



# Will materialism lead to happiness? A longitudinal analysis of the mediating role of psychological needs satisfaction



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## ABSTRACT

Materialism represents the importance of possessions in one's life. While high materialism ones keep seeking happiness from external goals such as money, status, and appearance, self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness should be satisfied in order to experience well-being. However, materialism, as a type of extrinsic motivation, may forestall the fulfillment of psychological needs, and then undermine personal well-being. Drawing on the view of SDT, we conducted a longitudinal study to test how materialism indirectly influences subjective well-being (SWB) and depression via psychological needs satisfaction. Data was collected from Chinese students in three waves (with 6 and 12 months in between, respectively), and a total of 565 participants completed all of the three surveys. Using structural equation modeling, the cross-lagged model revealed that psychological needs satisfaction fully mediated the effects of materialism on SWB and depression. Specifically, materialism impairs individuals' psychological needs satisfaction, and in turn decreases SWB and increases depression.

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## 1. Introduction

With increasing economic development, we are exposed to mass messages in our daily life telling that money, possessions, status, and image are important. That is why in recent decades, materialism has emerged as a topic of great interest among philosophers, religious leaders, and economists, as well as researchers; it was even identified as one of the basic human characteristics together with greed, avarice, and financial self-interest (Kasser, 2016).

Materialism is related to a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life (Richins and Dawson, 1992, p. 308), and/or goals to obtain external approval and rewards such as financial success, social recognition, and an appealing image that are frequently expressed via money and possessions (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996). Previous studies have shown clearly that materialism brings many problematic outcomes: it is detrimental for individuals' financial and consumption behaviors (Dittmar, Long, and Bond, 2007), interpersonal relationships (Pieters, 2013), work and educational motivations (Ku, Dittmar, and Banerjee, 2012), and also personal well-being (Jiang, Song, Ke, Wang, and Liu, 2016).

Well-being is becoming a popular policy concern in not only economically developed but also developing countries. For instance, since the economic reforms began, China has launched a series of welfare reforms related to citizens' well-being (Chan, Ngok, and Phillips, 2008). Moreover, throughout the world, people are granting increasing importance to subjective well-being (SWB). SWB, referring to both people's affective and cognitive evaluations of their lives, is sometimes labeled as "happiness" (Diener, 2000). Diener (2000) indicated that even in societies that are not fully westernized, participants considered SWB to be very important and thought about it frequently.

According to Richins and Dawson (1992), highly materialistic individuals have a tendency to consider money and possessions as the center of success and life, and the source of happiness. That is to say, they are likely to treat possessions as one of the channels to pursue well-being, since money enables them to live in desirable ways (Richards, 2016). Interestingly, there is considerable research evidence indicating that materialistic ones may suffer from a lack of happiness due to over-concern with possessions (Jiang et al., 2016). Materialistic orientation is even postulated to necessarily be associated with materialistic depression (Azibo, 2013).

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides one possible explanation for the negative effect of materialism on well-being from the perspective of needs. In SDT, needs specify "innate psychological nutrients that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (Deci and Ryan, 2000, p. 229). SDT maintains that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are three basic psychological needs:

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autonomy involves perceiving that activities are endorsed by or congruent with one's integrated sense of self; competence is fulfilled when desired effects and outcomes are obtained successfully; and relatedness pertains to belongingness and closeness with others and the environment (Deci and Ryan, 2014; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan, 2000). Basic psychological needs facilitate well-being and they determine to some extent whether people will display mental health or experience happiness (Deci and Ryan, 2000). When people place priority on financial success, popularity, appearance, and other extrinsic motivations, they are likely to ignore the inherent satisfaction of basic psychological needs, leading to a decrease in well-being and an increase in psychological problems (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007).

The negative association between materialism and well-being, as well as the mediating role of psychological needs satisfaction served in their relation have been proposed by previous researchers (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, and Kasser, 2014). However, the empirical evidence is relatively limited, or, initial studies simply relied on cross-sectional data (Chen, Yao, and Yan, 2014; Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, and Carlisle, 2014). Mediation is a causal chain involving at least two causal relations. When inferences about causality are derived from cross-sectional data, they are often fallacious (Cole and Maxwell, 2003). It is difficult to tell whether the emphasis on materialistic values/goals impairs psychological needs satisfaction, or the thwarted needs satisfaction motivates focal persons to pursue materialism. For example, researchers have found that enhancing interpersonal security can reduce valuing possessions (Clark et al., 2011). Therefore, it is believed that in the area of materialism, improvements in study designs are warranted (Kasser, 2016): longitudinal studies will make contributions to uncovering the causal relations between materialism and well-being outcomes, and their underlying mechanisms.

By employing a three-wave longitudinal design, the purpose of this study aims at exploring how materialism links to personal well-being via psychological needs satisfaction from the perspective of SDT. Inspired by the results of Dittmar and colleagues' meta-analysis, we chose one positive (i.e., SWB) and one negative (i.e., depression) indicator to represent well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014). We expected that psychological needs satisfaction would mediate relations between materialism and both SWB and depression. Specifically, when people prioritize materialistic values/goals, they will experience relatively low satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Then, they will hold low levels of SWB and high levels of depression.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Our participants were undergraduate students from a university in Eastern China. A three-wave cross-lagged design was used, and the sample size of each wave was 908 in Wave 1 (392 males, 488 females, 28 unspecified;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.42$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.08$  years); 657 in Wave 2 (262 males, 395 females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.91$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.04$  years); and 680 in Wave 3 (256 males, 424 females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.79$  years,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.04$  years). In total, 565 students (204 males, 361 females) ranging in age from 17 to 23 years ( $M = 19.34$  years,  $SD = 1.06$  years) completed all of the three waves. Compared with the first wave, the response rate of this study was 62.22%. The distribution of participants' yearly family income was shown as follows: <3000 RMB (2.1%); 3001 to 6000 RMB (5.0%); 6001 to 10,000 RMB (12.4%); 10,001 to 30,000 RMB (24.8%); 30,001 to 50,000 RMB (21.5%); 50,001 to 100,000 RMB (16.7%); 100,001 to 150,000 RMB (6.8%); 150,001 to 200,000 RMB (2.6%); >200,001 RMB (2.0%); and missing value (6.1%).

In each wave, participants were required to complete all the scales to measure the target variables, and to provide their demographic information. The interval between Wave 1 and Wave 2 was 6 months, and between Wave 2 and Wave 3 was 12 months. We did not explain the purpose of this study to participants until the survey of Wave 3 was

collected. After finishing each survey, participants received a gift (costs around 5 RMB) as a token of appreciation.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Materialism

Materialism was measured by the Material Values Scale (Richins and Dawson, 1992), which includes 18 items belonging to three dimensions (success, centrality, and happiness). Participants rated all the items on a five-point scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." Example item is "Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions". Higher scores indicate higher levels of materialism. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients were 0.69 for Wave 1, 0.73 for Wave 2, and 0.75 for Wave 3.

#### 2.2.2. Psychological needs satisfaction

Basic Need Satisfaction in Relationships Scale (BNS) (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, and Deci, 2000) was used. It has 9 items and three subscales, that is, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, based on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 "completely contradictory to reality" to 7 "completely conforms to reality." Example item includes "I feel free to be whom I am". An overall score of need fulfillment was obtained by averaging all of the nine items. Higher scores represent higher levels of satisfaction of psychological needs. In the current sample, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of the whole scale were 0.81 for Wave 1, 0.80 for Wave 2, and 0.80 for Wave 3.

#### 2.2.3. Subjective well-being

Following previous research (e.g., Hayes and Joseph, 2003), SWB was measured by the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, 1985). Participants indicated their agreement about each item on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree." Higher scores show higher levels of life satisfaction. An example item from this scale is "In most ways my life is close to my ideal." The SWLS is a trait-like measure yielding desirable psychometric properties (Diener et al., 1985). In this sample, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of SWLS were 0.79 for Wave 1, 0.83 for Wave 2, and 0.86 for Wave 3.

#### 2.2.4. Depression

The short form of Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Cole, Rabin, Smith, and Kaufman, 2004) was employed. It includes 10 items such as "I felt fearful", which belong to 4 dimensions. Participants indicated how often they had felt these ways during the past week on a three-point scale anchored from 0 "rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)" to 3 "most or all of the time (5–7 days)." Higher scores indicate higher levels of depression. In this sample, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients were 0.74 for Wave 1, 0.74 for Wave 2, and 0.80 for Wave 3.

## 3. Results

Missing data (e.g., wave nonresponse), as a part of longitudinal data set, should be accounted for in data analysis in order to draw valid conclusions. Moreover, we found the significant gender ( $\chi^2 = 45.51$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and age differences (Age Time 1:  $t = -3.61$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Age Time 2:  $t = -2.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; Age Time 3:  $t = -2.94$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between participants who dropped out and participants who continued in the study, showing our data were not randomly missing. Therefore, the Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) estimation approach was employed to deal with missing data (Little and Rubin, 2002; Muthén, Kaplan, and Hollis, 1987). FIML replaces missing data with probable values by using the linear relationship between the variable with missing data and other variables in the model. Compared with other techniques such as listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, and

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