

Materialism and well-being: the role of consumption

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Numerous studies find a negative relation between materialism and well-being. The present paper discusses the role of consumption in that relation. Studies on experiential versus material purchases are reviewed. Although a good deal of studies find an advantage for experiential purchases, this does not occur for materialists. Yet, materialists do not benefit more from material than from experiential consumption due to unrealistic expectations, especially about the pleasure it affords and the impression it conveys. Still, the relation between materialism and well-being is bidirectional and the path from ill-being to materialism seems stronger. The impact of materialistic consumption on well-being may be limited and may depend on the underlying motives. Materialistic self-signaling may be especially non-detrimental for well-being.

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Materialism is typically defined as the pursuit of status and happiness through the acquisition of wealth and material possessions [1^{••}]. It has also been defined as the emphasis on extrinsic goals like wealth, popularity, fame, and physical attractiveness compared to intrinsic goals like health, sense of community, and personal growth [2^{••}]. Although luxury consumption may positively affect well-being and materialists are especially likely to engage in it [3[•], see Figure 1], a recent meta-analysis shows that higher levels of materialism are associated with lower levels of well-being [4^{••}]. Perhaps materialists are spending their money in the wrong way [5[•],6].

Material versus experiential consumption

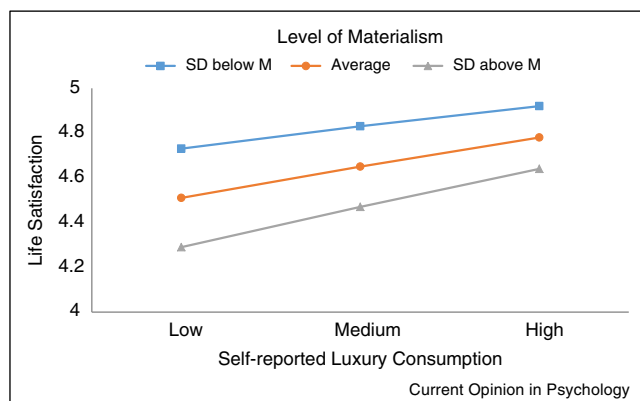
Materialistic consumers seem to prefer purchasing products to purchasing experiences [7,8]. However,

consumption of experiences may benefit well-being more than consumption of products for several reasons [9^{••},10,11]. First, because it is less straightforward to compare experiences, one may be less likely to feel one's experiences are inferior to that of one's peers [12]. Second, experiences seem more self-expressive than products [13]. Third, as one often enjoys experiences with other people [14[•]] and people are more likely to talk about one's experiential rather than one's material purchases [15], experiential consumption may serve the satisfaction of the basic need of relatedness. Interestingly, younger adults seem to be happier from engaging in extraordinary experiences while for older adults, any experience promotes well-being [16]. Possibly, extraordinary experiences may better address the need of relatedness for younger adults than ordinary ones.

Although experiential consumption seems to benefit well-being more than material consumption, several boundary conditions have been identified. First, the advantage of experiential consumption is limited to positive consumption outcomes; for negative outcomes, people are equally unhappy about experiences (e.g., disappointing entertainment at a holiday resort) as they are about products (e.g., poor TV picture quality) [17]. Second, if people engage in experiential consumption for non-autonomous reasons (e.g., because others do it, or to make a good impression), it does not contribute to their well-being [18]. Finally, the advantages of experiential consumption are emphasized when the experience is shared with other people, not when it is enjoyed in isolation, underscoring the importance of consumption practices that both satisfy individual needs and facilitate social bonds [14[•]].

The research on experiential consumption suggests that materialistic people would be happier if they took a more balanced approach, that is, if they purchased more experiences. This recommendation hinges on the assumption that materialistic and non-materialistic people equally appreciate, and benefit similarly from, experiential consumption. Several studies, however, indicate that materialism is negatively related to agreeableness and honesty-humility [19,20]. Materialism is also positively related to anxious attachment [21]. Anxious attachment often causes people to become lonely, which in turn leads them to pursue material goals, perhaps as a substitute for the security offered by healthy social relationships [22[•]]. Taken together, this research suggests that materialistic people may be less willing or able to connect with other people, in which case experiential consumption may not be more beneficial. In all, then, materialistic people may benefit less from experiential consumption than less materialistic ones.

Figure 1



Relationship between reported luxury consumption and satisfaction with life at different levels of materialism

Source: adapted from: Hudders and Pandelaere [3*].

Do materialists benefit from experiential consumption?

Only a handful of studies investigated whether materialism moderates the effect of material (vs. experiential) consumption on happiness. Millar and Thomas [23] find that materialistic people are happier than less materialistic people when they recall a material purchase. Interestingly, though, high and low materialistic people were equally happy with experiential purchases. However, while low materialistic people were much happier after recalling an experiential purchase than after recalling a material one, high materialistic people were equally happy in both conditions. As a result, the benefit of experiential (compared to material) consumption is evident for low materialistic people but not high materialistic people.

Zhang *et al.* [8] take a different approach to addressing whether materialism moderates the effect of type of consumption on happiness. Crucial in their research is the distinction they make between materialism as value or disposition, on the one hand, and the tendency to engage in material (vs. experiential) consumption, on the other hand. Although some research suggests that materialistic consumers are more likely to engage in material consumption, being materialistic does not logically

Table 1

Greed Scale.

No matter how much I have of something, I always want more.
One can never have enough.
Even when I am fulfilled, I often seek more.
The pursuit of more and better is an important goal in life for me.
A simple basic life is sufficient for me. (R)
I am easily satisfied with what I've got. (R)

Source: adapted from: Krekels and Pandelaere [49*].

Table 2

Identity needs and materialistic ways of supporting them.

Identity need	Example of materialistic need support
Self-esteem	Undergoing cosmetic surgery to improve satisfaction with one's appearance
Continuity	Acquiring a painting by a local artist from one's childhood hometown
Distinctiveness	Buying custom modifications and brightly colored paint and detailing for one's car
Belonging	Purchasing and wearing local sports team clothing and accessories upon relocation to a new city
Efficacy	Framing and displaying academic diplomas on the wall in one's office
Meaning	Saving income from a second job to purchase a larger 'dream' home for one's family

Source: adapted from: Shrum *et al.* [65*].

constrain people to engage in only, or even predominantly, material consumption. As such, some materialistic people may actually engage in a lot of experiential consumption too. Because of this distinction, Zhang *et al.* [8] investigate how materialism moderates the effect of experiential (vs. material) consumption on well-being as well as how the tendency to favor material consumption [7] moderates that relationship. Although they found no moderation of the effect of experiential (vs. material) consumption on well-being, they did find that people who score low on the tendency to purchase experiences are less likely to benefit from them. Interestingly, experiential buyers were happier when buying experiences than when buying products, but material buyers were equally happy when buying experiences and products.

Although being materialistic and having a tendency to engage in material consumption are distinct conceptually, in many samples these constructs will be moderately to strongly correlated. As such, the main take-away from the studies above is that while less materialistic consumers benefit more from experiential consumption than from material consumption, highly materialistic consumers seem to benefit equally from both types of consumption. This is puzzling because materialistic people view material consumption as much more relevant than experiential consumption [23]; one could thus expect that material buyers would be happier buying products compared to experiences.

Why materialists do not benefit more from material consumption

Materialists are more likely than non-materialists to believe that the acquisition of a product will offer a lot of pleasure, improve the impression one makes on others, facilitate one's relationships with others, and help one become more efficient [24**]. These expectations lead to pre-purchase anticipation which is associated with positive feelings. As many products probably fall short on

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