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# Materialism and Satisfaction with Life

Shuchi Agrawal\*

## Abstract

*Material acquisitiveness has become the primary goal in modern society. Studies into the consequences of pursuing a materialistic lifestyle have found that materialism is negatively related to life satisfaction. Most of these studies have been conducted in western countries. There are very few reported studies using Indian sample. Using a sample of 200 adults, a negative relationship was found, in that those individuals who were high in materialism were less satisfied with their life than those who were low in materialism. Correlation was also found between Materialism and other demographic variables like age, family income and education level. The implications of these findings for future research are discussed.*

## Introduction

Materialism has become the central driving force in the modern consumerist society. According to Oxford dictionary Materialism is the devotion to material needs and desires, to the neglect of spiritual matters; a way of life, opinion, or tendency based entirely upon material interests. A materialist person places high level of importance on acquiring more and more possessions. He measures self worth by extrinsic assets and possessions rather than by intrinsic characteristics. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Belk 1984). People low on materialism have been found to value possibilities which have interpersonal orientation while those high on materialism, value possessions that are related to appearance and status (Prentice, 87).

Researchers have adopted two main approaches in the study of materialism. The first approach measures materialism as inferred from the presence of certain personality traits (Belk, 1984, 1985) while the other approach measures materialism as a value (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Belk (1984, 1985)

asserts that the personality traits of 'possessiveness', 'envy' and 'nongenerosity' represent materialism in that they express a person's relationship to material objects. Later a fourth trait of preservation was added in subsequent cross-cultural studies of the materialism scale (Ger and Belk, 1993). Belk sees envy as a desire for others' possessions; the envious person resents those who own what he wants. Non generosity is defined as "an unwillingness to give or share possessions with others", which also includes a reluctance to lend or donate possessions to others and negative attitudes toward charity. Finally, possessiveness is defined as a concern about loss of possessions and a desire for the greater control of ownership.

Richins and Dawson (1992) consider

*\*Dr. Shuchi Agrawal  
Assistant Professor  
IILM Institute for Higher Education  
3, Lodhi Institutional Area, New Delhi-3  
e-mail : shuchi.agrawal@iilm.org*

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materialism "a value that guides people's choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including, but not limited to, consumption arenas". Their scale comprises three components: 'acquisition centrality', 'possession defined successes and 'acquisition as the pursuit of happiness'. Acquisition centrality refers to the importance materialists attach to acquiring more possessions which allows acquisitiveness to function as a life-goal for them. Materialists also hold strongly to the belief that owning or acquiring the right possessions is a key to happiness and well-being. Finally, Richins also defines materialists as people who believe success can be judged by the things people own.

### **Effects of Materialism**

Theologians and philosophers have long complained that materialism is incompatible with a virtuous life. Virtually every major religion views materialism as conflicting with religious fulfillment. Because of the negative consequences associated with materialism, literature has mostly focused on its negative aspects and consequences. A growing body of empirical research shows that materialism has adverse effects on both individuals and society (Kasser, 2002).

On the individual level, research indicates that materialism is inversely related to self-esteem, well-being, quality of life, and satisfaction with life in general (Richins and Dawson, 1992; Sirgy, 1998; Kasser, 2002). Compared with our ancestors today we own twice as many cars per person, eat out twice as often and enjoy endless other commodities that weren't around then—big-screen TVs, microwave ovens, SUVs and handheld wireless devices, to name a few. But are we any happier? Money does not buy happiness. Surveys found virtually same level of happiness between very rich individuals on Forbes 400 list and Maasai herdsman of east Africa (Diener, 2003). Ironically money cannot buy many things that makes a person happy like good health, home, kids, interesting job etc.

In fact aspiring for monetary success more than other goals has been found to be associated with negative physical and psychological outcomes (Kasser and Ryan, 1993). Among samples of adults with greater financial resources, strong materialistic values continued to relate negatively to well-being (Kasser

and Ryan, 1996). An extrinsic orientation (highly valuing material success, fame, and image) actually led to fewer experiences of positive affect, greater levels of depression, anxiety, narcissism, and substance abuse.

Materialism adversely affects society also. A consumption culture leads to lower concern for the environment and less participation in public domain issues (Droge and Mackoy, 1995). Strong materialistic values are also related to lessened involvement in family, community, and social issues (Kasser, 2002). Research findings by Solberg, Diener, and Robinson (2004) suggest that the "built-in-trade-offs" between materialism and quality of relationships damage the quality of materialists' relationships. Study on teenagers, college students and adults, in the U.S., England, South Korea, Singapore, Russia, Germany, and India shows that people with strong materialistic values have poorer relationships i.e. they have more conflict and less empathy, and they also contribute less to the community. They have less desire to help others. Research by Rindfleisch (1997) proves that partners from divorced families are more likely to be materialists than from non-divorced ones. Further it is the diminution of interpersonal resources like love and affection that link family disruption and materialism and not paucity of financial resources.

The ill effect of materialist culture have been well recorded by Helena Norberg-Hodge in her book *Ancient Futures*. According to her The small Himalayan nation of Ladakh is one of the best-documented examples of a 'happy society'. Ladakhis were a remarkably joyous and vibrant people who lived in harmony with their harsh environment. There was no trace of violence, discrimination, avarice, abuse of power and depressed, burned-out people were nowhere to be found. The Ladhaki culture and value system generated mutual respect, community-mindedness, reverence for nature, love of life, empathy, spiritual awareness and environmental conservation.

In 1980's capital consumerism with its usual bounty of raised hopes spread its wings in Ladakh. Soon the greed economy took root. As a consequence, today the society is plagued by social diseases like declining mental health, family breakdown, crime, land degradation, unemployment, a widening gap between

rich and poor and pollution (Schumaker, 2003).

Numbers of theories have also tried to explain the inverse relation between materialism and the feeling of well being and life satisfaction. According to Sirgy (1990) materialists set very high and unrealistic goals related to standard of living and other life domains. That is why they experience greater dissatisfaction. This feeling of dissatisfaction with 'life domains' 'spill over' into the super ordinate domain of life satisfaction. This is the 'bottoms up spill over approach'. On the other hand tops down spill over approach say that dissatisfaction with the life domains is the result and not the cause of dissatisfaction with life as a whole.

Organismic theory states that people who are motivated by extrinsic goals experience lower well being and greater distress as they depend on external approval and rewards.

Diener suggests that several factors may help explain the apparent toll of pursuit of wealth. In simple terms; a strong consumerist bent—what William Wordsworth in 1807 called "getting and spending"—can promote unhappiness because it takes time away from the things that can nurture happiness, including relationships with family and friends.

Most of the studies have been done in the west as consumerism was high in these countries. But today in country like India where economic growth has taken wings especially after globalization consumerism has reached a fevered pitch. This study was therefore undertaken to study the relation between materialism and life satisfaction among people of different age groups and to find out whether the present generation is more satisfied with life than the older generation.

**Hypothesis**

Materialism and satisfaction with life will be inversely related. The three dimensions of materialism and satisfaction with life will be negatively correlated.

**Methodology**

The sample consisted of 200 adults. Three age groups were taken 20-35 years, 35- 50 years and

50 + years. Interviews were also conducted to get an insight. Materialism was measured using a shortened 15-item version of Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale. The scale included five items to tap each of the three dimensions of happiness, success, and centrality. Responses were recorded on 5-point Likert scales which ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Cronbach's coefficient alpha has been found to range between .80 and .88 for the entire scale. Test-retest reliability is quoted as  $r = .87$ . Satisfaction with life scale by Deiner was used to measure life satisfaction. The Scale assesses satisfaction with the respondent's life as a whole. It does not assess satisfaction with life domains such as health or finances but allows subjects to integrate and weight these domains in whatever way they choose. The SWLS is shown to have favorable psychometric properties, including high temporal reliability. Scores on the SWLS correlate moderately to highly with other measures of subjective well-being. Normative data for the scale shows good convergent validity with other scales and with other types of assessments of subjective well-being.

**Results**

**Table 1** Respondents background characteristics  
n = 200

Gender	Number of employees	%
Male	150	75
Female	50	25
<b>Age group</b>		
20-35	90	45
35-50	60	30
50+	50	25
<b>Income level/month</b>		
Less than 20000	40	20
20,000-50,000	50	25
50,000-80,000	60	30
80,000+100,000	27	13.5
100000+	23	11.5
<b>Education level</b>		
Class 12	12	6
Graduate	78	39
Post Graduate	74	37
Doctorate	36	18

**Table 2 Correlation between Materialism and Selected Demographics**

	Age	Income	Education
Materialism	-.25*	-.02	-.03
Success	-.25*	-.10	-.02
Centrality	-.17**	-.02	-.01
Happiness	-.20**	-.19*	-.06

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

**Table 3 Correlation between Materialism and Satisfaction with Life**

	Materialism	success	centrality	happiness
Satisfaction With Life	-.28**	-.24**	-.13*	-.32**

\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

Consistent with past studies, the analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction with  $r = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . A negative relation was found with all the three dimensions of materialism. The happiness subscale, which measures the degree to which respondents believe that acquiring more material goods would make them happy, is clearly the most closely associated with life dissatisfaction. The belief that success in life can be measured by possessions is modestly but frequently related to life dissatisfaction. But the connection between possessions playing a central role in one's life and being dissatisfied with one's life is fairly weak, although still statistically significant for the scale as a whole (Table 3).

Family income and materialism were found to be unrelated (correlation between materialism and income = -.02). Some correlation is probably attributable to the significant correlation ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ) between the Happiness subscale and family income. As income falls, respondents were more likely to equate happiness with material possessions. None of the other materialism subscales approached significance in correlating with family income.

Analysis also revealed no relation between education level of individual and materialism (Table 2 correlation = -.02). As can be seen in Table 2, age was inversely related to all dimensions of materialism and its composite measure. An independent samples

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*t*-test revealed that males were more materialistic than females  $t = 2.24, p < 0.05$ . They are more likely to equate material possessions with happiness.

## Discussion

The results of the current study supported the hypotheses that individuals higher in materialism would be less satisfied with their life as a whole. Results also supported the second hypothesis, that individual domains of materialism and quality of life would be negatively correlated. In the present study, participants high in materialism considered material possessions and pursuits to be a factor in their happiness, a determinant of their success, and of central value in their lives when compared to other values. Thus, those classified as materialists place greater emphasis on extrinsic goals relative to intrinsic goals. Therefore, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings that extrinsic goals – such as the financial goals of materialists – lead to lower well-being (Solberg et al. 2004). According to Kasser and Ryan (1996) even when extrinsic goals are fully attained, they remain less nourishing than intrinsic goals, such as affiliation, community feeling, physical fitness, and self-acceptance. It is these intrinsic goals which are prerequisites for well-being, because they “help orient people towards the experiences in life likely to satisfy their psychological needs” (Kasser and Ahuvia, 2002). A strong materialistic value orientation may cause further alienation from natural endeavors to grow, actualize, and relate with others (Kasser et al., 2004).

The findings also support Sirgy's (1998) 'bottomup' postulation in that materialists set unrealistically high expectations for these material-oriented life goals, are not satisfied with what they have and continually want more. This dissatisfaction then tends to 'spillover' into feelings about 'life as a whole'. The interviews conducted indicated that materialists experienced lower satisfaction with both 'family life' and 'amount of fun and enjoyment' than non-materialists. This is consistent with findings of Fournier and Richins (1991) which suggests that high materialists place possession acquisition foremost in their value hierarchy ahead of many other values such as family and interpersonal relationships. For the materialist, possessions serve as 'surrogates' for inadequate interpersonal relationships. Hence, their lower satisfaction with 'family life' and "amount of fun

and enjoyment' may be due to the greater emphasis they place on possessions and time spent acquiring possessions than on cultivating family relationships and having time for fun and enjoyment. In turn, this dissatisfaction then 'spillovers' into feelings about life as a whole (Rindfleisch et al. 1997).

The findings from the current study support and add to the past research illustrating a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (Belk, 1984, 1985; Dawson and Bamossy, 1991; 2000; LaBarbera and Gurhan, 1997; Richins, 1987; Richins and Dawson, 1990, 1992; Sirgy et al., 1995, 1998).

Previous work by Kasser et al., (1995) explains this significant relationship between income levels and the happiness dimension of materialism. These researchers found that teenagers growing up in less advantageous socioeconomic circumstances placed greater value on financial success aspirations than on self acceptance, community feeling, or affiliation. They suggested such teens may focus more on external rewards because intrinsic sources of worth and security are less supported by and less prevalent in disadvantaged communities. Economists have always maintained that well being is a function of income. That is why people and nation alike strive for more income. But a growing body of research shows that wealth alone isn't necessarily what makes us happy today. After certain income level we simply do not get any happier. While rich are happier than poor the happiness boost from extra cash isn't that great once one rises above the poverty line. After certain level of money, Quality of life means more than the Quantity of money.

Significant negative relationship was found between age and materialism. Individuals from older age displayed less materialistic tendencies. This may be explained in terms of socialization factor. Older generation maintains core values and beliefs of Indian culture which they had learned and internalized in early years while the younger generation has been brought up in a consumerist culture professing that material pursuits, accumulation of things and presenting the right image provides real worth, deep satisfaction and generally meaningful life. Today the buzz is that happiness can be found in mall, on internet or in catalogue. They shop when they get bored or to fit in with their peer set.

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## Future research

While the current findings highlight the negative effects of materialism in adulthood, further research is required to find its antecedents with investigation into childhood and adolescence. In particular we need to know if materialism causes unhappiness and if so how?

## Conclusion

Today most of the world's population is growing in an economic set up where the main goal is to get whatever they can for themselves. As a result happiness and satisfaction level is declining. As Robert E. Lane puts it in his book, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*: Happiness is declining in the most powerful country of the world. "Amidst the satisfaction people feel with their material progress, there is a spirit of unhappiness and depression haunting advanced market democracies throughout the world, a spirit that mocks the idea that markets maximize well-being." President Roosevelt once said 'Happiness is not the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.' The problem is that today achievement is being equated with money and money with happiness. But the feeling of well being and happiness depends upon a combination of appropriate conduct at the level of body, mind and spirit. From times of Krishna, Buddha and Jesus, spiritual Masters have guided towards spirituality and love, which is endorsed by modern spiritual genius like; Vivekananda, Swami Parmahansa, Ninh Thanh, Krishnamurti, Sai Baba, Dalai Lama and the likes. It is rightly said that 'moderation is the key to success'. What is required is wisdom, prudence, positive goals and a balanced approach. We need to strike a balance to be happy. We cannot ignore the external world but we have to ensure that we do not let materialism and greed overwhelm us.

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