

MATERIALISM AND LIFE SATISFACTION: A META-ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Although it is widely believed that materialism leads to satisfaction, empirical studies suggest the opposite: that materialism is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. This article integratively reviews studies which have examined the materialism/satisfaction relationship. It shows that the negative correlation between these variables is consistent across all studies. The integrative review is followed by a critique which discusses this negative relationship, suggesting that ideological bias may be a factor in the research findings. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Materialism has recently received a lot of attention in marketing and consumer research (e.g., Belk 1983, 1984, 1985; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and Moore 1982; Richins 1987; Richins and Dawson 1990, 1992) and in other disciplines (e.g., Campbell 1987; Fromm 1976; Lasch 1979; Mukerji 1983; Schudson 1984). Two recent developments suggest that the study of materialism is of growing interest to the discipline of consumer research. First, Belk's (1985) seminal piece on the subject has become one of the most frequently cited articles from the *Journal of Consumer Research* (Cote, Leong, and Cote 1991). Second, the Association for Consumer Research decided to co-sponsor a June, 1992 workshop on materialism.

Belk's work and other past research has associated materialism closely with life satisfaction. Thus, predominant theories conceptualize materialism as the belief that life satisfaction can come from acquiring possessions. While materialism, thus defined, is widespread, researchers generally assume this belief--that things will make one happy--is ill founded. Most studies published on the topic predict a negative correlation between materialism and life satisfaction. As our integrative review of both published and unpublished studies will show,

empirical results in these studies generally confirm this negative correlation.

While empirical work done to date seems to confirm the association between materialism and dissatisfaction, these results are not yet beyond challenge. Following the integrative review, this article examines a possible ideological bias in previous studies that may help account for the negative correlation. The article then discusses potential future directions in the study of materialism and life satisfaction.

INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

Method

This portion of the article describes how the integrative review of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction was conducted. The first subsection discusses the literature search; the second lists criteria used to judge the relevance of studies that were found; the third explains how independent data points (hypothesis tests) were identified; the fourth tells which characteristics of the primary research studies were coded; the fifth describes the scales used in the various studies; and the sixth reviews the conventions that facilitated quantitative analysis of results across different studies.

Literature Search. Data for the integrative review were gathered through several channels. First, informal inquiries turned up three unpublished working papers on materialism and life satisfaction. Two of the three papers were under review, and by the completion of the project, those two had been published, one in a journal, the other in a conference proceedings (Cole et al. 1992; Richins and Dawson 1992).

Work in primary and secondary channels was also reviewed. Each issue of *Advances in Consumer Research* from 1983 to 1992 and all unabstracted issues of the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) were scrutinized for relevant articles. Abstracted issues of JCR and numerous other psychological journals published during the

previous 18 years were searched using PSYCHLIT, an indexing service. The bibliographies of the articles uncovered in these searches were examined and other pertinent empirical and conceptual studies were retrieved.

This search uncovered nine empirical studies and a number of conceptual studies which treated various aspects of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction. All of the empirical studies had been produced by marketing scholars, and all had appeared in marketing journals or conference proceedings.

Criteria for Relevance. In the case of the empirical studies, the main criterion for relevance was that a paper focus on materialism and life satisfaction. This criterion produced the nine articles, two of which were eventually eliminated. That left a total of seven empirical studies that examined the relationship between materialism and life dissatisfaction. (See Table 1 for a listing of these studies.)

Data Points. In the meta-analysis, each hypothesis test in a study was counted as an independent data point if necessary information was present. Consequently, all the studies but one produced multiple data points. The separate data points were extracted in two conditions. The first was when multiple scales were used to measure either materialism or life satisfaction. For example, Belk (1985) correlated his materialism scale with two measures of life satisfaction and, thus, provided two data points, one for each satisfaction measure. The second condition was when well defined subsamples were used in a study. For example, Dawson and Bamossy (1991) provided information on materialism and life satisfaction for three distinct groups: American expatriates living in the Netherlands, citizens of the Netherlands, and American citizens living in the United States. Sirgy et al. (1993) provided information on respondents living in Turkey, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Using all possible pairs of measures, a total of 39 data points were extracted from the seven empirical studies.

Coded Characteristics of Primary Studies. The following information was coded for each

study: the full reference, a description of the phenomenon studied, the conceptual definition of materialism used to guide the study, the unit of analysis, the research design, sample characteristics, sampling technique, the scales used to measure the various constructs, hypotheses, descriptive and inferential statistics, and the substantive results of the study.

Materialism and Life Satisfaction Scales. Three materialism and eight life satisfaction scales were used in the six empirical articles. Each scale is described below.

Belk, who has fueled much of the work on materialism in consumer research, considers materialism to be a personality trait. He defines materialism as:

The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. 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 in life (Belk 1984, p. 291).

According to Belk, materialistic individuals are characterized by three personality traits which he tapped in his materialism measure: 1) *envy*, i.e. "displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of [another] in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable;" 2) *possessiveness*, "the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one's possessions;" and 3) *nongenerosity*, the "unwillingness to give possessions to or share possessions with others" (Belk 1984, pp. 291-292). Belk (1985) combined subscales measuring each of these three traits to get an overall measure of materialism.

Richins (1987) definition of materialism is similar to Belk's, for she defines it as "the idea that goods are a means to happiness; that satisfaction in life is . . . achieved by possession and interaction with goods" (p. 352). However, unlike Belk, Richins views materialism as a value, not as a character trait. She attempts to measure materialism directly, rather than infer it as Belk (1984, 1985) did. The scale she developed has two factors, one which taps the belief that material possessions lead to personal happiness, and another which taps the related belief that money *per se*

Table 1

Data Point	n	Samp. Char.	Mat. Sc.	Sat. Sc.	Mat. Alpha	Source	p-value	Power	ES
Belk (1985) a	338	1,2,3	BK	A	.69	JCR	.001	.93	-.27
Belk (1985) b	338	1,2,3	BK	B	.69	JCR	.001	.93	-.24
Richins (1987)	252	2	R	C	.69	ACR	.01	.95	-.29
Dawson and Bamossy (1990) a	80	2,5	BK	G	.61	ACR	NS	.88	-.45
Dawson and Bamossy (1990) b	127	2,5	BK	G	.62	ACR	NS	.75	-.32
Dawson and Bamossy (1991) a	80	2,5	BK	D	.62	OJ	NS	.15	-.11
Dawson and Bamossy (1991) b	127	2,5	BK	D	.62	OJ	NS	.18	-.19
Dawson and Bamossy (1991) c	60	2,5	BK	D	.83	OJ	.02	.6	-.13
Richins and Dawson (1991) a	205	6	R&D	C	> .8	JCR	NA	.96	-.33
Richins and Dawson (1991) b	205	6	R&D	C	> .8	JCR	NA	.64	-.35
Richins and Dawson (1991) c	205	6	R&D	C	> .8	JCR	NA	.6	-.17
Richins and Dawson (1991) d	205	6	R&D	C	> .8	JCR	NA	.99	-.41
Richins and Dawson (1991) e	205	6	R&D	C	> .8	JCR	NA	.92	-.32
Cole et al. (1991) a	234	2,5	BK	E	.54	DIMS	.01	.99	-.38
Cole et al. (1991) b	234	2,5	BK	C	.54	DIMS	.01	.98	-.36
Cole et al. (1991) c	234	2,5	R	E	.8	DIMS	.01	.94	-.33
Cole et al. (1991) d	234	2,5	R	C	.8	DIMS	.01	.95	-.28
Cole et al. (1991) e	234	2,5	BK	F	.54	DIMS	.01	.98	-.39
Cole et al. (1991) f	234	2,5	R	F	.8	DIMS	.01	.93	-.30
Sirgy et al. (1993) a	139	2	BK	E	.667	WP	NS	.5	-.10
Sirgy et al. (1993) b	249	2	BK	E	.585	WP	.01	.99	-.32
Sirgy et al. (1993) c	180	2	BK	E	.713	WP	.01	.93	-.26
Sirgy et al. (1993) d	233	1	BK	E	.643	WP	.01	.99	-.32
Sirgy et al. (1993) e	234	1	BK	E	.596	WP	.01	.9	-.18
Sirgy et al. (1993) f	139	2	BK	C	.667	WP	NS	.1	-.09
Sirgy et al. (1993) g	249	2	BK	C	.585	WP	.01	.92	-.22
Sirgy et al. (1993) h	180	2	BK	C	.713	WP	.01	.94	-.23
Sirgy et al. (1993) i	233	1	BK	C	.643	WP	.01	.99	-.30
Sirgy et al. (1993) j	234	1	BK	C	.596	WP	.01	.99	-.24
Sirgy et al. (1993) k	139	2	R	E	.728	WP	.05	.78	-.18
Sirgy et al. (1993) l	249	2	R	E	.66	WP	.01	.93	-.21
Sirgy et al. (1993) m	180	2	R	E	.76	WP	.01	.92	-.25
Sirgy et al. (1993) n	233	1	R	E	.731	WP	.01	.99	-.32
Sirgy et al. (1993) o	234	1	R	E	.7	WP	.01	.9	-.20
Sirgy et al. (1993) p	139	2	R	C	.68	WP	.05	.65	-.16
Sirgy et al. (1993) q	249	2	R	C	.728	WP	.05	.81	-.16
Sirgy et al. (1993) r	180	2	R	C	.66	WP	.01	.86	-.21
Sirgy et al. (1993) s	233	1	R	C	.76	WP	.01	.99	-.29
Sirgy et al. (1993) t	234	1	R	C	.731	WP	.01	.92	-.19

Characteristics of Sample

- 1= Student convenience sample
 2= Non-student convenience sample
 3= Other convenience sample
 4= Adolescent, child sample
 5= Non-convenience, non-random sample
 6= Non-convenience, random sample

Abbreviations

- NS= Not significant
 NA= Not available
 JCR= Journal of Consumer Research
 ACR= Advances in Consumer Research
 OJ= Other Journal
 WP= Working paper
 DIMS= Developments in Marketing Science

Materialism Scale

- BK= Belk (1984, 1985)
 R= Richins (1987)
 R&D= Richins and Dawson (1991)

Satisfaction Scale

- A= Gurin et al. (1960)
 B= Bradburn and Caplovitz (1967)
 C= Andrews and Withey (1976)
 D= Dawson and Bamossy (1991)
 E= Meadow et al. (1991)
 F= Kosenko et al. (1989)
 G= Not specified

leads to happiness.

In a later article written with Dawson, Richins (1992) again accepts Belk's basic definition of materialism and again asserts that materialism is a value, not a character trait. It is a value because, for the materialist, "possessions and their acquisition are at the forefront of personal goals that dictate 'ways of life'" (p. 304). Building upon these basic ideas, Richins and Dawson define their own three components of materialism: 1) *acquisition centrality*, a disposition to place the acquisition of possessions and the possessions themselves at the center of one's life; 2) *acquisition as the pursuit of happiness*, a disposition to believe that possessions lead to happiness; and 3) *possession-defined success*, a disposition to judge one's own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions acquired. The Richins and Dawson scale measured each of these three components of materialism.

The studies employed several measures of happiness or life satisfaction. Three used the Andrews and Withey (1976) delighted/terrible satisfaction scale which measures satisfaction with marriage, standard of living, and self-efficacy. Two used the congruity life satisfaction (CLS) scale developed by Meadow et al. (1991). This measure is based on the theory that life satisfaction is a function of comparisons between perceived life accomplishments and a set of evoked standards. These standards are classified by their sources (e.g., accomplishments of relatives, friends, associates; past experience; self-perceived strengths and weaknesses) and their forms (e.g., whether the standards are based on ideal, expected, deserved, minimum tolerable, or predicted outcomes).

Dawson and Bamossy (1991) developed a life satisfaction scale specifically for their study, one that treated satisfaction as a function of happiness with family, career, possessions, neighborhood, health, and level of national security. Other scales used in the studies included the Bradburn and Caplovitz (1967) happiness scale, the Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) satisfaction scale, and the Kosenko, Sirgy, and Efraty (1989) satisfaction measure, a scale based on Maslow's (1970) need hierarchy.

Quantitative Conventions. Several

conventions were used to facilitate the quantitative analysis of results. The effect size indicator was a Fisher's z transformation of the Pearson's r correlation (Fern and Monroe 1992). The transformations, which were roughly the same as the correlation, were used to combine the results so that the homogeneity of results could be tested (Cooper 1984). These indicators were appropriate for the survey data produced in the empirical studies. Since the Fisher's z transformation was used, the homogeneity of results was calculated using the formula,

$$X^2_{homog} = \sum_{i=1}^k (N_i - 3) (Z_{ni} - \bar{Z}_n)^2$$

with $k-1$ degrees of freedom and where N_i is the number of comparisons in the i th study (Rosenthal 1984; Hedges and Olkin 1985).

Results

In this section, the results of the individual materialism studies are synthesized. The first subsection provides a broad quantitative overview of the review's results. The second provides the combined probability results. The third presents an analysis of effect size. The final subsection describes study characteristics that bear on the results.

Quantitative Overview. The results of the quantitative overview are contained in Table 1. As before noted, the literature search uncovered seven studies, suitable for meta-analysis, that examined the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction. Of these, only one (Richins and Dawson 1991) used a non-convenience random sample; the other six used non-random student or other convenience samples. Five studies used the Belk, three the Richins materialism scale, and one study used a materialism scale developed specifically for that study (Richins and Dawson 1992). Turning to the satisfaction scales, one study used the Gurin et al. (1960) and the Bradburn and Caplovitz (1967) happiness and life satisfaction measures; four studies used the Andrews and Withey (1976) delighted/terrible

measure of life satisfaction; two studies, the Meadow et al. (1991) CLS measure; one study, the Kosenko et al. (1989) need hierarchy satisfaction measure; one study, a life satisfaction measure developed specifically for that study; and one study did not specify the satisfaction measure used.

Effect Size Analysis. For the 39 data points in the various studies, the average effect size of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction was $r = -.25$. The chi-square statistic for these 39 data points with 38 degrees of freedom was a non-significant 48.79, $p > .10$. This suggests that the average effect, $r = -.25$, is the best estimate of this effect. Power was calculated using sample size, the effect size indicator (Fisher's z transformation of Pearson's r), and power charts from Lipsey (1990).

Study Characteristics. Several study characteristics bear upon the quality of a study's results. Cooper (1989) has suggested that the source of the data--i.e. journal, conference proceedings, working paper--should be considered since data from journals are usually more reliable and valid than data from conference proceedings or working papers. Of the studies used in this meta-analysis, three had been published in journals (Belk 1985; Dawson and Bamossy 1991; Richins and Dawson 1992), three in conference proceedings (Cole et al. 1992; Dawson and Bamossy 1990; Richins 1987), and one was an unpublished working paper (Sirgy et al. 1993).

All studies reported reliability coefficients for the materialism scales they used, but the Belk scale exhibited poor reliability. Reliabilities in most studies using this scale were below the .70 cutoff recommended by Nunally (1978) for exploratory research. Reliabilities were better for the Richins and best for the Richins and Dawson scale. Evidence of validity was also provided for the latter two scales. With two exceptions (Cole et al. 1991; Sirgy et al. 1993), no reliability data were reported for the life satisfaction measures, although other studies were often cited which did establish the measures' reliability and validity. All seven studies used surveys to collect data, so it is not possible to reject the hypothesis that the results reported in this meta-analysis are method driven

(Brewer and Hunter 1989).

DISCUSSION

A number of theoretical perspectives have been used to account for the negative correlation between materialism and life satisfaction, including existential philosophy (Belk 1988), social comparison theory (Richins 1992), and Diderot unities and the Diderot effect (McCracken 1988). Fournier and Richins (1991) provide a good overview of the many perspectives used to explain this correlation. But while most researchers have sought to provide theoretical explanations for a correlation which they assume to be well established, a few researchers have tried to call the correlation itself into question.

Thus, Schudson (1991) contends that the negative correlation may be an artifact of the political ideology of researchers studying materialism. According to Schudson, many critics of materialism have Marxist or socialist leanings (see also Belk 1983) and are, therefore, especially critical of materialistic tendencies that accentuate differences between classes. The ideology of these critics may cause them to believe, *a priori*, that possessions cannot produce satisfaction because they create a gap between the haves and have-nots, a gap that leads to invidious social comparisons. The inevitable result of such comparisons is dissatisfaction--or so this ideology could lead one to suppose. Researchers with this ideological bias may not seriously consider the possibility that materialistic consumption leads to life satisfaction.

There is ample evidence that ideology can, in fact, influence the design and outcome of a study (Habermas 1973; Kuhn 1970; Murray and Ozanne 1991). Thus, Murray and Ozanne (1991) argue that all researchers are ideologically biased to one extent or another. "The issue," they say, "becomes not whether one can be apolitical in research, but rather what political stance one takes" (p. 130). They claim, further, that scientific reasoning and theorizing is "inseparable" from political action.

The researcher cannot be divided into two beings; a nonpolitical, scientific theorizer and a political, philosophical participator (who votes in political elections, speaks out at city council

meetings, works on policy in academic committees, etc.) (p. 135)

They suggest that the output of research is directly influenced by the researcher's political ideology. In some circumstances, ideology may drive the results.

There is evidence, too, for Schudson's claim that some researchers who have taken a negative view of materialism do have a Marxist or socialist political orientation. Thus, Kilbourne (1992) examines materialism using critical theory, a perspective rooted in neo-Marxist thought (Larsen and Wright 1993). Several researchers who attended the Workshop on Materialism and Other Consumption Orientations sponsored by Queens University and the Association for Consumer Research recommended that the problem of materialism be "solved" by "adopting a socialistic form of government and economy" (from a handout generated in a computer exercise, copies of which are available from the first author). Other researchers have suggested that governments curb advertising to reduce materialism (e.g., Collins and Jacobson 1991; Pollay 1992), an intervention more consistent with a statist than with a libertarian political ideology.

Further support for Schudson's hypothesis on the effects of ideology may be found in the dearth of research on potentially positive consequences of materialistic consumption for individuals and societies. In our review of the literature, we located only a handful of articles that considered positive consequences of materialism for life satisfaction (Belk 1983; Rotzoll 1992; Schudson 1991). As the summary of articles included in the meta-analysis shows, most studies of materialism have focused on the negative consequences of this phenomenon.

If Schudson is right about the effects of ideology, researchers approaching materialism from a different ideological perspective should produce different results. There is some evidence that this may happen. Schudson himself argues that possessions can be a source of genuine meaning for consumers regardless of their social stratum, for ownership can produce pleasure that leads to satisfaction and psychological well-being. Hence, consumers can receive satisfaction from their possessions. This claim is supported, in

some measure, by the growing number of interpretivist studies which have explored the deep meaning possessions hold in the lives of consumers (e.g., Belk 1992, 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Claiborne and Ozanne 1990; McCracken 1989). It is also supported, perhaps, by positivistic work that has examined the relationship between income and satisfaction. Several studies have found a consistent positive correlation between level of income and happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being (Diener 1984; Diener, Horowitz, and Emmons 1985; Diener et al. 1992; Easterlin 1974; Veenhoven 1991).

While these last cited studies may support Schudson's (1991) claim that happiness can come from possessions, caution is warranted. Income and materialism are not the same thing. As defined by Belk (1984, 1985) and Richins and Dawson (1992), materialism is the need for possessions and not the actual acquisition and accumulation of possessions. Thus, it is possible for consumers with little wealth to be materialistic.

Directions for Future Research

Schudson's (1991) claim that ideology drives the results of research on materialism is one area that warrants future study. A study might, for example, investigate whether wealth and materialism are correlated with each other and with measures of happiness, life satisfaction, and subjective well-being. If ideological bias accounts for past results, one might predict the usual negative correlation between materialism and life satisfaction, a positive correlation between wealth and life satisfaction, and a positive correlation between materialism and wealth.

Method bias is another topic that warrants further study. All previous empirical studies examining the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction have relied on survey methodology. The results of these surveys need to be confirmed by studies using other methods--e.g. experiment, naturalistic inquiry--so that the hypothesis of method bias can be ruled out (Brewer and Hunter 1989).

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