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An Olive Branch: Materialism, Life Satisfaction and Self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to examine the relationship between materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction among 17-21 year old undergraduates (75 female, 30 males) pursuing non-commerce courses from Delhi University. The research was divided into two studies. In Study 1, relationship between materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction was examined by administering Richins and Dawson's Material Values Scale (Short form), Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale and Deiner's Satisfaction With Life Scale on 105 undergraduates from Delhi University selected using convenience sampling. Statistical analysis using Pearson's correlation technique demonstrated a significant negative relationship between Materialism and Life Satisfaction and a significant positive relationship between Self-esteem and Life Satisfaction. In Study 2, a one hour intervention session was conducted on convenience sample of 8 females from Study 1 to prime self-esteem. The instruments used in the first study were re-administered following the intervention session. The analysis of the intervention session is still underway and will not be discussed in this paper.

An Olive Branch: Materialism, Life Satisfaction and Self-esteem

Materialism

Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 308) define materialism as a "set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life."

Perspectives on materialism. The following are the perspectives on materialism:

Political perspective. Inglehart suggests that materialism is palpable by the degree to which nations place an emphasis on values involving material things. Inglehart claims that there has been a shift in post-industrial society from materialist to "postmaterialist" values.

Anthropological/sociological

perspective. University Of Chicago Sociologists Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have developed an influential notion of materialism: "If things attract our attention excessively, there is not enough psychic energy left to cultivate the interaction with the rest of the world. The danger of focusing attention excessively on the goal of physical consumption - or materialism - is that one does not attend enough to the cultivation of self, to the relationship with others, or to the broader purposes that affect life" (p. 53).

Marketing perspective. In the marketing literature, Ward and Wackman (1971, p. 422) have defined materialism as "an orientation which views material goods and

money as important for personal happiness and social progress."

The psychological perspective. The psychological perspective began with Belk's work which viewed materialism as a trait and defined it in the following words: "Materialism reflects 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." However, in the past few decades the values approach propounded by Richins which views materialism as a value that guides behavior, has gained prominence and this approach will be adopted in the present study.

Previous research on materialism. Developmental trends in materialism with regard to age have not been the focus of much research in the past. Only a couple of researches have focused on whether the level of materialism in children and adolescents varies with age (Achenreiner, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2003).

Research appeared in the 1970s demonstrating that materialism in adolescents may be correlated with factors such as ineffective family communication patterns, greater peer communication, and higher levels of television viewing (Churchill and Moschis, 1978, 1979 and 1981). Higher levels of materialism have been observed in young consumers with materialistic parents (Goldberg et al. 2003), disrupted families (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton, 1997; Roberts, Tanner, and Manolis, 2005), less affluent households (Goldberg et al. 2003), and greater susceptibility to influence from peers and marketing promotions (Achenreiner, 1997; Goldberg et al., 2003). Strong materialistic values have also been seen to be associated with lessened involvement in family, community, and social issues (Kasser, 2002). Undesirable psychological

and physical outcomes have been shown to relate to materialism (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996 and 2001)

Materialism and life satisfaction. Current literature reports that materialism is negatively related to well-being, quality of life, and satisfaction with life in general (e.g. Richins and Dawson, 1992; Sirgy, 1998; Kasser 2002; Roberts et al., 2005).

An investigation of materialism and undergraduates' life satisfaction was carried out by Ang Chin Siang and Mansor Abu Talib in Malaysia in 2011 on 363 undergraduate students. Results of the study affirmed that materialism (measured by Richins and Dawson's 15-item material values scale) was statistically correlated to life satisfaction (measured by SWLS). Notably, it was also observed that 'Possession-defined Success' items captured the most variance in undergraduates' life satisfaction.

Self-esteem

Rosenberg defined self-esteem as "a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely, the self (1965: 30). Self-esteem is usually broadly defined as a person's overall evaluation of, or attitude toward, her or himself (James, 1890; Leary and MacDonald, 2003; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, and Schimel, 2004).

Theories of self-esteem. The following are the theories of self-esteem reviewed for the study:

Sociometer theory. Sociometer Theory (ST) proposes that Self-esteem aids in serving the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). According to ST, state Self-esteem represents perceptions of one's current relational value in the immediate situation (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). As a result, state Self-esteem fluctuates

depending on the salient social context. However, individuals are also able to report levels of global, or trait, Self-esteem that can demonstrate consistency across time (Kernis and Waschull, 1995).

Terror management theory. According to the theory, development of sophisticated cognitive abilities in humans would have led to the realization that death was inevitable and hence paralyzing terror. Self-esteem is defined as feeling that one is living up to the standards of one's culture, as this provides protection from death via literal or symbolic immortality.

Self determination theory. According to the SDT, humans have three innate psychological needs – competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). This perspective distinguishes between two types of Self-esteem: contingent and true (Deci and Ryan, 1995). Contingent Self-esteem is described as unstable and resulting from conditions that are unsupportive of some or all of the three posited psychological needs. In contrast, true, stable Self-esteem reflects self-worth that does not fluctuate as a function of one's accomplishments.

Several studies reported an increase in Self-esteem during adolescence (Huang, 2010; Pullmann, Allik, and Realo, 2009; Twenge and Campbell, 2001). However, other studies have reported that Self-esteem remains the same (Young and Mroczek, 2003) or may even decrease (McMullin and Cairney, 2004; Robins et al, 2002).

A few available longitudinal studies suggest that self-esteem increases during young adulthood (Huang, 2010; Ort et al 2010). Studies have also illustrated that during middle and late adolescence, and into early adulthood, Self-

esteem stabilizes or even increases (Savin-Williams and Demo, 1983; Harter, 1990).

Self-esteem and life satisfaction. Research has implicated self-esteem to play an important role in determining the level of life satisfaction. This may be illustrated further by the findings of a meta-analysis of 137 different personality constructs undertaken by DeNeve, Kristina M.; Cooper, Harris in 1998 to determine the correlates of subjective well-being (SWB). This study found private collective self-esteem to be one of the traits most closely associated with SWB along with other traits such as hardiness, locus of control, etc.

Self-esteem and materialism. The relationship between materialism and self-esteem has been reviewed and researched repeatedly (Kasser, 2002; Chang and Arkin, 2002; Larson, Sirgy and Wright, 1999; Richins, 1999; Mick, 1996). Kasser conducted a review of the theory and research of the two constructs and postulated an inverse bidirectional relationship between the two while Mick found that the inverse relationship between the two lost significance when controlling for social desirability.

Materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction. One prominent study which focused on all the three variables was conducted by William David Meek in 2007. Meek studied 194 undergraduate students at a Midwestern University in USA. The Material Values Scale by Richins and Dawson (1992) was used along with Belk's Materialism Scale to measure the level of materialism. Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale was used to determine the levels of self-esteem while the Brief Life Satisfaction Scale by Lubin and Whitlock was used to assess 10 domains of life satisfaction. Results showed that life satisfaction had a significant and positive relationship with self-esteem; a significant and negative relationship with personality based materialism,

and did not have a significant relationship with values based materialism.

Subjective Well-being

Subjective well-being consists of three separate but associated components: (1) cognitive evaluations of the conditions of one's life, (2) positive affective states and (3) negative affective states (Campbell 1981; Diener et al. 1985). The cognitive evaluation component of subjective well-being is called life satisfaction. "Life satisfaction is a cognitive assessment of an underlying state thought to be relatively consistent and influenced by social factors" (Ellison et al. 1989).

Research studies (Koivusilta et al., 2002; Berntsson et al. 2001; Currie, 1999; Grob et al., 1999; Kainulainen. 1998; Deiner et al., 1996) indicate that the level of adult and adolescent well being is fairly high regardless of the macrosocial context. It has also been seen that self rated global well being has temporal stability over years (Kainulainen, 1998; Suh et al., 1996).

Theories of subjective well being. The following are the theories of subjective wellbeing considered for this paper:

Top-down perspective. Top-down theories of SWB suggest that people have a genetic predisposition to be happy or unhappy and this determines their SWB "setpoint". Set Point theory implies that a person's baseline or equilibrium level of SWB is a consequence of hereditary characteristics and therefore, almost entirely predetermined at birth. The dynamic equilibrium model of SWB (Headey and Waring, 1992) proposes that personality provides a baseline for emotional responses.

Bottom-up perspective. Bottom-up approaches posit that there are universal basic human needs and happiness results from their

fulfilment. A theory propounded to explain the limited impact of external events on SWB is hedonic adaptation. This theory proposes that positive or negative external events temporarily increase or decrease feelings of SWB, but as time passes people tend to become habituated to their circumstances and have a tendency to return to a personal SWB "setpoint" or baseline level.

Rationale of the Study

Research studies in India have not yet looked at materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction together in relation with one another. Hence it is important to study these variables to determine the nature of the relationship between the two variables.

Past research, while focusing on the association between materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction, has largely ignored evolving interventions in order to increase the self-esteem of individuals in the society. An intervention offers an opportunity to establish a causal relationship between the variables under study.

A lot of research studies while focusing on the variables of interest, have focused on adults or children or adolescents but not young adults. This age group is important to study because this population represents the transition from adolescence to adulthood and hence the phenomenon observed in adolescence or adulthood may or may not hold true for this population. Further, in a longitudinal study young adults have been documented to have high levels of materialism compared to other age groups (Belk, 1985).

Also a research conducted among business graduates in Singapore (Kasser and Ahuvia) demonstrated that pursuing commerce related courses may be associated with higher internalized levels of materialism, hence only

non-commerce students were chosen for the present research.

Delhi, as a cosmopolitan city, invites and accommodates students who are young adults, from all over the country, in order to pursue their specialized courses. Acclimatization to this multicultural metropolitan city spans over a few years. Hence the current research undertook a minimum of four years of stay in Delhi as a criterion for inclusion to the sample.

The present research aims to understand the impact of the level of materialism on the life satisfaction of late adolescents and young adults aged from 17 to 21 years and it also aims to examine the role of self-esteem as a significant variable in determining the nature of this relationship.

The data for the present research has been collected in two parts. The first study, follows a¹. correlational design and is an attempt to assess². the level of materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction among 105 17-21 year old students³. pursuing non-commerce undergraduate courses in the Delhi University using the Material Values Scale (by Richins and Dawson), Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale and Satisfaction With Life⁴. Scale (by Deiner) respectively.

The second study aims to examine the link between self-esteem, materialism and life satisfaction in an experimental context by¹. priming the self-esteem of 17-21 year olds². chosen from the first study using convenience sampling. With the help of an experimental design the study aims to compare the³. relationships between the three variables after the self-esteem prime with the relationships between the variables before the session in order to examine the impact of the intervention on the self-esteem of individuals and also to ascertain whether self-esteem can be treated as a variable

that can be implicated in the relationship observed between life satisfaction and materialism in the first study.

Objectives

1. To assess the degree of materialism, self-esteem and life satisfaction of 17-21 year old students.
2. To examine the interrelationships between the variables under study.
3. To explore the impact of an intervention designed to prime the self-esteem of 17-21 year old students.
4. To explore the impact of an intervention designed to enhance self-esteem on the interrelationships between the variables.

Hypotheses

In the first study the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: An inverse relationship is likely to exist between self-esteem and levels of materialism in the sample of 17-21 year olds.
- H2: An inverse relationship is likely to exist between the levels of materialism and life satisfaction of 17-21 year olds.
- H3: A positive relationship is likely to exist between the self-esteem and life satisfaction of 17.-21 year olds.

In the second study the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H4: Greater levels of self-esteem are likely to be associated with the Self-esteem priming intervention.
- H5: Self-esteem priming intervention will affect levels of life satisfaction and materialism of 17-21 year olds.

Variables.

In the study one (correlational study) level of materialism (inclusive of the dimensions of: a. acquisition centrality, b. possessions as reflective of Success and c. possessions as a source of happiness) were considered as variables.

In study two (self-esteem priming intervention) self-esteem was considered the independent variable.

Method

In the first study, the sample was administered Richins Material Values Scale (short form), Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale and Deiner's Satisfaction with Life Scale in a single setting one after the other and a correlational research was conducted.

A convenience sample of females from the first study was taken for the second study which followed an experimental design in which an intervention was undertaken to prime self-esteem. The impact of the intervention was examined by administering the three scales again to assess the variables of interest.

Sample

For the first study, a sample of 105 undergraduate students of Delhi University was taken. All individuals were between the age group of 17 to 21 years and had done their schooling in India. Only Individuals staying in Delhi or NCR for at least 4 years and having a family income equivalent to or greater than 5 Lakhs per annum were taken. The sample consisted of individuals pursuing non-commerce courses from various colleges across Delhi University. For the intervention, a convenience sample of females who had participated in the first study was taken.

Measures

The instruments used to assess the variables of interest were Richin and Dawson's Scale of Material Values (Shortened Version), Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale and Deiner's Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS). All measures had sound psychometric properties.

Intervention session

The intervention session consisted of four activities and lasted for an hour. The participants were asked to introduce themselves by telling their names, the one thing that they are passionate about, two of their biggest accomplishments and the one thing/person/quality in their life that they're the most grateful about. Then they were given a post-it note, were asked to come up with an adjective to use as a prefix with their name which started with the same letter as their name and stick this note to their clothing.

Then the participants were asked to endorse themselves as if they were a product in order to convince at least two people to become their friends. At the end of every ad, there was voting by the show of hands to see how many people got convinced. Following this activity, they were told to take 5 minutes and list down the 5 things that they do in everyday life that makes them feel happy.

Finally, they were made to play a game called 'hot-seat'. In this game, all participants had to come one by one and sit on a chair placed in the centre of the room, the 'hot seat'. The rest of the participants had to compliment the person sitting on the hot seat based on their interaction with the person within or outside the session.

This was followed by re-administration of the questionnaires and debriefing.

Results

Study One

Data obtained by administering the self-esteem scale, material values scale and satisfaction with life scale was analyzed by using Pearson's correlation method.

Table 1 <i>Correlation Between Variables in Study One</i>		
Variable One	Variable Two	Correlation Coefficient
Materialism	Life Satisfaction	-0.23*
Materialism	Self-esteem	-0.13**
Self-esteem	Life Satisfaction	0.56*
* Correlation significant at 0.05 level (one tailed test) ** Correlation not significant at 0.05 level (one tailed test)		

Study Two

Self-esteem priming intervention was conducted and questionnaires were re-administered. Correlations for the pre and post conditions were calculated, but the analysis of data is underway and hence only the correlation will be presented here without accounting for significance.

Table 2 <i>Correlations for the Pre and Post Test Conditions in Study Two</i>			
		Pre-test	Post-test
Variable One	Variable Two	Correlation	Correlation
Materialism	Life Satisfaction	-0.91	-0.91
Materialism	Self-esteem	-0.13	-0.47
Self-esteem	Life Satisfaction	0.01	0.16

Discussion

The first study aimed to examine the level of self-esteem, materialism and life satisfaction of 17-21 year olds and explore the interrelationships between the three variables. The study hypothesized that an inverse

relationship would be observed between materialism and life satisfaction as well as materialism and self-esteem while life satisfaction and self-esteem would exhibit a positive relationship.

The results document a statistically significant inverse relationship between materialism and life satisfaction with the correlation being significant 0.05 level of two-tailed test. This result is in line with the observations of previous research which has found materialism to be associated with a poor quality of life, low levels of affective well-being and satisfaction with life in general (e.g. Roberts et al. 2005). This observed relationship may be explained using the social comparison theory which posits that needs and desires are usually built on social comparisons and identification with reference groups (Passas, 1997). In a society without fixed social classes, reference groups are often fluid. Once one moves to a new level of affluence, new reference groups may form, and new means and aspirations would make one's current wealth and possessions seem inadequate. Thus materialists may have very unrealistic and abnormally high standard-of-living goals which may lead to greater dissatisfaction with standard of living than non-materialistic goals (Sirgy1988).

A negative relationship was observed between materialism and self-esteem. However this relationship was not significant at 0.05 levels. This relationship has been reviewed and researched repeatedly (Kasser, 2002; Chang and Arkin, 2002; Larson, Sirgy and Wright, 1999; Richins, 1999; Mick, 1996). This inverse relationship may be explained by the fact that individuals with discrepant Self-esteem engage in attempts to deal with psychological discomfort associated with the discrepancy, including various forms of self-enhancement (Jordan et al 2003; Zeigler-Hill and Terry, 2007). A focus on

material goods is an important way that consumers attempt to build and communicate a more positive self image (Belk, 1988; Escalas and Bettman, 2003; Solomon, 1983). Thus, essentially concern over how one is viewed by others, which is a characteristic of low self-esteem (e.g. Leary, 2004) has been associated with materialism. In the present study, however, while a negative relationship has been observed, it is not significant. This may be due to small size of the sample and a larger sample may have been more helpful in illustrating a statistically significant negative relationship between the variables. Thus generalizations would have to be made with caution.

A statistically significant positive relationship was observed between life satisfaction and self-esteem. Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive as well as bidirectional relationship between the two variables of interest. Research has implicated self-esteem to be an important part of the factor structure of subjective well being (DeNeve, Kristina M.; Cooper, Harris, 1998). This relationship may be explained in terms of the additive or the interactive models. According to the Additive models, the presence of a high self-esteem acts as a protective factor which subsequently lead to a higher level of well being and hence greater life satisfaction. According to buffering hypothesis (interactive model), factors such as self-esteem may interact with risk factors such as poverty and their impact may influence the outcomes under highly stressful situations.

The second study consisted of a Self-esteem priming intervention session. The analysis of data derived from the intervention session is under analysis and hence cannot be interpreted or discussed here. However, the subjective experience of the participants immediately after the session has been presented in the table 3.

Table 3 <i>Subjective Experiences of Participants</i>	
Participant	Subjective Experience
01.	"I thought the session was interesting and created a feel good atmosphere. It was fun overall and the best activity was the one in which we had to endorse why we would be good friends."
02.	"I really liked the session especially the activity which involved complimenting other and getting complimented. That is because even though we all know some things about ourselves. The activity about writing things that make us happy everyday really brought things into perspective for me. For example, 2 things on my list were eating malai jam sandwich, talking to my best friend and watching grey's anatomy."
03.	"It was a good session. I liked the hot-seat part the most-it made me feel very good. There was nothing that I didn't like!"
04.	"It was a great experience. I got to know many people. It was a good interactive session. My favourite part was when people had to tell what they thought of me. It was good to know what people thought of me at our first meeting."
05.	"The activities were very interesting. The best activity I felt was the first one where we spoke about our accomplishments and stuff because it forced us to be retrospective and introspective. It told me what I've done and at the same time to remember and cherish the things I am grateful for. Thanks for the experience."
06.	"The activity that I found the most interesting was giving nicknames to ourselves. It was mix of heart and head. The session really made me feel good about myself."
07.	"I loved the session. I have, since my kindergarden years, wanted to be perceived as an intelligent person and today's session was a dream come true when I was repeatedly told my others that I am seen by them as someone who can hold intellectually stimulating conversations. All the activities made me feel very good and I liked all of them equally well. Thank you so much for doing this!"
08.	"I really enjoyed the session. It made me feel happy, it wasn't something that I was expecting and you made an effort to make us feel good about everything. I really liked the activity in which you asked us to give compliments to each other. It was lots of fun. It was an Eca period well spent!"

Limitations

The present study was conducted on a convenience sample of 105 young adults from Delhi University and the small sample size may be seen as a limitation because it doesn't allow for any generalizations to be made as the sample is not representative of the population of interest and may not capture the true essence of the interrelationships among variables.

The Self-esteem priming intervention involved a single session and thus was limited in its impact on the self-esteem of individuals. The session may not have produced any long term effect on the global self-esteem of the individuals at all.

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About the Author



Shivangi Gupta has done a review on research conducted upon attachment styles in adolescent romantic relationships, a project on how advertisements create gender stereotypes in the minds of young children, etc. She is fascinated by personality psychology (particularly the Jungian school of thought), cognitive neuroscience as well as developmental psychology. She has keen interest in pursuing research within psychology as she feels that research is fundamental to the growth of any discipline.