

THE PURSUIT OF POSSESSIONS

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The Pursuit of Possessions Is an Unsustainable Source of Satisfaction

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the pursuit of possessions is an unsustainable source of satisfaction. The pursuit of possessions is the motivation to purchase material items as a fundamental source of happiness. I support my position with the following three arguments. First, pursuing possessions leads to poor financial decisions. The fulfillment of material desires can develop into a compulsive spending habit entailing financial jeopardy. Second, pursuing possessions inflates happiness levels to unattainable heights. High-involvement consumerism releases dopamine at unsustainable volumes. Third, pursuing possessions degrades social morality. Engaging in materialistic consumerism instills narcissism within individuals. I also consider the alternative arguments. These arguments claim that pursuing possessions can extrinsically motivate employees, increase living standards, and stimulate confidence. While these positions have merit, I show that pursuing possessions financially burdens employees, reduces quality of life, and incites narcissism. I conclude by providing recommendations to diminish the impact of materialism in society.

Keywords: Materialism, pursuit of possessions, high-engagement consumerism, dopamine, standards of living

The Pursuit of Possessions Is an Unsustainable Source of Satisfaction

In this paper, I argue that the pursuit of possessions is an unsustainable source of satisfaction. I define the pursuit of possessions as the desire to acquire material items as an essential means of achieving happiness. The pursuit of possessions is becoming increasingly prevalent because of its association with affluence and prestige. A 2009 journal article found a consistent generational increase in the attribution of material possessions as a primary source of instant gratification (Christopher et al., 2009). However, despite its short-term benefits, adopting a materialistic life approach inversely impacts individuals' life satisfaction in the long run. Thus, this paper explores how the long-term financial, emotional, and social consequences of the pursuit of possessions render it an unsustainable source of satisfaction.

I support my position on the pursuit of possessions as an unsustainable source of satisfaction with the following three arguments. First, I argue that the pursuit of possessions leads to poor financial decisions. Tatzel (2002) reinforces this argument by affirming that while it stimulates satisfaction momentarily, acquiring material possessions may develop into a compulsive spending habit entailing guilt and debt. Second, I argue that the pursuit of possessions engenders inflated, unattainable happiness levels. Flurry et al. (2021) concur that by seeking the acquisition of increasingly valuable possessions, materialistic individuals' dopamine levels may never reach a sustainable equilibrium, leading to chronic dissatisfaction. Finally, I argue that the pursuit of possessions diminishes individuals' social morality. According to Pilch and Gornik-Durose (2017), materialistic spending tendencies strongly correlate with narcissism and egocentricity, negatively impeding individuals' interpersonal relations and general social morality.

I also consider three alternative views to my position. First, some people claim that the pursuit of possessions extrinsically motivates individuals in the workplace (Brooks & Al-Asfour, 2020). Second, others evaluate the claim that the pursuit of possessions can reward individuals with increased standards of living (Yu et al., 2019). Third, many argue that the pursuit of possessions stimulates confidence (Martin et al., 2019). I show that the above

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claims have merit but that they may not be considering the full picture. For instance, while it extrinsically motivates individuals in the workplace, the pursuit of possessions encourages compulsive spending habits that ultimately nullify its productive benefits (Tatzel, 2002).

This paper is important because it brings to light the underlying consequences of the pursuit of possessions that individuals fail to anticipate when implementing a materialistic lifestyle. In contemporary society, many individuals are enticed by the pursuit and accumulation of material possessions because they perceive it to be a pathway to prosperity and happiness. However, in most cases, these individuals subject themselves to financial, emotional, and social jeopardy that inversely contribute to their overall well-being and satisfaction in life. As such, it is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that the evidence, however unexpected it may appear to be, is made available to the public so that informed decisions can be made.

Opposition to the Pursuit of Possessions

In contrast to its perceived benefits, the pursuit of possessions introduces a host of detrimental effects that cannot be ignored. One primary detriment of the pursuit of possessions is that it leads to poor financial decisions by encouraging compulsive spending habits. Another detriment of the pursuit of possessions is that it engenders inflated, unattainable happiness levels by stimulating excessive dopamine. The pursuit of possessions also degrades social morality by instilling antagonistic narcissism within individuals, diminishing their social morality. Therefore, the pursuit of possessions introduces financial, emotional, and social complexities that render it an unsustainable source of satisfaction.

Poor Financial Decisions

The pursuit of possessions leads to poor financial decisions. More specifically, materialism encourages individuals to acquire financially demanding possessions at the expense of spending beyond their monetary capabilities. For example, in a study exploring the effects of materialism on consumer behavior, Tatzel (2020) proposes that because materialists engage in high-involvement consumerism excessively, they are more prone to

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overspending than non-materialists. The author reinforces this proposition by suggesting that the leading stimuli responsible for overspending are the desire of acquiring bragging rights, keeping up with social trends, or experiencing instant gratification, all of which are incentives synonymous with the pursuit of possessions. However, while such materialistic stimuli may induce momentary satisfaction, Tatzel (2020) claims that their emotional contributions pale in comparison to their negative effects on individuals' financial welfare. Accordingly, the author posits that materialists' momentary emotional satisfaction upon acquiring material goods will be followed shortly by demanding monetary liabilities, rendering their lifestyle unsustainable. Therefore, the pursuit of possessions influences individuals to make spontaneous and financially inconsiderate purchase decisions, ultimately diminishing their satisfaction.

In addition to its encouragement of overspending, the pursuit of possessions also leads to the underdevelopment of the principles of financial management. According to Martin et al. (2019), because materialists characteristically place a higher value on acquiring material possessions to attain immediate gratification, their long-term financial security and investment strategies fall inferior to non-materialists, leading to economic crises. Accordingly, Flurry et al. (2021) concurs that by failing to balance between consumption, investment, and saving, materialists can subject themselves to debt, economic uncertainty, and missed investment opportunities, diminishing their ability to develop wealth and affluence. Furthermore, materialists' negligence of saving and investment may render them prone to social exploitation, manipulation, and corruption. More specifically, Tatzel (2020) suggests that by disregarding the principles of financial management, materialists increase their vulnerability to financial scams, adversely impacting their financial welfare. As a result, the pursuit of possessions dissuades individuals from pertinent financial saving and investment disciplines, adversely contributing to their quality of life and personal satisfaction.

Unattainable Happiness Levels

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The pursuit of possessions engenders inflated, unattainable happiness levels. Materialism stimulates the release of happiness hormones at volumes that overburden individuals from experiencing satisfaction in rudimentary conditions. These happiness hormones, namely serotonin, endorphins, oxytocin, and dopamine, are neurotransmitters that generate feelings of gratification and satisfaction in response to pleasurable stimuli (Davis & Loxton, 2013). When materialists engage in consumerism, dopamine is predominantly released in the brain, stimulating pleasure and reinforcing the behavior of acquiring possessions. Accordingly, through hypothesis testing, Flurry et al. (2021) shows that while it induces pleasure through immediate dopamine release, the pursuit of possessions shifts individuals' dopamine thresholds to unattainable heights in the long run, inversely contributing to their happiness levels. This shift occurs because as excessive consumerism becomes a conventional activity in materialists' lives, their dopamine response to material acquisitions diminishes exponentially, leading to decreased satisfaction levels. As such, the pursuit of possessions inversely contributes to individuals' happiness by stimulating excessive dopamine levels momentarily, negatively contributing to their satisfaction in the long run.

Along with its adverse influence on dopamine release, the pursuit of possession also encourages individuals to pursue happiness externally instead of internally. For instance, according to Christopher et al. (2009), materialistic individuals tend to have lower levels of well-being and satisfaction than non-materialists because of their negligence of internal sources of happiness, such as personal growth and relationships. More specifically, the authors attribute materialists' lack of internal enthusiasm to their feelings of social inadequacy and excessive consumerism. As a result, materialists inherently seek temporary happiness through a life of excessive material expenditures rather than developing meaningful social relationships. This financially demanding life approach can develop into an endless psychological cycle of desire and acquisition, achieving the inverse of the perceived

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emotional benefits of the pursuit of possessions. Therefore, the pursuit of possessions discourages individuals from finding happiness internally.

Degradation of Social Morality

The pursuit of possessions degrades individuals' social morality. Studies have shown that materialism instills narcissism within individuals, adversely impacting their relationships. Narcissism is a personality trait characterized by excessive self-centeredness and a strong desire for attention and admiration from others (Nehrlich et al., 2019). While narcissism and materialism are not inherently linked, a behavioral study conducted by Pilch and Gornik-Durose (2017) affirms that the pursuit of possessions can contribute to the development of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. That is, by conducting a regression analysis of survey results, the study demonstrates a strong, positive, and linear relationship between materialistic spending tendencies and narcissism. Accordingly, the study's authors attribute the positive correlation between the two variables to materialists' focus on external validation, pursuit of wealth and power, and lack of emotional depth, all of which regress individuals' social morality. Therefore, the pursuit of possessions ingrains narcissism within individuals, negatively affecting their social behavior.

In addition to its stimulation of narcissistic characteristics, the pursuit of possessions also encourages unethical behavior as a means of attaining material success. For example, in a study exploring materialists' financial management, Genita et al. (2018) infer that financially unprosperous materialists have shown a growing tendency to resort to unethical methods of making money to fund their materialistic desires. The study explains this conclusion by suggesting that the consequences of conducting ethical misconduct in the form of theft, money laundering, and labor exploitation pale in comparison to the impulsive needs of materialists. Furthermore, the authors claim that that engaging in unethical activities to acquire funds can have an adverse effect not only on individuals but on society as a whole. This claim is derived from the observation that pursuing such activities can cultivate an environment where satisfying material desires is more of a necessity than the preservation of

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financial integrity. As a consequence, individuals in pursuit of possessions not only engage in environmental and economic corruption in society but also contribute to the development of a culture based on principles of greed and manipulation. Thus, the pursuit of possessions encourages individuals to acquire funds unethically.

Arguments for the Pursuit of Possessions

Some people believe that the pursuit of possessions is an advantageous life approach. For example, they argue that the pursuit of possessions is an effective extrinsic motivator in the workplace. In addition, many argue that the pursuit of possessions rewards hard-working individuals with increased standards of living. Some also correlate the pursuit of possessions with increased confidence. Thus, the opposition claims that the pursuit of possessions improves individuals' productivity, quality of life, and personality, positively contributing to their satisfaction.

Extrinsic Workplace Motivation

Critics claim that the pursuit of possessions is an effective extrinsic motivator in the workplace. In workplace contexts, extrinsic motivators, primarily financial incentives, can be exploited to increase employee productivity effectively. This increase in productivity is explained by Vroom's expectancy theory of motivation, which suggests that the strength of employee motivation is proportional to the expectation that performing a task will be followed by a desirable reward (Lee, 2007). Accordingly, Brooks and Al-Asfour (2020) statistically infer a strong, positive, and linear relationship between financial rewards and employee productivity, attributing the effectiveness of financial rewards as extrinsic motivators to the upsurge of materialism in society. In addition to its increasing effectiveness, the study projects that as employees' materialistic standards increase, the motivational value of financial rewards will increase, leading to enhanced satisfaction levels. As such, the opposition claims that the pursuit of possessions is a sustainable source of satisfaction because it extrinsically motivates individuals in the workplace.

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Despite a strong correlation between the pursuit of possessions and extrinsic motivation, studies have shown that being primarily motivated by material possessions leads to compulsive spending habits, thereby achieving an inverse financial effect on hard-working individuals. For instance, as explained by Tatzel (2002) in her analysis of the effects of materialism on consumer behavior, the pursuit of possessions encourages individuals to be financially lenient when purchasing high-involvement products. Consequently, as materialistic employees acquire increasingly valuable financial rewards for their productive efforts in the workplace, their financial leniency will lead them to make progressively costlier purchases, adversely contributing to their financial conditions. In addition, as detailed in their study of materialists' well-being, Christopher et al. (2009) suggest that although acquiring highly valuable products can be a rewarding experience for those who have earned their financial liberty, pursuing the acquisition and ownership of material possessions may lead to dissatisfaction in other aspects of life. Accordingly, while it can be an effective mechanism to ignite employee productivity in the workplace, the pursuit of possessions introduces emotional risks that may hinder employees from experiencing desirable satisfaction levels in the long run. Therefore, despite its instrumentality in extrinsically motivating individuals in the workplace, the pursuit of possessions introduces financial and emotional challenges that render it an unsustainable source of satisfaction.

Manifestation of Increased Standards of Living

Others argue that the pursuit of possessions rewards hard-working individuals with increased standards of living. In a statistical study exploring how materialistic individuals respond to increased income differently than non-materialists, Yu et al. (2020) infer that materialism facilitates guiltless spending as income increases, leading to increased standards of living, quality of life, and well-being. Additionally, the authors attribute materialists' attainment of higher standards of living to their spontaneous approach to spending, which allows them to make instantaneous and sound economic decisions without experiencing post-purchase cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, the study suggests that materialists tend to be

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more successful in achieving their financial objectives than non-materialists because of their innate desire and motivation for wealth and luxury, further reinforcing materialism's manifestation of increased standards of living. Accordingly, the opposition claims that the pursuit of possessions is a sustainable source of satisfaction because it can reward individuals with increased standards of living.

While it rewards individuals with increased standards of living, studies have shown that the pursuit of possessions simultaneously diminishes individuals' quality of life. In their study examining the effects of the pursuit of possessions on adolescents' happiness levels, Flurry et al. (2021) claim that as materialistic adolescents' standards of living increase, their satisfaction and quality of life decrease. This negative relationship is attributed to materialists' incapability of being satisfied, which causes their momentary appreciation of increased standards of living to be followed shortly by feelings of inadequacy and discontentment. In addition, in a behavioral study analyzing the external factors affecting materialists' satisfaction levels, Pilch and Gornik-Durose (2017) infer that materialists experience an underlying negative response to increased standards of living because of their constant comparisons to aspirational and reference groups. This negative response not only instills feelings of jealousy within materialists, but it also inhibits them from experiencing happiness upon achieving hard-earned material success. As such, while it can reward individuals with increased standards of living, the pursuit of possessions engenders emotional drawbacks that outweigh its material benefits.

Confidence Stimulus

Many people also argue that the pursuit of possessions increases individuals' confidence and self-esteem. Martin et al. (2019) concur by providing statistical evidence that as individuals grow older, their perceived self-worth decreases, increasing their materialistic needs. The authors justify this conclusion by claiming that because aging beyond a certain point decreases self-esteem, adults instinctively resort to material possessions as a coping mechanism to compensate for their degrading confidence levels. In addition to its positive

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contribution to aging individuals' confidence levels, the pursuit of possessions instills confidence within the youth (Martin et al., 2019). More specifically, the study posits that by embracing a materialistic life approach, the youth can prematurely develop an entrepreneurial and independent character, positively contributing to their confidence and self-esteem. Accordingly, the opposition argues that the pursuit of possessions is a sustainable source of satisfaction because it stimulates confidence.

The pursuit of possessions may increase confidence and self-esteem, but studies have shown that it predominantly instils characteristics of antagonistic narcissism within individuals. In a study examining the effect of materialism on social morality, Pilch and Gornik-Durose (2017) infer a strong, positive, and linear relationship between narcissism and materialism as income increases, indicating that the pursuit of possessions unfavourably amplifies materialists' characteristic self-centred social behaviour. This conclusion is derived from the observation that the pursuit of possessions encourages individuals to seek external sources of social superiority, such as validation, status, and attention, leading to the development of selfish characteristics. Additionally, as explained by Christopher et al. (2009) in their behavioural analysis of materialists, while materialistic spending stimulates confidence, it simultaneously instils overwhelming characteristics of social inhibition within individuals, negatively contributing to their general morality. The study justifies the disproportion between narcissism and confidence by affirming that because materialists appraise themselves according to their material possessions, their social interactions will characteristically involve sensitivity to negative criticism and rejection. Therefore, while it instils confidence within individuals, the pursuit of possessions stimulates narcissism that decreases individuals' social morality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the pursuit of possessions is an unsustainable source of satisfaction. With the generational increase of materialism, the pursuit of possessions gradually eclipses people's lives with its deceptive cycle of desire and acquisition. First, I

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highlighted the detrimental financial effects of the pursuit of possessions that materialists experience because of their excessive engagement in high-involvement consumerism. Such financial repercussions are attributed to materialism's encouragement of spontaneous spending behaviour, which can lead to debt. Second, I argued that the pursuit of possessions introduces emotional impacts that lead to unattainable happiness levels in the long run. The perpetual cycle of desire and acquisition stimulates dopamine release at detrimental volumes, inversely contributing to individuals' satisfaction levels. Lastly, I demonstrated the correlation between the pursuit of possessions and decreased social morality. Because materialism encourages individuals to place a higher value on material accumulations over social relationships, it ingrains within them characteristics of narcissism and self-centeredness.

Despite its unquestionable detriments, critics claim that the pursuit of possessions is an advantageous lifestyle. First, critics rightfully argue that the pursuit of possessions extrinsically motivates individuals in the workplace. While it serves a pivotal role in increasing employee productivity, research shows that the pursuit of possessions entails financial burdens that nullify its productive benefits. Others claim that the pursuit of possessions rewards hard-working individuals with increased standards of living and quality of life. However, research demonstrates that while it elevates standards of living, materialism's endless cycle of desire and acquisition comes at the expense of individuals' happiness, rendering its quality of life benefits obsolete. Many also suggest that the pursuit of possessions positively contributes to individuals' confidence levels. Despite its self-esteem benefits, research shows that the pursuit of possessions primarily instils characteristics of antagonistic narcissism within individuals.

This paper is important because it provides insight into the consequences of the pursuit of possessions that lie behind its facade. Critics have misplaced positive light on the short-term benefits of the pursuit of possessions, simultaneously ignoring the long-term detriments that follow in its wake. Consequently, individuals who succumb to the allure of

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materialism find themselves enmeshed in a spiral of financial, emotional, and social complexities that can be challenging to overcome. While its upsurge may seem overwhelming, spreading communal awareness of the perils of materialism can reduce its impact. Indeed, our collective efforts to expose the destructive nature of materialism can cultivate a more informed, conscientious, and responsible society. However, to achieve this goal, we must first change our adulterated perception of materialism from within.

Specifically, we need to reduce our emphasis on acquiring and owning material possessions and, instead, cherish emotional and social experiences for the genuine happiness that they bring. As a result, we can help steer individuals away from embracing a materialistic lifestyle that would have otherwise altered their reality for the worse. Ultimately, when combined as a community, we can effectively overwrite the deceiving facade of materialism and foster a community more attuned to the value of human connection, compassion, and empathy.

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