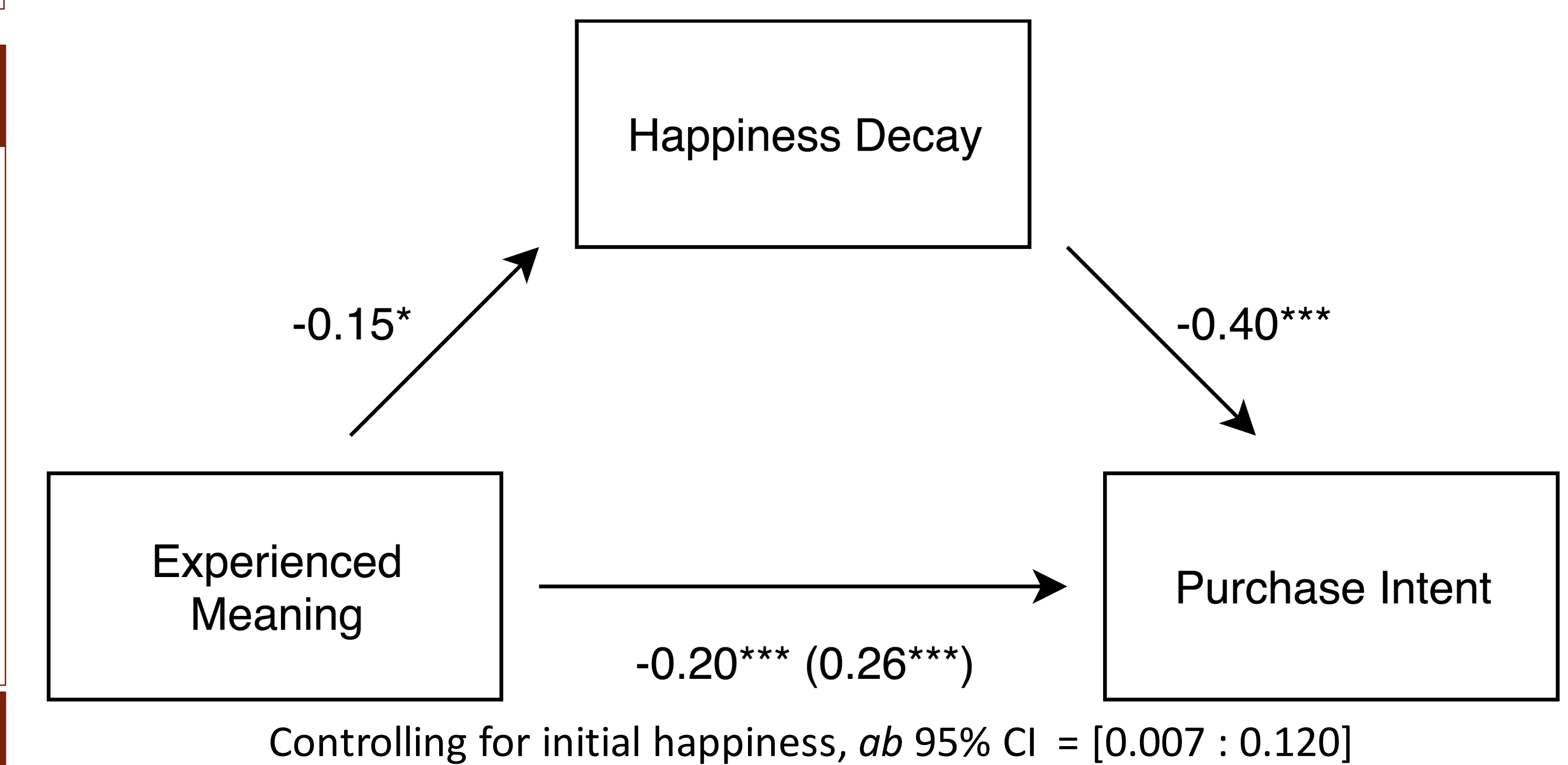
## Results



## Study 3: Video Advertisement

- MTurkers watch a GoPro video ad (N = 335)
- Add purchase intent measure (one week later)

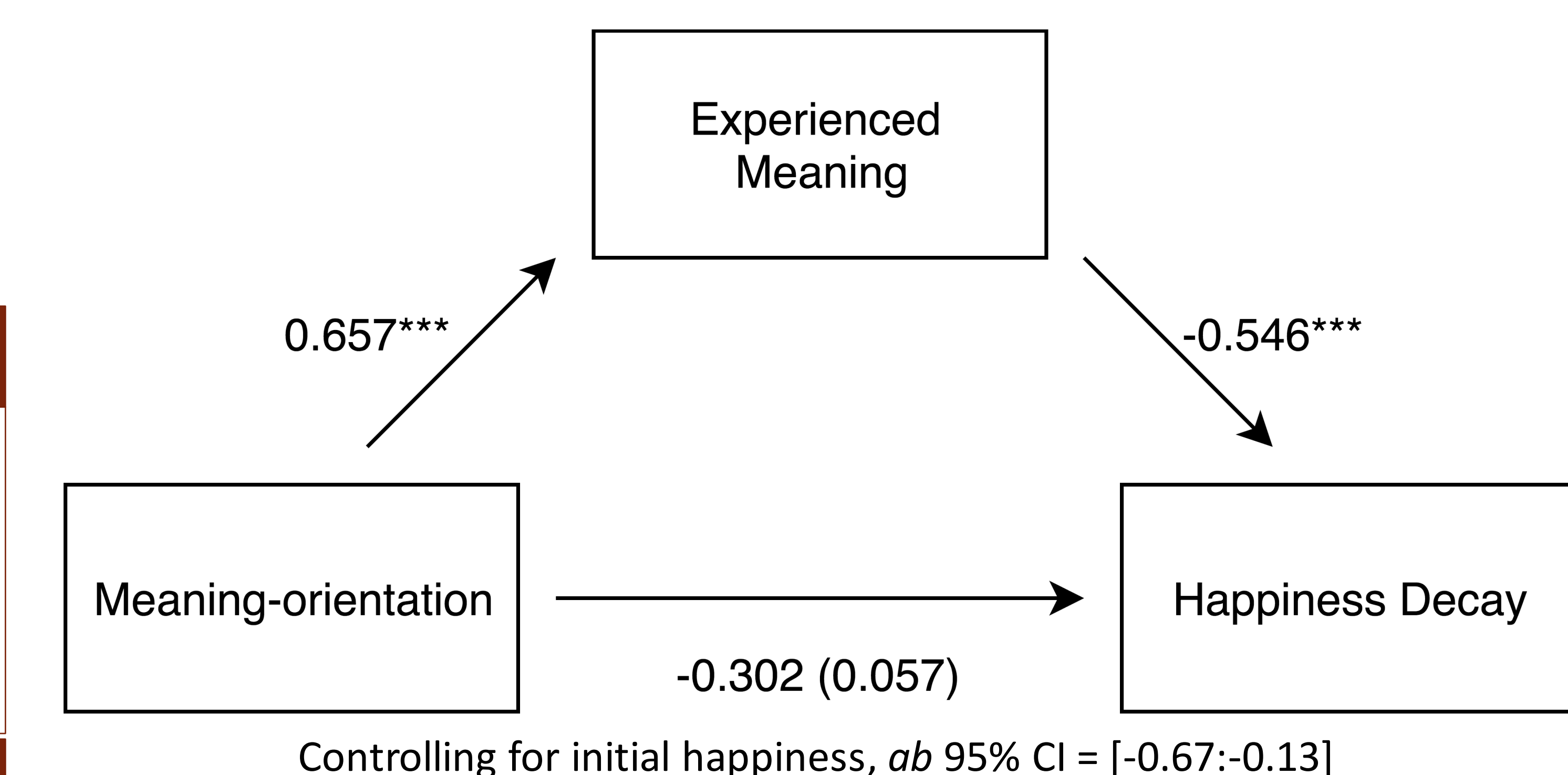
## Results



## Study 4: Facebook

- Participants (N = 141) come into the lab and spend 5 minutes on facebook, prompted to focus on how their time on facebook is happy, meaningful, or both.
- Complete online survey immediately after, and 1 week later

## Results



## Discussion

- Present happiness garnered from remembering a past experience decays with time
- Happiness decay depends on meaningfulness, whereby meaningful happy experiences show less decay than non-meaningful happy experiences
- Greater meaningfulness during an advertisement slows happiness decay, thereby increasing purchase intent
- A meaning orientation increases experienced meaningfulness, in turn slowing happiness decay

## Contact

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