



Can't buy me friendship? Peer rejection and adolescent materialism: Implicit self-esteem as a mediator



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We found that peer rejection led to adolescent materialism.
- We observed a mediating role of implicit self-esteem in the link between peer rejection and adolescent materialism.
- Priming high implicit self-esteem buffered against the effects of peer rejection and led to decreased adolescent materialism.

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ABSTRACT

Peer rejection is closely connected to adolescent materialism, and self-esteem is a mediator of this relationship. However, most previous studies have revealed only a correlational link between peer rejection and adolescent materialism, and have emphasized explicit self-esteem but not implicit self-esteem. We conducted three studies to address this weakness. Study 1a and Study 1b verified the causal connection between peer rejection and adolescent materialism by showing that participants who recalled experiences of being rejected by peers reported higher levels of materialism than those who recalled acceptance experiences. In Study 2, participants who were rejected by peers demonstrated lower implicit self-esteem and higher materialism levels than those who were not. This study also found that implicit self-esteem mediated the relationship between peer rejection and adolescent materialism. In Study 3, after experiencing peer rejection, priming high implicit self-esteem induced a decline in the participants' materialism levels, which further validated the mediating role of implicit self-esteem. Overall, these findings suggest that peer rejection boosts adolescent materialism by lowering implicit self-esteem and that materialism is a way to compensate for impaired implicit self-esteem.

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Introduction

If you have read the best-seller by Harriet Braiker, *Who's Pulling Your Strings?*, you may remember the story of Cara (Braiker, 2004, p. 20): After being rejected by her peer group in a new high school, Cara changed into new, fashionable clothing to keep pace with her schoolmates and threw an extravagant party to treat her "friends." In fact, there are many Caras among adolescents; they attempt to save their broken hearts from peer rejection through the acquisition of material goods such as fashionable clothes, branded sporting goods, and expensive electronic products. Based on recent theorizing on the origins of

materialism (e.g., Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Chaplin & John, 2010; Kasser, 2002; Roberts, Manolis, & Tanner, 2008), we examine whether peer rejection contributes to adolescents' high regard for material possessions, and we suggest that implicit self-esteem is a mediator of this relationship.

Peer rejection and adolescent materialism

As noted by Harris (1995), the role of teenagers' peer groups is even more significant than the role of their parents, because acceptance within a peer group can provide opportunities to develop social competence and a sense of belonging that is a fundamental social need for human beings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As the antithesis of peer acceptance, peer rejection is a phenomenon in which a child is rejected by his or her peer group. This is an interpersonal stressor for the rejected child (Dodge et al., 2003). Because being rejected signifies being deprived of chances for social interaction with peers and the concomitant benefits of peer acceptance, peer rejection early in life undermines children's

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overall development and has a long-term adverse impact that leads to multiple problems, such as emotional maladjustment (Beeri & Lev-Wiesel, 2012; Zimmer-Gembeck, Hunter, Waters, & Pronk, 2009), poor academic functioning (Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005), aggression, and antisocial behaviors (Dodge et al., 2003). In addition to emotional and behavioral disorders, some recent studies have shed light on the effect of peer rejection upon personal value systems, especially materialism-oriented values (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008; Chaplin & John, 2010).

Materialism is defined as “the importance a person places on possessions and their acquisition as a necessary or desirable form of conduct to reach desired end states, including happiness” (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 307). One of the interesting factors in the origin of materialism is interpersonal insecurity. Being socially excluded increases adults' materialistic values, such as desiring money more strongly (Zhou, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2009) and buying expensive goods to enhance self-appeal (Baumeister, DeWall, Mead, & Vohs, 2008; Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, & Vohs, 2011). Sheldon and Kasser (2008, Study 3) reported increased extrinsic aspiration, a materialistic sign, when college students were asked to think of a contingently-accepting person, who would reject certain features of their behaviors and personalities. Correspondingly, priming interpersonal security can directly attenuate adults' materialistic values (Clark et al., 2011). For juveniles, prior studies show that social environments that are not supportive of growth and self-expression, such as high-risk neighborhoods, poor family socioeconomic circumstances, and divorced parents, cause children to value financial success more than affiliation and self-acceptance (Burns, Homel, & Goodnow, 1984; Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995). A positive correlation between peer rejection and adolescents' higher materialism has also been demonstrated in questionnaire-based or interview research (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008; Isaksen & Roper, 2012; Wooten, 2006).

Peer rejection and adolescent materialism could be linked because material possessions might play a role, in the short-term, in helping youths to avoid or cope with the potential damage resulting from peer rejection. First, adolescents are inclined to judge their peers on the number and quality of their possessions, which has been mentioned in prior literature (Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009; Wooten, 2006). Thus, as a result of peer pressure, owning material possessions may be an effective way to temporarily gain peer acceptance and close friendships (Isaksen & Roper, 2012). Mead et al. (2011) provided support for this inclusion motive by demonstrating the greater tendency to buy a product symbolic of group membership after rejection. This partly explains why adolescents are particularly prone to focus on material goods when forming peer groups (Isaksen & Roper, 2012). Second, material possessions provide ephemeral economic safety (Christopher, Drummond, Jones, Marek, & Therriault, 2006; Clark et al., 2011) and self-identity (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Wattanasuwan, 2005) that can restore the psychological security undermined by peer rejection. Third, attachments to material possessions may instantly substitute for personal relationships when individuals are socially rejected (Kleine & Baker, 2004), especially for those with an anxious attachment style (Norris, Lambert, Nathan DeWall, & Fincham, 2012). Finally, material possessions' contribution to short-term mood repair also cannot be ignored (Müller et al., 2012).

Although the impact of peer rejection on adolescent materialism is implied, most previous studies related to this issue have been conducted through questionnaires or other self-report methods. As such, prior research has revealed only a correlation between the variables, rather than demonstrating causality. For example, Banerjee and Dittmar (2008) used a scale to measure youths' materialism levels and sociometric nominations to indicate their peer rejection conditions. The results showed a positive correlation between peer rejection and materialism. Another study interviewed adolescents and found that they considered brand possessions helpful in establishing and maintaining peer groups (Isaksen & Roper, 2012). Indirect interviews have also

revealed that material possessions helped adolescents to avoid ridicules and jokes that were used to ostracize peers (Wooten, 2006). However, empirical research is still needed that examines whether peer rejection is actually a causal factor in increased adolescent materialism. The current study experimentally manipulates the experience of peer rejection under laboratory conditions, by asking participants to recall former experiences or to play a game that can induce feelings of being rejected, and examines subsequent effects on adolescent materialism.

(H1). We hypothesize that *peer rejection results in increased adolescent materialism.*

The role of implicit self-esteem

In addition to the four temporary potential benefits of material possessions mentioned above—facilitation of affiliation, restoration of security, substitution for interpersonal relationships, and mood repair—we argue that materialism might also improve self-esteem. Peer rejection has been found to decrease self-esteem (Damon, Lerner, & Eisenberg, 2006). Once they are rejected by peers, adolescents who are greatly concerned with self-presentation (Banerjee, 2002; Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebel, 1980) and peer acceptance (Parker & Gottman, 1989) feel that their self-evaluation is threatened and experience self-doubt. Furthermore, rejected children are more fearful of negative evaluation than those who are not rejected (La Greca & Stone, 1993), and are likely to spend more money to compensate for their impaired self-esteem.

Prior literature has shown that materialism is associated with people's needs or negative self-evaluation. For example, it is positively correlated with belonging motivation (Rose & DeJesus, 2007), self-doubt and uncertainty (Chang & Arkin, 2002), public self-consciousness and social anxiety (Schroeder & Dugal, 1995), interpersonal and personal insecurity (Christopher et al., 2006; Clark et al., 2011), and desires for self-enhancement (Kilbourne & LaForge, 2010). All of these findings imply the possible association between materialism and low self-esteem. Kasser et al. (2014) revealed a relational change between the two over time under a materialistic intervention condition, and more direct evidence has demonstrated their close connection (Chaplin & John, 2005; Isaksen & Roper, 2012; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). These results suggest that materialistic values might buffer threatened self-esteem, though this kind of function is likely only a temporary way to cope with suffering and might actually reduce people's well-being in the long term (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser et al., 2014, Study 3).

Regarding the role of self-esteem in relation to peer rejection and adolescent materialism, the existing research has made some exploration on its effect. These studies either mainly focused on explicit self-esteem (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Chaplin & John, 2007, 2010; Hanley & Wilhelm, 1992) or took explicit and implicit self-esteem together (Park & John, 2011). However, based on the frequently-claimed disassociation between the two constructs, as well as the possible contamination when measure them sequentially, we argue for the need to first investigate the potential effect of implicit self-esteem. Implicit self-esteem is shown to be disassociated with explicit self-esteem, although debates exist. On one hand, some researchers insist that implicit self-esteem is a form of self-evaluation and self-attitude that occurs when conscious self-reflection is absent (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & Knippenberg, 2001). It differs from explicit self-esteem in its formation, prediction of outcomes, structure, and measurement (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). On the other hand, some researchers argue that implicit self-esteem only differs from explicit self-esteem by nature of its measurement, pointing to different process, and that this does not imply a separate construct (Fazio & Olson, 2003; Fazio & Towles-Schwen, 1999). Regardless of this debate, many studies have shown that implicit self-esteem is distinct from, and only modestly correlated with, explicit

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