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Materialism and Depression: Effects of the American Media

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Abstract:

In the past century, the U.S. has witnessed a dramatic explosion of advertising messages and materialistic desires for luxury and leisure products. The American media have propagated these messages through movies, musics, cartoons, etc., influencing the American perception of happiness. Overall, an analysis through the scientific, economic, and social angles shows that the materialistic pursuit of happiness leads to diminished subjective well-being and more serious mental health issues. As friendship deficit seems to be a principal cause of depression, a feasible solution to this could be giving priority of friendships over commodities.

Keywords: Materialism, emotional well-being, mental health, depression, interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

In the past century, the U.S. has witnessed a dramatic explosion of advertising messages and materialistic desires for luxury and leisure products (Belk & Pollay, 1985, p. 51). The American media have propagated these messages through movies, music, cartoons, etc., influencing the American perception of happiness. An article from The New York Times Style Magazine suggests that the American media propagate a materialistic narrative of happiness and has made satisfaction through the purchase of commodities an essential way to gain happiness (O'Hagan, 2015). However, psychologists, for decades, have suggested that individuals preoccupied with materialism 'may be vulnerable to diminished well-being' (Kashdan & Breen, 2007, p. 522). According to a collaborative study published on the Journal of Consumer Research, the materialistic pursuit of happiness could be even more detrimental to one's mental health as it 'leads to an increase in depressive symptoms' (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002, p. 365). As stated by the National Institute of Mental Health, 'depression is a common but serious mood disorder' and will strictly impacts people's daily activities (National Institute of Mental Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Overall, an analysis through the scientific, economic, and social angles shows that the materialistic pursuit of happiness leads to diminished subjective well-being and more serious mental health issues. As friendship deficit seems to be a principal cause of depression, a feasible solution to this could be giving priority of friendships over commodities. This places more emphasis on the so-called collective-oriented values, such as family cohesion, community ties, and religious fulfillment (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002, p. 348), than materialistic pursuits, which is in line with the Dalai Lama's suggestion that true happiness, is experienced through love, compassion, and generosity (Lama et al., 2016, p. 53). Since depression is usually a result of the loosening of social or family ties, it is reasonable to solve this by focusing on collective-oriented values over material goods.

2. Scientific Implications of Materialism: Psychological Disorders and Non-Drug Addiction

From a scientific standpoint, several studies, focusing on the psychological implications of materialism, identify a negative correlation between materialism and subjective well-being in American societies. In the past century, social scientists became dissatisfied with macroeconomic indicators of subjective well-being, such as GDP and employment rates, and sought alternative measures of well-being, thus giving rise to the scientific assessment of subjective well-being (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002, p. 349). This field of study, which now encompasses thousands of researches, regards subjective well-being as consisting of three separate but related components. Diener et al. details these three components that there are the affective aspect and the cognitive-judgmental aspect. The first one contains the positive and negative affective states of well-being, and the second one is equivalent to the cognitive evaluation of one's life, also known as life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985, p. 71; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010, p. 16489). Diener's work has laid the theoretical grounds for studies in this literature, as it is crucial to differentiate the affective aspects from the cognitive-judgmental aspect when examining the effects and relationship of materialism on subjective well-being.

Most studies that examine this relationship suggest that there are negative psychological implications of materialism and a negative correlation between the affective aspects of subjective well-being and materialism. A study conducted by an associate professor at the University of Bologna identifies a trend in western societies like the US, where media, advertising and persuasive and invasive communication have pushed people to adapt to a materialistic way of life (Passini, 2013, p. 370). In economically developed societies, people are immersed in the influence of media and the cultural messages they convey. These promote the materialist style of life as the only way to gain happiness in western,

more economically developed societies (Passini, 2013, p. 371; O'Hagan, 2015). Though the materialist pursuit of happiness can be seen as a normal but costly way to gain happiness, it can actually be regarded an act of non-drug addiction. Passini describes the materialistic pursuit of happiness as a psychopathological binge that exhibits similar characteristics of drug addiction and has made people 'lose the ability to have a normal dynamic interaction' (Passini, 2013, p. 373). This addictive style is also evident in O'Hagan's experience at Disneyland, where his daughter, representative of most people in the park, lost the ability to think realistically in the Disney world of make-believe. This focus on material goods over interactions with the real world is commonly seen in western societies like the US. A study of 387 consumers in the US examines the relationship between compulsive buying (CB) and depression. It reports that participants with CB, who scored less than -1.34 on the Compulsive Buying Scale, reflected more depressive symptoms, higher materialistic values endorsement, and more severe excessive internet use compared to those without CB (Mueller et al., 2011, p. 422). Therefore, it becomes clear that the lack of social interactions, as a result of practices such as CB and excessive internet use, would likely to cause depression and thus serious psychological issues.

The materialistic pursuit of happiness contributes to not only psychopathological addiction of consumption but also severe psychological disorders that have detrimental effects on one's mental health. Russell Belk, a Distinguished Research Professor at York University and a leading authority in the fields of consumer behavior and materialism, corresponds materialism with undesirable traits such as non-generosity, envy, and greed. He concludes that these traits have a significant negative correlation with both the affective and the cognitive-judgmental aspects of subjective well-being (Belk, 1985, p.274). As cultural messages are promoting the materialistic pursuit of happiness in America, this way of gaining happiness is problematic itself because it contributes to psychopathological and psychological issues, thus diminishing subjective well-being.

Nonetheless, some experts have argued for an alternative explanation for the relationship between materialism and subjective well-being. A study based on longitudinal data from over 2500 consumers across 6 years and a new latent growth model identifies a bidirectional relationship between materialism and subjective well-being, claiming that 'materialism and loneliness reciprocally influence each other over time' (Pieters, 2013, p. 616). By definition, loneliness leads to with reduced self-regulation, depression and stress, which eventually contributes to diminished well-being. Pieters also argues that some subtypes of materialism reduce loneliness and thus are virtuous (2013, p. 629). However, this claim ignores the fact that the termed pleasure is usually brief and short, as it is the type of sensory joy classified by the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama points out that experience of materialistic happiness is so dependent on external stimuli (2016, p. 53) and that true, lasting happiness is nurtured from interpersonal relationships (54). Therefore, the materialistic pursuit of happiness still inevitably contributes to psychopathological and psychological problems. As a result, it will strictly impact subjective mental health negatively.

3. Economic Implications of Materialism: Income and the Consumption Effect

From an economic standpoint, the materialist pursuit of happiness is closely associated with income levels in American society, therefore rising income may not be a promising route to subjective well-being. Consumption, a common practice of materialism, therefore, plays a key role in this conversation. Robert Lane, a professor of Market Economics at Yale University, draws connection between consumption and materialism, suggesting that the latter is simply a function of disposable income, and that higher disposable income often leads to the purchase of more material goods based on the belief that possessions are key to happiness (1994, p. 537). This belief is inevitably common in western societies, where people usually have excessive, disposable income to purchase material goods to fulfill their desires. Research from Princeton University identifies a positive correlation between the cognitive evaluation of life and income (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010, p. 16489). This is expected because higher salary does generate more disposable income for individuals, thus fulfilling their desire of purchasing products. Nevertheless, the same study from Princeton University also indicates that income beyond a certain level does not contribute to emotional well-being, the affective aspect of subjective well-being (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010, p. 16489). This result is representative of the American society for its large sample and data collected by the Gallup organization. The rather modest relationship between affective well-being and income beyond a high level of income is reasonable. Due to the fact that people in western societies still own extra money after paying for their necessities, the rather modest relationship between affective aspects of subjective well-being and income beyond a high level of income becomes reasonable because the extra money spent on the purchase of material goods does not raise one's happiness level.

Research conducted by Mario Pandelaere, an Associate Professor of Marketing at Virginia Tech further, divides consumption into experiential consumption, purchases of experiences, and material consumption, purchases of products (Pandelaere, 2016). This provides greater details within the notion of consumption. The study argues that material consumption is responsible for the often robust, negative correlation between materialism and subjective well-being, while experiential consumption benefits subjective well-being (Pandelaere, 2016). The author also finds that material consumption leads to anxious attachment, which in turn leads consumers to pursue material goal as a substitute for the security offered by healthy social relationships (Pandelaere, 2016; Pieters, 2013, p. 616). This thus creates a vicious circle between material consumption and the negative psychological implications of it. High income does give more freedom to people for buying commodities but not happiness; instead, people with excessive material consumption reflect more depression symptoms and thus enters the vicious cycle described above (Lane, 1994, p. 525). Nonetheless, material consumption is not necessarily detrimental to subjective mental health. Pandelaere explains that most studies that identify a negative correlation between materialism and subjective well-being focus on an aggregate of all aspects of materialism, and little research focuses on individual aspects.

Nonetheless, it is still evident that the materialistic pursuit of happiness leads to severe psychological disorders and reflects some psychopathological behaviors. Yet the question remains when trying to relate materialism and emotional well-being directly with one another. Social psychologists have conducted studies on the relationship between interpersonal relationships and the two subjects, thus trying to draw clearer correlations between them. For example, the aforementioned study by Robert Lane, explores the relationship between friendship, material consumption, and subjective well-being. Lane finds that the crucial cause of depression is the absence of friends and of family solidarity, the so-called collective-oriented values in academic terms (Lane, 1994, p. 525). Lane also identifies that 'countries that have experienced or are currently experiencing rapid economic growth have the highest incidence of depression,' thus proving that rising income does not promise the rise of happiness level (Lane, 1994, p. 544). This is in line with the previously discussed economic studies on materialism, as both studies agree to that rising income does not promise increased well-being. Therefore, a feasible solution would not fall under the economic lens; instead, a focus on the social lens would actually yield a more comprehensive solution to the psychological issues caused by the materialist pursuit of happiness.

4. An Approach to Solving this Issue: Social Methods

From a social standpoint, a feasible solution to the psychological disorders brought by materialism is to focus on the collective-oriented values in life. According to Kashdan and Breen, two professors of Clinical Psychology, materialist consumption is often used as strategic attempts to avoid unfavorable impressions from others (2007, p. 524). That is, materialism is used as a tactic to present a better self, the so-called self-presentational tactics, in social interactions. Andrew Christopher, a Professor of Psychology at Albion College, indicates that personal insecurity is a precursor to materialism and the latter is therefore used as a tactic to present a better self to the others (Christopher et al., 2005, p.137). This makes the relationship between materialism and interpersonal relationship clear, as the fear of being socially insecure and the wish to offer a better impression might cause people to pursue materialism. Materialism therefore affects one's tendency to manage the impressions an individual creates in the eyes of others. Another study, also led by Andrew Christopher, indicates that materialism had a significantly negative effect on life satisfaction through the three self-presentation tactics combined, which are excuse-making, use of disclaimers, and self-handicapping (Christopher et al., 2007, p. 1157). Therefore, the materialist way to show a better self is not an effective way to do so, and may negatively impact subjective well-being.

5. Conclusion

Overall, a solution to this hedonic treadmill caused by the spread of materialism is to focus more on the collective-oriented aspects of life. More specifically, governments and markets should make loss of such collective-oriented aspects of life a cost, and the gain of these aspects a benefit. Governments could create scaffolding within society in which individuals would find new opportunities for the social companionship and family solidarity that would in reality improve their subjective well-being. While it is evident that in developed countries like the US, materialist purchase of goods is one self-presentational tactic in social interactions, one should be aware of the negative psychological outcomes that come with it. As suggested by Dalai Lama, long lasting happiness is nurtured from interpersonal relationships (Lama et al., 2016, p. 63).

6. References

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