



The dual nature of materialism. How personality shapes materialistic value orientation

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ABSTRACT

This article presents two empirical studies examining different types of materialism as identified in an analysis of connections between materialism and HEXACO personality traits. Two groups of materialistic subjects and one non-materialistic group were revealed in both studies. In one group, a high level of materialism was accompanied by low levels of honesty-humility, agreeableness, and emotionality and higher levels of extraversion (Peacock type). In the second group, materialism was found alongside lower levels of honesty-humility, agreeableness and extraversion but higher levels of emotionality (Mouse type). “Peacocks” were more prone than “Mice” to look for immediate financial gains and ostentatious consumption, whereas “Mice” were more anxious and insecure in their ambivalent attitudes to money and were more concerned about their financial futures. Despite the similar importance attached to material possessions, the two types of materialism should be considered separately in future research.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Materialism and its origin

Materialism as both a theoretical concept and an object of empirical investigation came into the field of psychology from marketing and consumer research. The interest in the individual characteristics of people who were seen as submerged in consumer culture and, because of that, making a perfect target for marketing action started in the mid-1980s and developed significantly in the early 1990s due to two conceptualizations of materialism by Belk (1985) and Richins and Dawson (1992). Since then—as Richins (2004) claims—materialism has been an issue of great interest to scholars, social commentators, and public policy makers.

Materialism was defined first by Belk (1985) as the importance that people attach to worldly possessions, which occupy a central place in their lives and are expected to be the greatest source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Richins and Dawson (1992) noted that materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the centre of their lives, view possessions as essential to their satisfaction and well-being and judge their own and others' success by the quantity and quality of possessions accumulated. Belk (1985) conceptualized materialism as a personality complex composed of envy, non-generosity, and possessiveness, whereas Richins and Dawson (1992) defined materialism in terms of the values that direct people's choices and behaviours in various situations.

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On a descriptive level, materialism is a simple and consistent construct, which expresses people's aspirations for acquiring and possessing material objects and fitting into frames established by consumer culture (cf. Dittmar, 2008a). The cultural and societal roots of materialism are emphasized in the socialization hypothesis of its origin (Dittmar, 2008a; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2003), which assumes that the influence of materialistic standards is present through implicit and explicit pressure originating from a confrontation with the values and lifestyles of family members and peers as well as messages transmitted by the media and advertising. In this context, material possessions become one of the major elements of a social communication system, backing the individuals' quest for identity (Dittmar, 2008b). The alternative hypothesis proposes that materialism is the result of a formative experience of material deprivation (Inglehart, 1990) and a feeling of insecurity resulting from other experiences that undermine the satisfaction of psychological needs (Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008; Kasser et al., 2003). These experiences may result in the pursuit of material goods that serve as a shield—to protect, defend, and offer safety and comfort.

The insecurity-based view on the origin of materialism suggests that materialists compensate for concerns about their self-worth and their ability to cope with and feel secure in an unpredictable and hostile environment through material possession. This view depicts a materialistic person as a fearful, anxious individual with low self-confidence who is concerned about the fulfilment of primarily basic needs (cf. Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Inglehart, 1990; Kasser, 2002). However, the popular representation of a materialist is one of an assertive owner of expensive properties, vehicles, clothes and gadgets—the avaricious holder of a substantial amount of money who is involved in excessive rather than basic consumption. These two images differ considerably, even if we accept that deeply rooted anxiety and insecurity may be hidden behind ostentatious self-expression and flamboyance. We assume that the discrepancy in the way materialism is experienced and expressed is partly due to individual differences, mainly personality, which thus far has not been extensively explored from the point of view of the origin of the materialistic orientation.

1.2. Materialism and personality

Personality relates to basic regulatory mechanisms underlying individual behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and values. Thus, it might be expected that a certain type of personality is associated with materialistic orientation. Belk (1985), in his conceptualization of materialism, linked it to specific personality characteristics. Other researchers who applied Richins and Dawson's (1992) approach (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Hong, Koh, & Paunonen, 2012; Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013; Shafer, 2000; Watson, 2014, 2015) assumed that the materialistic value orientation correlates with—instead of being equivalent to—personality traits such as honesty, neuroticism, and agreeableness.

Thus far, researchers have concentrated on simple relationships between personality and materialism as mediators in models that explain particular types of economic behaviours, for example, excessive buying (Otero-López and Villardefrancos, 2013) and compulsive buying (Harnish & Bridges, 2014; Rose, 2007). Studies based on the Five-Factor Model of personality (FFM) showed that materialism was correlated positively with neuroticism and negatively with agreeableness. The data concerning the connections between materialism and extraversion, openness to experience and conscientiousness were not consistent, with results suggesting rather weak or no significant relationships (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Hong et al., 2012; Otero-López and Villardefrancos, 2013; Shafer, 2000; Watson, 2015).

In a study by Ashton and Lee (2008) concerning HEXACO,¹ an alternative to the FFM six-factor model of personality, materialism was connected negatively, rather strongly so, with honesty–humility, agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness. In the case of emotionality and extraversion, the correlations were positive. In relation to materialism, HEXACO had stronger predictive validity than FFM, mainly due to honesty–humility.

It has to be noted that although significant, the correlations between materialism and personality traits were relatively weak across studies (they ranged from -0.37 to 0.33). Only honesty–humility correlated more strongly with materialism ($-0.57/-0.66$). Thus, the percentage of explained variance was relatively small.

Other personality traits were also investigated in connection with materialism. Hong et al. (2012), in their study on personality traits supernumerary to the Big Five, found positive correlations between materialism and seductiveness and manipulateness as well as negative links to thriftiness and integrity. However, the socially malevolent personality feature that has received the most attention in the context of materialism is narcissism. The data from various studies showed clearly that materialism was significantly and positively correlated with narcissism (Bergman, Westerman, Bergman, & Daly, 2013; Harnish & Bridges, 2014; Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Roberts & Robins, 2000; Rose, 2007).

The connections between materialism and various personality traits are understandable and theoretically justified. However, as a configuration of characteristics, they seem to be internally incoherent, encompassing features that are not likely to coexist. Negative correlations between neuroticism and agreeableness in FFM were frequently reported (cf. Ashton, Lee, & de Vries, 2014), but connections between honesty–humility and emotionality in HEXACO were rather weak

¹ The HEXACO model was presented by Ashton and Lee (2008) in lexical studies on personality structures that were conducted in various languages. The model contains six personality dimensions: honesty–humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Three of these dimensions correspond closely to the FFM dimensions of extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. The HEXACO emotionality partly overlaps with FFM neuroticism but excludes “angry hostility”, which is instead included in the HEXACO agreeableness factor. The HEXACO agreeableness differs in this respect from FFM agreeableness and changes its accentuation. Honesty–humility is a new factor reflecting individual differences in the tendency to be sincere, fair and modest versus insincere, greedy and boastful.

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