

# Does materialism really lead to lower life satisfaction? Surprising new study suggests otherwise

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New research casts doubt on the belief that heightened materialism leads to reduced life satisfaction. The results of the study suggest that the negative association between materialism and life satisfaction observed in past research might not be due to materialism itself causing lower life satisfaction, but rather because people who tend to be more materialistic also tend to have certain stable characteristics that are linked to lower life satisfaction.

The findings have been published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

“I started researching this topic during my PhD under supervision of Professor Rik Pieters,” said study author [Esther Jaspers](#), a senior lecturer at Massey University in Wellington, New Zealand.

“Materialism is generally perceived as something negative. However, possessions and their acquisition play an important role in all of our lives. We are interested in this topic because we want to deepen our understanding of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction, and specifically, to find out if materialism is bad for people’s well-being, as is commonly believed.”

The study followed 6,551 people over three years to investigate the relationship between materialism and subjective well-being. The participants completed assessments between 2013 and 2015. The first asked questions regarding their

demographics, the second used the Material Values Scale to measure materialism, and the third used the Satisfaction with Life Scale to measure subjective well-being.

The Material Values Scale consists of several items that assess three different facets of materialism: the belief that acquiring possessions will increase happiness, the belief that possessions are indicators of success, and the belief that possessions are central to one's life.

The researchers used a statistical technique called the random-intercept cross-lagged panel model (RI-CLPM) to look at how materialism and life satisfaction relate to each other over time. This model separates stable differences between people from changes over time by using "random intercepts." This helps to get more accurate estimates of how materialism and life satisfaction are longitudinally correlated with one another.

The study found that the analysis strategy had important impacts on the results and that traditional longitudinal analyses may suggest spurious causal relationships. The traditional analysis showed a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction, consistent with prior studies. However, the more advanced RI-CLPM analysis found no longitudinal effects of composite materialism on life satisfaction, or vice versa.

Instead, more materialistic people tended to have lower life satisfaction overall. But the model did not find a significant link between intra-individual changes in materialism and changes in life satisfaction over time.

In other words, the results suggest that the negative association between materialism and life satisfaction is mostly due to differences between people (i.e., some people are more materialistic and less satisfied with life), rather than changes in materialism and life satisfaction within the same person over time.

"We do find that materialism and life satisfaction are negatively related at the population level," Jaspers told PsyPost. "That is, people who value possessions and acquisitions more than others report lower levels of life satisfaction. However, we do not find evidence that changes in materialism within people lead to subsequent changes in life

satisfaction. This means that there might be other factors that are associated with both materialism and life satisfaction that could be responsible for the negative relation.”

Interestingly, when examining the particular facets of materialism, the researchers found that decreases in life satisfaction were associated with higher subsequent scores on the happiness facet of materialism.

“Even though we did not find that materialism leads to reduced life satisfaction, we did find that people who experienced lower life satisfaction increased in their belief that having more possessions would make them happier,” Jaspers explained. “This belief represents one of three facets of materialism as it is commonly defined and measured in materialism research.”

“This result suggests that materialism, at least to some extent, may be a coping strategy for people. Even though there are some studies that support this idea, the focus in the literature is usually on the effect of materialism on life satisfaction, and not the other way around.”

Longitudinal studies are better at understanding the order of effects than cross-sectional studies. Although they can’t establish causation like randomized controlled trials, they provide stronger evidence for reciprocal effects. However, the new study, like all research, includes some limitations.

“We did not examine external factors that may be causing the negative relation between materialism and life satisfaction that we observe at the population level,” Jaspers told PsyPost. “In addition, our longitudinal data contained measurements of materialism and life satisfaction that were approximately 6 months apart and spanned 3 years in total. The findings may be different with different time intervals between measurements. For instance, changes in materialism over the course of multiple years might impact life satisfaction and vice versa.”

The study, “[Materialism and life satisfaction relations between and within people over time: Results of a three-wave longitudinal study](#)”, was authored by Esther D. T. Jaspers, Mario Pandelaere, Rik G. M. Pieters, and L. J. Shrum.

