

“Qwantify” Research Study by Northeastern University Seeks Thousands of Public Participants

App-based study asks: What do you want — and will it make you happy?

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA, January 9, 2017 /PRNewswire/ -- The Mind & Life Institute, in partnership with Northeastern University, announced today the launch of Qwantify, a scientific research study seeking thousands of public participants to download and use a free app to answer the question, “What do you want, right now?”

Everyone desires something. You might want a new smartphone, a slice of pizza, or a hug from a friend. Desire, or “wanting,” is a basic human motivation that leads us to do all kinds of things, whether it’s as minor as grabbing a cup of coffee or as major as making a career change. Desire can lead to great satisfaction in life, or it can spiral out of control leading to situations like addiction. Dr. Wendy Hasenkamp, science director at the Mind & Life Institute, said, “Many of us have ideas about what we think will make us happy. But often, people’s beliefs about themselves don’t match up with their patterns of daily experience. And when it comes to the things we want, which motivates our behavior, this can have major impacts on well-being.” Hasenkamp is one of the investigators for the Qwantify project, along with Dr. Christy Wilson-Mendenhall, Dr. Paul Condon and Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett from Northeastern University.

The new mobile app, developed by London-based Psychological Technologies, is simple to use and is available for free to anyone who wants to participate in the study. There is no obligation and all data collected is completely anonymous. Study data is collected in real time when participants answer a few simple questions each day, such as “Do you *want* anything right now?” “What emotions are you feeling?” or “Are you with other people?” As data is gathered, participants can view their own personal statistics on charts and graphs, offering a way to learn about their own wants and desires. At the the same time, information is aggregated from all participants into massive data sets for analysis by the research team. It generally takes about two weeks to complete the study, but users can continue to use the app as long as they like.

“Everyone who uses the Qwantify app is helping the research team to better understand the dynamics of wanting; but the app also provides helpful insights to each person,” said Condon. “Over the course of the study, participants learn about the patterns of their own cravings and desires. Even without the data analysis, many people find that just tuning into what they are experiencing in the moment provides valuable personal insights, and increases awareness of wanting and its effects.”

Through the Qwantify app, researchers are able to study the relationships between wanting and happiness on a scale not previously available in the lab alone. “Wanting is deeply personal, and can vary a great deal from person to person. Science does not know enough about this variation. As researchers, we realize that laboratory studies take place in a very specific context. An equally important part of building a science of the mind is engaging in research that sheds light on the intricacies of what daily life is like for people across the country and the world,” said

Wilson-Mendenhall. “There’s a huge opportunity for discovery here.” Thanks to this technology, the data can now include the real-world experiences and desires of thousands of people, making the outcomes more accurate and relevant across diverse populations.

Questions that the Qwantify study will explore include:

- What kinds of desires do people experience most frequently?
- How is wanting related to things like stress and loneliness, or self-esteem and happiness?
- Do different people experience wanting differently?
- How is wanting affected by your social situation?
- What emotional states are people trying to achieve through wanting?

The Northeastern University researchers on the Qwantify project are based in the lab of psychologist and neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Feldman Barrett, whose theory of emotion is based on a deeper understanding of the mind, body and brain. “You are the architect of your own experience,” said Barrett. “You are not at the mercy of your emotions. The more you know about your wants and desires, the better equipped you are to design the kind of life you want to lead.” Barrett’s new book *“How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain”* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, March 7, 2017) explores her theory and latest research in the new science of emotion, mind, and brain, and shares intriguing practical applications for health, the legal system, our relationships with one another, and what it means to be human. Her research overturns the widely-held belief that emotions are hard-wired reactions within the brain, instead showing that emotion is constructed in the moment by core systems interacting across the whole brain, aided by a lifetime of learning.

The real-world, moment-to-moment nature of Qwantify’s app-based sampling will help scientists to understand this complex landscape when it comes to human desire — and its relationship to well-being. The study is now live, and the Qwantify app is freely available for iPhone or Android through the App Store or Google Play. More information can be found at <http://qwantify.org>.

About the Mind & Life Institute:

The Mind & Life Institute is a nonprofit organization founded in 1991 to establish the field of Contemplative Sciences. The institute provides a home for scholars and scientists from around the world who incorporate contemplative practices into their various fields of research. Mind & Life supports and unifies this community by funding research projects and think tanks, and by hosting academic conferences and dialogues with contemplative leaders like the Dalai Lama. Our mission is to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing by integrating scientific research with contemplative practices such as mindfulness, compassion and other meditative traditions. For more information, please visit <https://www.mindandlife.org>.

About Dr. Feldman Barrett and Northeastern University’s Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory:

Lisa Feldman Barrett, PhD, is a University Distinguished Professor of Psychology at Northeastern University, with appointments at Harvard Medical school and Massachusetts General Hospital in Psychiatry and Radiology. She received an NIH Director's Pioneer Award for her research on emotion in the brain. Her research focuses on the nature of emotion, and she has crafted the theory of constructed emotion as a means of understanding how brain and body create a mind. For a detailed list of current publications, please visit: <http://www.affective-science.org>

About Psychological Technologies:

PSYT creates real-time data-collection apps designed to capture academic research metrics using the experience sampling method (ESM) and ecological momentary assessment (EMA). For more information, please visit <http://www.psynt.co.uk/>

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