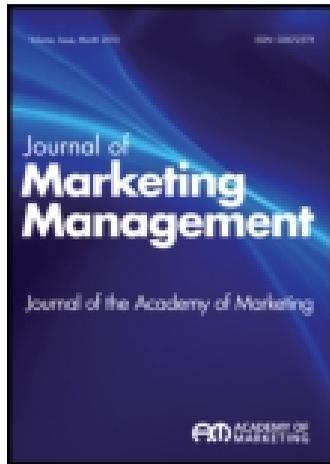


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### Materialism: the good, the bad, and the ugly

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## Materialism: the good, the bad, and the ugly

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**Abstract** Materialism has a generally held connotation that is associated with character deficiencies, self-centeredness, and unhappiness, and most extant research views materialism as having a negative influence on well-being. In this article, we review and synthesise research that supports both positive and negative outcomes of behaviours associated with materialism. We conceptualise materialism in terms of the motives underlying materialistic behaviour, and situate our review and synthesis of materialism research within this context. In doing so, we document the utility of a motives-based view of materialism and propose research agendas that arise from this motives-based perspective.

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**Keywords** materialism; well-being; motives; compensatory consumption; self-identity; prosocial behaviour

Materialism is a complex construct. Although the term materialism is generally well known (at least in Western societies), and most people may have an intuitive feel for what it means, scholarly definitions of materialism vary widely. Examples include conceptualisation as a personal value (Richins & Dawson, 1992), a personality trait (Belk, 1985), an extrinsic motivation focus (Kasser & Ryan, 1993), a preference for products over experiences (van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), and a focus on lower-order needs at the expense of higher-order needs (Inglehart, 1990), just to name a few. Despite these variations, however, a common thread runs through them all: materialism, however defined, is generally considered a stable trait variable that is detrimental to an individual's well-being.

We suggest that such a narrow view of materialism may constrain the ability to understand the multifaceted functions of materialism in at least three interrelated ways. First, the generally *a priori* assumption that materialism is problematic and results in diminished well-being potentially undermines research on possible positive effects of materialism. Second, viewing materialism as a stable trait variable has difficulty accommodating research that investigates short-term, situational effects that are often demonstrated in experimental contexts. Third, viewing materialism only as an individual difference variable lacks a specific focus on the possible underlying motivational processes that may mediate or moderate the relation between materialism and well-being.

The purpose of this article is to address these issues by (a) articulating a motives-based conceptualisation of materialism, (b) reviewing and synthesising extant research on materialism and well-being within this motives-based framework, and (c) providing directions for future research that follow from this framework. We highlight the utility of the motives-based framework for better understanding the complex relation between materialism and well-being, and in particular note that this framework allows for the consideration of possible positive effects of materialism and the inclusion of research that is not traditionally considered materialism research (e.g. compensatory consumption, prosocial behaviour). The proposed research directions are intended to better articulate the processes underlying the relation between materialism and well-being, a step that is critical for developing transformative guidelines and policies.

Accordingly, we have organised the discussion around these possible positive and negative effects of materialism, but we also introduce a third and related aspect of materialism: people's perceptions of others' (apparently) materialistic behaviour. We refer to this composite discussion as the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of materialism (with apologies to Sergio Leone, director of the film with the same name). The good and bad descriptors are straightforward. The ugly descriptor refers to the relatively universal negative perception, at least in Western societies, of materialism. We juxtapose this perception with research showing that consumers nevertheless use materialism to signal desired characteristics to others. This aspect of materialism – the apparent disconnect between the intended signals and their actual reception – has implications for why materialistic behaviour on the part of actors may not achieve, or may even be orthogonal to, the goals that motivate the behaviour.

One final point we would like to make: As noted in the introduction to this special issue, this article emanated from the 2013 Transformative Consumer Research (TCR)

workshop. The intention of the workshop, and this article that follows, is to stimulate new thinking, and thus ideally new research, on aspects of materialism. Workshops by definition are idea incubators. They are intended to give birth to new research questions more than they are designed to answer them. Consequently, what they produce is necessarily incomplete. This article is no exception.

## Defining materialism

As just noted, there are multiple definitions of and perspectives on materialism (values, needs, motives, etc.). The synthesis of research on materialism that we provide here is motivated by the definition that emanated from the previous TCR workshop on materialism in 2011. This definition conceptualises materialism in terms of the symbolic motives<sup>2</sup> that underlie behaviour: ‘Materialism is the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences, or relationships that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic value’ (Shrum et al., 2013, p. 1180). The differentiating aspects of this definition from others are that it (a) specifies the motivational underpinnings of materialism with respect to the construction and maintenance of self-identity; (b) defines materialism in terms of acquisition, which includes not only buying, but also acquisition through gifts, inheritances, and other non-purchase means; (c) incorporates the use of the acquisition (e.g. display of a purchase); (d) includes not only products and services, but also experiences (e.g. vacations, sporting events; Belk, 1982) and relationships (e.g. friendships, marriages; Belk, 1982); and (e) refers to the symbolic nature of the acquisitions, and thus the extent to which the acquisitions and their use serve as a signal, whether to the self or to others (what Belk, 1988, refers to as the *extended self*).

In this review, we offer a further expansion of this definition beyond acquisition to include the disposition of possessions (including money given for charitable donations) and the sharing of possessions. Including disposition accounts for the accumulating literature on the motivations underlying charitable donations and other prosocial behaviours (Grace & Griffin, 2009). This perspective situates charitable giving within the same category as conspicuous consumption: it can serve self- or other-signalling functions in the same way that acquisitions do. The same reasoning applies to sharing. Although sharing involves both disposition and acquisition, it is generally not viewed in terms of a typical (equal) exchange, but rather refers to non-reciprocal pooling of resources resulting in joint ownership without reciprocal expectations (Belk, 2010; Gentina, 2014; Gentina & Fosse-Gomez, 2012).

In the following sections, we review and synthesise research on the effects of materialism on well-being, within the context of the good, bad, and ugly. We frame the review in terms of the motives underlying materialism and the implications of this frame for understanding materialism effects. However, this review is admittedly imbalanced, with the good section representing a sizeable proportion of the whole.

<sup>2</sup>The terms motives, needs, and goals are often used interchangeably (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010; Maslow, 1943; Shrum et al., 2013), and for simplicity we do so in this paper. However, as one example for clarification, needs may refer to essential aspects of the self (e.g. need for self-esteem, need to belong, need for control, etc.), motives may refer to desires to repair threatened needs, and goals may refer to a broader interest in maximising happiness and well-being.

This imbalance arises for these reasons. First, the research we discuss in the good section is not traditionally considered within the context of materialism research, but represents a framing of the motives underlying consumption within our conceptualisation of materialism as a motive-driven behaviour. Thus, this section provides a new perspective on materialism research. Second, research on the bad aspect of materialism is ubiquitous. Thus, we focus primarily on the latest research, with an emphasis on methodologies that can address issues of causality (e.g. longitudinal and experimental designs) and underlying processes (e.g. motivations). Third, the ugly aspect is a relatively novel extension of our focus on the underlying motivations for materialistic behaviour. Rather than a focus on the direct effects of materialistic behaviour and their underlying motives, we look at the apparent disconnect between those underlying motives and their actual effects on others. Although this section is admittedly impoverished relative to the other sections, it represents a unique approach to materialism that builds on emerging research that emphasises the motives underlying materialistic behaviour. Within each section, we review new research, and at the end of each section provide a research synthesis and propose future research agendas.

## **The good: positive utility of materialistic behaviour**

The potentially positive aspect of materialism is seldom examined. In the following sections, we discuss research that suggests how materialism may have at least short-term benefits under certain conditions. The short-term reference is to the fact that most of this research is experimental, and thus situationally induced. Research that has linked materialism with lower well-being has predominantly focused on the relation between stable materialistic traits and values, and longer-term measures of well-being such as happiness, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and quality of life (cf. Belk, 1985; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Nairn & Ipsos, 2011; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Roberts & Clement, 2007). However, to the extent that materialistic behaviour serves signalling purposes (self- or other-signalling), materialistic behaviour may at times help individuals achieve their short-term objectives.

### ***Compensatory consumption***

Compensatory consumption refers to consumption that is motivated by self-threats (Rucker & Galinsky, 2013) that result when one's self-concept is challenged (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Campbell & Sedikides, 1999). Examples include threats to both broad fundamental human needs (e.g. need to belong, power and control, self-esteem, meaningful existence; for reviews, see Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2013; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollidge, & Scabini, 2006; Williams, 2007), as well as more specific aspects of the self that may be important to an individual (e.g. intelligence, athletic ability, an exciting personality; Crocker & Knight, 2005; Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). When people experience self-threats, they attempt to restore those particular aspects of self-worth, and one way to accomplish this is through consumption. People use symbolic products to achieve or maintain their own identity, as well as to signal their desired identity to others (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). In other words, consumers engage in materialistic consumption because they believe (at least implicitly) that it will raise their self-esteem, approval, or sense of power and control.

Research across a variety of domains has documented this effect. For example, when people feel threats to relational needs such as belongingness that result from being socially excluded, they compensate by attempting to reconnect with others by spending money on products that signify group membership and by adjusting their spending to conform to the attitudes of the people with whom they anticipate interacting (Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). They also show greater preferences for nostalgic products, which provide a reconnection with the past and shared consumption experiences (Loveland, Smeesters, & Mandel, 2010), and donate more money to charitable causes as a means of societal affiliation (Lee & Shrum, 2012), compared to those who are not socially excluded.

Threats to other self-needs, such as efficacy needs (e.g. power, control, meaningful existence), can result in quite different compensatory responses than threats to relational needs. When people feel threats to personal power or control, they attempt to repair those needs through consumption associated with power and status. Thus, when people feel threats to personal power, they are willing to pay more for high-status products (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and have a greater preference for conspicuous, high-status logos than those who do not feel such threats to their power (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009). Similarly, when people experience threats to their feelings of a meaningful existence (e.g. a threat to their mortality), they report greater interest in acquiring luxury products (Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002; Mandel & Heine, 1999), engage in more conspicuous consumption (Lee & Shrum, 2012), and form stronger connections to brands (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009).

Self-threats can also occur through mere observation of others, and these others need not be confined to real people. For example, exposure to idealised images of female models in ads lowers girls' and women's self-esteem (Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005; Smeesters & Mandel, 2006) and satisfaction with their physical appearance (Hawkins, Richards, MacGranley, & Stein, 2004; Richins, 1991). Although this body of research has not tested the compensatory aspect of self-threat, other research suggests that people may compensate in reaction to such media-related self-threats. For example, individuals who compare themselves to more successful, similar others express more interest in purchasing high-status, luxury brands than those who compare themselves to either dissimilar or less successful others (Mandel, Petrova, & Cialdini, 2006).

Although compensatory consumption is generally thought of in terms of reactions to self-threats, it can also occur in anticipation of self-threats, and thus can be proactive as well as reactive. For example, when self-threats (e.g. to intelligence) are anticipated in impending social interactions, people are willing to pay more for products that bolster the intelligence component (e.g. a dictionary set) of their identity prior to the anticipated self-threat (Kim & Rucker, 2012).

One common factor across most of the compensatory consumption research is that the consumption is domain-specific (i.e. related to repairing the particular need that is threatened). However, that need not be the case, as consumption can serve other compensatory functions that help people cope with self-threats. For example, when the opportunity to compensate in the domain of the self-threat (e.g. mortality salience) is not available, people may compensate in other ways that distract them from the self-threat (e.g. eating cookies; Mandel & Smeesters, 2008). In addition, engaging in general self-affirmation (e.g. describing a time in which one has acted in a self-consistent way; Shira & Martin, 2005) can also compensate for threats to specific needs (Gao et al., 2009). These results are consistent with the concept of *fluid*

*compensation* (Steele, 1988), in which individuals cope with particular self-threats by reaffirming general self-integrity (see also Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006).

That said, evidence for across-domain compensatory consumption is far from consistent. For example, in a series of studies, Lee and colleagues (Lee & Shrum, 2012; Lee, Shrum, & Yi, 2014) found that threats to particular aspects of the self (e.g. self-esteem) produced expected within-domain compensatory reactions to bolster self-esteem (increased charitable donations). However, providing the opportunity to compensate in other domains (e.g. restoring a sense of personal power through conspicuous consumption or directly boosting a sense of personal power) had no effects, which suggests no across-domain compensation, at least for this particular self-threat.

Although compensatory consumption effects are well-established, one important question is whether compensatory consumption actually pays off (Mandel et al., 2013). That is, even though people may react in predictable ways to self-threats as a means of bolstering their self-identity, those efforts may not be successful. If not, such compensatory consumption may have a negative effect on well-being. Some research supports a restorative effect. When participants were primed with self-doubt about a certain trait (e.g. exciting person), they compensated by choosing products or experiences related to excitement (e.g. sky-diving) relative to those who were primed with confidence (Gao et al., 2009). Importantly, the self-view confidence of those who were initially threatened was significantly increased after they chose the compensatory product or service. Similarly, participants whose sense of personal power was threatened and compensated by choosing a high-status (vs. low-status) product experienced greater feelings of personal power (Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky, 2011). These two sets of findings on the utility of compensatory consumption suggest that materialism may have positive utility for individuals, at least under certain circumstances.

### ***Utility of materialism in the absence of self-threats***

We have proposed that materialistic behaviours can have both other- and self-signalling motivations, and that these motivations may have utility for consumers. However, self-threat and the need to bolster fragile aspects of the self cannot alone account for the motivations for materialistic behaviour. The prevalence of materialistic behaviour suggests that there may be other perceived or actual positive effects. Thus, although there is a substantial literature on the negative relation between materialism and well-being, the question still remains: Why, if materialism fails in obtaining life satisfaction, is it so alluring?

One possibility is that many people believe that materialism will make them happier. In fact, one of Richins and Dawson's (1992) three subscales of materialism measures the belief that one's possessions will make one happy, and more will make one happier. A second possibility is that even though materialists report lower levels of well-being than non-materialists, they may actually benefit more from materialistic purchases. In particular, materialistic individuals may experience a (short-term) increase in their subjective well-being after the consumption of luxury items. For example, in a large-scale survey of Belgians, Hudders and Pandelaere (2012) showed that luxury consumption increases life satisfaction, especially for materialistic consumers. Moreover, although there was a direct negative relation between materialism and both affective and cognitive well-being (consistent with extant research), the indirect effect via luxury consumption was positive. Thus, materialists may experience more positive affect, less negative affect, and greater satisfaction with life when consuming luxury brands.

These short-term rewards may motivate materialistic people to continue pursuing their materialistic goals, despite the potential long-term adverse effects of materialistic consumption. Materialists, relative to non-materialists, experience stronger positive emotions before purchasing a product because of expectations that the purchase will transform their lives (Richins, 2013). In other words, it is not only the actual outcome that determines the value of a good, but also the expectations (appearance, hedonic, efficacy, relationship, and self-transformation, etc.) that come with it.

Directly increasing happiness through consumption may not always be the primary motivation of materialists, however. They may also care about other desirable outcomes such as status, fame, or the admiration of others (Kasser, 2002), or their relative position within their society or reference group (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). Status is valued intrinsically (Huberman, Loch, & Öncüler, 2004), feels good (Ivanic & Nunes, 2009), and is related to the ability to access valuable resources (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1989), or the public consumption of luxury products, may be one strategy for gaining status. Conspicuous consumption is particularly appealing to materialists (Richins, 1994a; Wong, 1997), who are especially concerned with the symbolic meaning of products (Richins, 1994b). Materialistic individuals prefer products that are luxurious, prestigious, and visible to others because they help to signal status or membership in a social group (Richins, 1994a, 1994b; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Moreover, the products may symbolise personal characteristics, such as taste (Berger & Ward, 2010) or the importance of certain values (Ahuvia & Wong, 1995).

Results from other streams of research also suggest such materialistic behaviours may in fact be fruitful. For example, conspicuous consumption may produce desirable outcomes in the context of interpersonal relationships and interactions. Conspicuous displays of status may elicit favourable treatments from negotiation partners, such as higher offers in a dictator game (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011) or submissive behaviour (Fennis, 2008). Research in evolutionary psychology also suggests that conspicuous consumption may be beneficial, especially for men who wish to attract a desirable mating partner (e.g. Griskevicius et al., 2007; Janssens et al., 2011). Although women tend to view men's conspicuous consumption as a signal of short-term mating goals, making those men less appealing as long-term partners (Sundie, Ward, Beal, Chin, & Geiger-Oneto, 2009), during ovulation women are particularly attentive to signals of status and wealth (Durante, Griskevicius, Cantú, & Simpson, 2014; Lens, Driesmans, Pandelaere, & Janssens, 2012). Thus, because women shift to shorter-term mating goals during ovulation (Gangestad, Garver-Apgar, Simpson, & Cousins, 2007), conspicuous signals of wealth and status may raise the mating success of men who display them.

Collectively, these findings suggest that the utility of materialism may depend on the motive underlying the behaviour, at least under specific situations. Under certain conditions, materialism may have positive effects even when it is measured as a chronic trait or value orientation. For example, although materialism measured with the Richins and Dawson (1992) material values scale consistently shows a negative correlation between overall materialism and life satisfaction, when the scale is decomposed into its three subscales (happiness, success, and centrality), the subscales do not uniformly predict decreased well-being (for a review, see Lens, Pandelaere, Shrum, & Lee, 2012). Although happiness materialism (the belief that more possessions will increase happiness) is consistently related to lower levels of life satisfaction, success materialism (the belief that possessions are indicators of success)

tends to be uncorrelated with life satisfaction, and centrality (the general importance of possessions in one's life) tends to be positively correlated with life satisfaction. Somewhat similar findings were recently reported by Pieters (2013): levels of the happiness and success dimensions of materialism were positively correlated with loneliness, but the centrality dimension was negatively correlated with loneliness.

To the extent that the different dimensions of materialism may reflect different underlying motivations (Lens et al., 2012), the utility of materialistic goal pursuit (and consequent behaviour) may be a function of the underlying motives. This notion is consistent with findings by Srivastava, Locke, and Bartol (2001), who showed that the relation between financial aspirations and well-being depends on the underlying motives (cf. Carver & Baird, 1998; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). Motives such as family support, security, and pride were positively correlated with subjective well-being, whereas motives such as social comparison and overcoming self-doubt were negatively correlated with subjective well-being. Carver and Baird (1998) reported similar relations.

### ***Altruistic and prosocial behaviours***

Although people generally have an intuitive feel for what constitutes materialistic consumption, and there are surely cultural differences in these perceptions, there are arguably more commonalities than differences. Concepts such as conspicuous consumption and desire for luxury products are two examples. However, simply because people consume in conspicuous and luxurious ways does not de facto indicate expressions of materialism: materialism depends on the symbolic nature (signalling aspect) of the behaviour. For example, a person may purchase a large, expensive house, not necessarily to signal wealth and prestige, but for the security and comfort it provides, and a wealthy person may rely on luxury brand names – those considered to be prestige brands by those less wealthy – as a heuristic of quality and function, just as less wealthy consumers do with everyday brands.

But the flip side is also true: consumption generally not considered to be materialistic also serve signalling purposes. Materialism is not only about typical luxury and status consumption. People may purchase and display products to signal desirable attributes such as altruism and social concern, which themselves may signal a certain status (Furchheim, Jahn, & Zanger, 2013). For example, status motives can increase the desirability of green products over more luxurious but non-green products when the green products are relatively more costly and consumed in public (Griskevicius, Tybur, & van Den Bergh, 2010). Based on the evolutionary concept of costly signalling, an altruistic act that is performed in public signals at least two things: that the person is willing to incur the cost of self-sacrifice for the sake of others and that the person has the ability (financial resources, time, etc.) to incur this self-sacrifice. Gift-giving can also serve these same functions (Zahavi & Zahavi, 1997).

Altruistic behaviours are not just about status, however; they may also be used to signal valuable and socially positive qualities. Greed and selfishness are generally considered to be negative qualities (Ayn Rand followers notwithstanding) and altruistic acts are considered to be positive qualities. Thus, people may use altruistic acts to convey positive traits. For example, people are more willing to donate in public when there are no external rewards that could diminish the prosocial act and its positive image. However, in a private setting, they are more likely to donate if there is an extrinsic reward (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009). Similarly, altruistic

behaviour may signal other valued qualities such as kindness, strength of character, trustworthiness, or intelligence (Furchheim et al., 2013; Millet & Dewitte, 2007).

Finally, altruism is not just for other-signalling. Products allow people to construct their own desired identities, and thus may serve as self-signals of particular qualities (e.g. intelligence, taste) that are central to one's self-identity (Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Elliot, 2013). In the context of green consumption, consumers of green products may be associated with desirable, comparably scarce traits such as being caring and ethical individuals. Following the notion that not many people are willing to incur the costs of self-sacrifice (money, convenience, quality, or time) for the sake of others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), choosing a green product over a non-green product may create an emotional state of feeling morally superior. This 'holier than thou' effect (Epley & Dunning, 2000) in turn may help materialists positively differentiate themselves from other members of the same social class or to demonstrate belongingness to some elite group.

The unifying concept for all of these examples is that, despite their apparent value to society, such altruistic behaviours serve the same signalling function as more negatively perceived signalling through consumption (e.g. status, prestige). To the extent that altruistic consumption-related behaviours have symbolic value, they fit within our conceptualisation of materialistic behaviour.

### ***Research synthesis and future directions***

The research we have reviewed suggests that materialistic behaviour is based on motivations that centre on self-identity. We have characterised this research in terms of the 'good' side of materialism. In particular, we have reviewed research that supports the proposition that materialistic behaviour is often motivated by the desire to bolster threatened aspects of the self, and that these behaviours can have positive utility. That is, they are successful in restoring a particular sense of self. However, there are several questions that remained unanswered.

First, the mechanisms underlying the effects of these behaviours are not clear. For example, is compensatory (materialistic) consumption specific to the need being threatened? Research to date is inconsistent, and thus represents an important avenue for future research. Second, to what extent does compensatory consumption successfully bolster the threatened needs? Although we have noted some studies that suggest that the compensatory consumption has a satiation effect, the number of such studies is small. Thus, more research is needed to both document this possible effect and to understand the conditions under which it holds.

Third, some research clearly indicates that materialistically motivated behaviour has some positive utility: materialistic behaviour motivated by desires to bolster threatened aspects of self-identity can be successful. However, the enduring nature of this success remains to be answered. Much of the evidence of positive utility is based on experimental designs that manipulate self-threats. Thus, the evidence of positive utility is situational and short term. Although some research suggests that trait-based motivations can also have positive utility, the body of evidence supporting this proposition is sparse. Thus, future research that focuses on chronic aspects of motivations would be beneficial.

We have discussed several different programmes of research that demonstrate the potential (if not actual) benefits of materialistic behaviour. That said, we do not suggest that materialistic behaviour is universally positive. To the contrary, even in

the research that suggests a positive utility for materialistic behaviour, we have also noted that these positive effects are situationally driven: They depend on the motivations for the particular behaviour, and in some (if not many) of the situations, materialistic behaviour can be counterproductive (Shrum et al., 2013). In the next section, we focus on negative outcomes of materialism, or the 'dark side' of consumption (Hirschman, 1991; Mick, 1996).

## The bad: detrimental effects of materialism

As we noted earlier, the cumulative body of research demonstrating negative effects of materialism is large. Various operationalisations of materialism correlate with a number of indicants of lower well-being, including lower vitality, physical health problems, negative affect, depression and anxiety, and dysfunctional consumer behaviour. Generally, this research proposes that higher levels of materialism lead to lower well-being. However, despite the ubiquity and consistency of these findings, a clear weakness of this research is the ambiguity regarding causal direction. This is understandable, given that materialism is treated as a stable trait or value and thus is typically measured rather than manipulated. Moreover, most research questions regarding the effects of materialism on well-being focus on long-term effects, which precludes short-term manipulations of materialism.

However, there are two alternative explanations for the correlational results just noted. The first is that the causal direction is the reverse: people who are generally unhappy may try to make themselves happier through consumption. The second alternative explanation is that the correlation is spurious, and driven by some unmeasured variable(s) that correlates with both materialism and lower well-being. In the following sections, we address each of these alternatives, and the implications that a motives-based approach to materialism have for them.

### **Causality explanations**

#### *Materialism causes lower well-being*

Although cross-sectional designs are unable to address issues of causality, longitudinal designs provide information on causal direction by computing correlations between the proposed causal factors at time 1 and the proposed dependent factors at time 2. Several recent longitudinal studies have assessed the relations between materialism and well-being, and provide support for the hypothesis that higher levels of materialism lower well-being over time. For example, Pieters (2013) analysed data from an online panel collected over a 16-year period. The results showed that materialism at time 1 was positively related to loneliness at time 2.

Similar results were reported by Kasser et al. (2014). That study reported results from three separate longitudinal studies that differed in sample composition (students, general population US, general population Iceland), duration (6 months, 2 years, 12 years), measure of materialism (material values scale; Richins & Dawson, 1992 scale; financial aspirations index; Kasser & Ryan, 1993), and measure of well-being (prevalence of mental health problems, life satisfaction). The results were consistent across the three studies, with materialism at time 1 predicting lower well-being at time 2. In addition, the negative relation between materialism and

well-being was mediated by changes in psychological need satisfaction (Kasser et al., 2014, study 2). Specifically, materialism was negatively correlated with feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Gagné, 2003) over time, and this relation mediated the negative relation between materialism and well-being over time. These findings provide strong evidence that increases in materialism lowers well-being.

Kasser et al. (2014), however, also reported some inconsistencies. For example, although changes in materialism over time predicted changes in well-being over time, initial levels of materialism showed inconsistent relations with changes in well-being over time. Across their three longitudinal studies, initial levels of materialism were unrelated to changes in well-being over time in study 1, negatively related to changes in well-being over time in study 2, and positively related to changes in well-being over time in study 3.

Although the Pieters (2013) and Kasser et al. (2014) studies provide compelling evidence of a causal effect of materialism on lower well-being, at least one recent longitudinal study showed no effects of materialism on well-being over time. Oprea, Buijzen, and Valkenburg (2012) collected data from 466 children in a two-wave online survey with an interval of 1 year. Although the zero-order correlation between materialism at time 1 and well-being at time 2 was significant and negative, that effect disappeared when the full model was tested simultaneously.

#### *Lower well-being increases materialism*

Although Pieters (2013) and Kasser et al. (2014) provide evidence that materialism lowers well-being over time, those two studies (as well as the Oprea et al., 2012 study) also report results that support the opposite relation (longitudinal designs allow for testing both possible causal relations). For example, Pieters (2013) results also showed that higher levels of loneliness lead to greater materialism over time. Kasser et al. (2014) reported similar findings for all three of their longitudinal studies: lower levels of general well-being lead to higher levels of materialism over time. Finally, Oprea et al. (2012) also found that initial levels of well-being were negatively correlated with materialism over time.

Some recent experimental research also supports the notion that lower well-being increases materialism. For example, boosting the self-esteem of 8 to 16 year olds reduced their levels of materialism in the short term (Chaplin & John, 2010). Similarly, boosting participants' feelings of gratitude increased their judgements of life satisfaction and reduced their reported levels of materialism (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, & Dean, 2009). Conversely, increases in existential stress led to higher levels of materialism (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Maheswaran & Agrawal, 2004; Rindfleisch et al., 2009). These studies also highlight the link between motives (e.g. maintenance or repair of self-esteem, anxiety, etc.) and materialism.

Thus, although longitudinal designs allow for assessments of the causal relation between materialism and well-being, the longitudinal results just noted generally provide evidence for both relations. Moreover, these competing relations can also be assessed for relative strength (effect size). Indeed, Pieters (2013) found that the effect of loneliness on materialism was actually stronger than the reverse, and Oprea et al. (2012) reported a similar pattern of results. Kasser et al. (2014) found the two effects to be relatively similar in size.

Finally, Pieters (2013) is also noteworthy in one other respect. Although the study shows clear reciprocal relations between materialism and well-being, the relations between *dimensions* of the material values scale (happiness, success, and centrality) were not uniform. Whereas the success and happiness dimensions both displayed reciprocal relations between levels of materialism and well-being over time that were negative, the centrality dimension showed reciprocal positive relations.

### ***Other-variable explanations***

Although longitudinal designs are effective in addressing causality issues, they are nevertheless vulnerable to other-variable explanations of the effects. Because materialism is measured as a general belief, value, or trait, it is not clear whether materialism per se is the driver of well-being effects, or some other variable that correlates with both materialism and well-being. For example, materialism is negatively correlated with several fundamental human needs: self-esteem (Chaplin & John, 2007; Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004), a sense of belonging (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Rose & DeJesus, 2007), feelings of a meaningful existence (Kashdan & Breen, 2007), and control over one's life (Kashdan & Breen, 2007). Moreover, deficiencies in these needs tend to be correlated with lower well-being (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Thus, it is not clear whether actual materialistic beliefs and values are driving the results, or whether it is the deficiency in fundamental human needs that cause lower well-being. That said, Kasser et al. (2014) provide evidence that increases in materialism over time cause need deficiencies (competence, autonomy, relatedness) over time, which in turn result in lower well-being. However, it is not clear whether alternative causal paths (e.g. higher need deficiencies cause higher levels of materialism, which in turn reduces well-being) were tested.

### ***Research synthesis and future directions***

As noted in the previous discussion, the results of longitudinal studies assessing the relation between materialism and well-being are mixed. At best, they suggest that the relation between materialism and well-being is bi-directional: higher levels of materialism cause lower well-being, and lower levels of well-being cause increases in materialism. The combination of these two findings is generally interpreted to reflect a 'downward spiral' in which decreasing levels of well-being promote more materialistic beliefs, which in turn result in lower well-being over time. At least two issues are worth noting. First, virtually all of the research pertains to findings based on Western European and American participants. Whether these findings hold for other populations is left unaddressed. Second, even if the downward spiral interpretation is valid, there still remains the chicken and egg problem: Which comes first? An additional concern is that, at least in the longitudinal studies just reviewed, the results are not consistent. Moreover, what is missing is why these effects manifest. The Kasser et al. (2014) study provides some suggestions about the underlying processes (need satisfaction).

In the end, it is not clear that materialism is the primary driver of negative well-being. More important, it is very unclear why these effects occur. One problem may be that there are numerous explanations for the underlying processes. Examples include the escalation hypothesis (constant striving for the latest consumer goods and desirable brands will inevitably lead to dissatisfaction as tastes change; Fournier

& Richins, 1991; Richins, 1995; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 1999), the hedonic adaptation hypothesis (hedonic treadmill in which initial joy wanes over time; Lyubomirsky, 2011), affective forecasting error (people's judgements about their future enjoyment of acquisitions are poorly calibrated; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005), and the displacement hypothesis (pursuit of material possessions will displace other more fulfilling and satisfying experiences such as relationships with family and friends; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Nairn & Ipsos, 2011). Although it is of course possible that all of these explanations are valid either simultaneously or situationally, numerous explanations for similar findings provide little explanation at all. Moreover, the lack of clear explanations for the processes underlying materialism makes it difficult to develop strategies to reduce materialism.

A second problem relates to the operationalisation of materialism. In all of the research reviewed that suggests negative effects of materialism, materialism is operationalised as personal values or financial aspirations. What is left unanswered is whether it is merely the beliefs about materialism that affect well-being and vice-versa, or whether actual materialistic behaviour is detrimental to well-being. Little if any research addresses the relation between actual materialistic behaviour and well-being.

A third problem is that despite the assumptions that intrinsic benefits or experiential consumption are more beneficial than extrinsic benefits or material consumption (cf. Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; van Boven & Gilovich, 2003), it may be that some people are simply not good at (and thus do not particularly enjoy) social or experiential interactions. The hypothesis that intrinsic orientations are more satisfying than extrinsic ones assumes that individuals have a choice about which goals and motivations to pursue. However, if some individuals are not good at social interactions, they are unlikely to be well-accepted by others. Such people would likely describe themselves as lonelier, less accepted, and probably less happy. Under these circumstances, they may turn to extrinsic pursuits, including materialistic ones, to fill the void left by social deficits that may not be a result of their own choosing.

Some research supports this proposition. For example, children and adolescents who have lower levels of theory of mind derive more happiness from objects than from experiences (Chaplin, Lowrey, Ruvio, & Shrum, 2014). Theory of mind refers to the ability to take the perspective of others, is a precursor to empathy, and facilitates social interactions (Malle, 2005). Those who are deficient in theory of mind skills tend to perform worse in social interactions and enjoy them less than those with better theory of mind skills (for a review, see Epley & Waytz, 2010). Thus, for those who are deficient in theory of mind (autistic children represent an extreme example), seeking to replace object-related interactions with social and experiential ones may provide little comfort.

The research we have reviewed, and the ambiguities in materialism effects we have highlighted, points to the importance of considering the motives that underlie materialistic behaviour. As we have noted, the research that unequivocally suggests a negative effect of materialistic goal pursuit on well-being is actually sparse. Although the negative correlation between measures of materialism and various measures of well-being is well-established, recent research suggests that the relation is bi-directional. More important, research suggests that the effects of materialism on well-being are a function of the underlying motives.

Our review suggests at least three possible areas of research that may potentially address these ambiguities. First, materialism research would benefit from studies that address the underlying motives for materialistic behaviour. In particular, research that

goes beyond very broad motivations (e.g. intrinsic vs. extrinsic) to investigate more specific ones (e.g. maintenance or repair of self-esteem, control, need to belong, meaningful existence, anxiety, etc.) may allow for the parsing of materialism effects on long-term well-being. Similarly, categorisation of these motives in terms of their signalling value (e.g. self-signalling, other-signalling, purely hedonic, etc.) and the relations of these motives with well-being would be useful. Most important, this research should focus on the mediators and moderators of the relation between materialism and well-being. Although correlational research may never be able to completely address causality issues, providing a more fully developed process model of the antecedents and consequences of materialism increases confidence in the validity of the proposed relations (Shrum & Lee, 2012).

Second, and related, materialism research may benefit from studies that investigate social interaction skills and their antecedents (e.g. theory of mind, empathy, emotional IQ, etc.). The research that shows clear relations (in both directions) between materialism and loneliness suggests that motives related to loneliness (e.g. need to belong) may be both important causes and consequences of materialism. Understanding the circumstances under which materialism is and is not successful in addressing loneliness and other aspects of well-being is clearly important. Third, research would benefit from a focus on actual materialistic behaviour (buying, using, displaying, sharing) and its antecedents and consequences. To date, most materialism research has considered only chronic beliefs about possessions and their expected benefits. Research that links actual materialistic consumption to well-being is clearly needed.

## **The ugly: negative perceptions of materialistic individuals**

Materialism has historically been viewed as a human deficiency. As Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) note, critics have characterised materialism as a waste of valuable resources, a shirking of personal and civic responsibility, a deficiency in character, and a subversion of traditional values (see also Schudson, 1991). Thus, it perhaps comes as no surprise that research shows that people perceive the materialistic behaviour of others along a number of negative character dimensions. For example, materialistic people are viewed as more selfish, self-centred, and extrinsically motivated, and discussions with them are considered less enjoyable when the topics concern materialistic as opposed to experiential purchases. Importantly, this effect is driven more by the stigma of materialism than by admiration for experiential people (van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). People also perceive others' conspicuous consumption to be driven by impression management motives, and interestingly, develop more negative attitudes towards flaunted brands when the perceiver does not have a strong connection to the brand (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013).

Given these stigmas and negative stereotypes, why do people use possessions to signal desirable qualities in themselves? People use consumption to signal attributes such as status, success, popularity, and taste. However, although some perceivers may infer these attributes, decidedly negative character qualities appear to be what is primarily signalled. One answer to the disconnect between intentions and outcomes of materialistic signals may be that perceptions of how one is viewed may be poorly calibrated. This process is similar to the affective forecasting error noted earlier: that people are poor predictors of their future feelings. In the same way, people may also

be poor predictors of how their actions are perceived by others: attempts to signal success to others result in inferences of shallowness, selfishness, and insecurity.

Some research provides support for this proposition, as well as a more specific mechanism. For example, actors and observers often infer different motivations or attributions for the same behaviour. The cause of this disparity is a function of differences in attentional focus. Actors (e.g. signallers) focus attention outward onto the situation, whereas observers (e.g. perceivers) focus attention on the actor. These differences in turn affect the processing and subsequent evaluation of information that is presented. Actors (presenters) use piecemeal processing, which motivates a 'more is better' strategy in presenting. Consequently, they use the sum of attributes in their calculations of how a set of attributes will be evaluated by perceivers. However, observers (evaluators) use a more holistic strategy and average across attributes (termed the *presenter's paradox*; Weaver, Garcia, & Schwarz, 2012). Although this research does not directly address the types of presentations and evaluations that pertain to materialism-related signals, it provides a useful framework for understanding the disconnect between the intent of a possession-related signal and its actual effect.

Other unintended consequences of other-signalling through consumption may also arise. For example, although certain individuals may choose status-related products because they expect those products to enhance their progress towards a goal (such as getting a job), the use of such status-related 'props' may create unexpected feelings of contrast with the initial goal, resulting in discouragement and diminished efforts towards attaining their achievement-related goals (Samper, Bettman, & Luce, 2013). Conspicuous signalling may also induce envy in observers. Benign envy may inspire others to work harder and improve their own level of success (Mandel et al., 2006; van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011a), which may be good for the observer but a disadvantage for the actor. Worse, materialistic displays may produce malignant envy that results in hostility among observers (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011b).

The common factor across this research is the disparity between the intended outcome of the signalling motive and its actual perceptual outcome. In other words, materialistic behaviour may have the motive of signalling success and other valued qualities such as hard work, but in fact results in perceiver attributions that are decidedly negative. An important research question is why this disparity occurs. One possibility pertains to the effects of deficiencies in theory of mind noted earlier. The discrepancy between expected and actual outcomes of signalling behaviour arises from the inability of actors to take the perspective of observers. Those with lower theory of mind skills (which is associated with lower levels of perspective-taking) are less able to understand the effects of their actions on others (Epley & Waytz, 2010). Consequently, they may misinterpret the effects of their actions on others. Related research highlights an ironic effect of need-fulfilment on perspective-taking and empathy. We noted earlier that threats to feelings of personal power increase conspicuous consumption. However, fulfilment of power also reduces perspective-taking and empathy (Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006), which in turn affects fairness in interpersonal relations (Blader & Chen, 2012).

Although this research may not speak directly to the issue of the interrelations between power, perspective-taking, and materialistic behaviour, consider the following anecdotal evidence. During the recent global economic crisis that

originated around 2008, the top three US automobile companies (General Motors, Ford, Chrysler) incurred substantial financial losses, to the point that their top executives (who are arguably very powerful individuals) appeared in front of Congress to make their case for emergency loans. Even though these top executives were asking Congress (and thus American taxpayers) for a bailout of their current financial woes, they chose to travel to Washington, DC by private jets. American citizens (and Congress) reacted quite negatively, but the top executives were clearly surprised (Milbank 2008).

### **Research synthesis and future directions**

Although research on the expected effects of materialistic consumptions on the perceptions of others is limited, it offers important insights on the potential disconnect between the motives underlying materialistic behaviour and their actual outcomes. The premise of this paper is that motives (for materialistic behaviour) matter. In some, if not many cases, the motives may be fulfilled. Even when materialistic behaviour is motivated by the need to bolster insecurities, whether chronic or situationally threatened, it can potentially be successful. However, it can also backfire. Understanding the personal and situational factors that contribute to the disparity between individuals' perceptions of the effects of their materialistic behaviour and the actual effects of that behaviour may yield insights into the relations between materialism and well-being.

The notion that materialistic behaviour can result in perceiver envy (e.g. benign or malicious) suggests another motive that may be useful in understanding the relation between materialism and well-being. In particular, some individuals may engage in materialistic behaviour with the motive of inducing admiration from others. However, other individuals may want to inspire envy in others. These fundamental motives (to be admired or to be envied) have received relatively little attention in materialism research, even though they are likely to be related to happiness and general well-being. Future research would benefit from investigations that examine these relations.

### **Conclusion**

We have attempted to provide a critical and balanced review of materialism research, with a specific focus on the motives that underlie materialism. Building on previous work that defines materialistic behaviour in terms of its underlying motives and symbolic signalling (Shrum et al., 2013), this article contributes to the materialism literature by situating previous research within this motives-based framework. In doing so, we have highlighted research that suggests that some materialistic behaviour may actually be beneficial, but also detailed research that suggests a detrimental effect. The common thread across all aspects of our review is a call for an integrated theory of materialism processes. Although this article falls far short of a concise process theory, it provides an important step towards that end. The framing of materialism research in terms of processes and specific motives also leads directly to questions for future research that we have detailed, and which we hope will contribute to a more parsimonious model of the relation between materialism and well-being. Such a model is a critical and necessary condition for transformative research that increases well-being and quality of life.

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