

## Consumer Behaviour as Determined by Narcissism and Lack of Marital Satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Recent research in consumer psychology has tried to understand consumer behavior as influenced by society, media and needs of an individual. This paper draws on the empirical evidence that suggests that feelings of insecurity correlate with materialistic tendencies, and that materialistic people are less happy in relationships. The role of relationship satisfaction and narcissism in bringing materialistic tendencies to the fore in an individual has been examined in countless studies across the globe. It is understood that the materialists who seek happiness in possessions, not people, also exhibit narcissism along with relationship dissatisfaction and it is also established that unhappy people make good consumers. This paper throws light on how one's relationship with their spouse can fuel materialistic desires in an individual and how narcissistic individuals seek external validation through consumption and show-off.

**Keywords:** *Consumer Behaviour, Determined, Narcissism, Lack, Marital Satisfaction*

*“Materialism is an identity crisis.”*  
Bryant H. McGill

**M**aterialism is understood as a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as having more importance than higher spiritual values. It has gained widespread attention across the globe for its far reaching and rather gripping effects on the consumer psyche. Noting the importance of materialism, Twitchell (1999) stated, “of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's various-isms, it has been the one that has ultimately triumphed” (p. 16). The word “materialism” finds its roots in philosophy (Micken and Roberts, 1999). It is the philosophical conceptualization that nothing exists except matter and its movement (Scott, 2009). Lange (1873-75), in his book, “The History of Materialism” (p. 215), described the then prevalent notion about materialism, as a belief in “material, self-existent things”. According to Eric Fromm (1976), materialism is a common value orientation prevalent among people in the industrialized capitalistic cultures. In a culture

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which places much emphasis on an individual's economic accomplishments, people tend to harbour extrinsic aspirations involving financial goals, materialistic assets and acquisitions, and identify success with social recognition (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), people have a tendency to evaluate themselves by comparison with others in groups when objective means are not available. Richins (1991) suggested that social comparison takes place with models in the advertisements. Individuals compare themselves with others who are worse off (i.e. downward comparison) to boost their self-esteem, with others who are better off (i.e. upward comparison), or with the idealized photo-shopped media images (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). People who engage in comparison with the idealized media images end up having unrealistically high expectations of their standards of living. Materialism is a complex phenomenon (Larsen et al., 1999), acting as a subject matter for researches in various fields in social sciences such as advertising, psychology, consumer behavior and marketing, economics, political science, and anthropology (Mannion & Brannick, 1995). Accordingly, it has been seen and understood from socio-cultural as well as individual perspectives (Hunt et al., 1996). It's also been noticed that materialism has different connotations: negative (e.g., Micken and Roberts, 1999), positive (e.g., Scott, 2009), and neutral (e.g., Larsen et al., 1999).

According to Richins and Dawson (1992), three traits of individuals who subscribe to a materialistic ideology are:

- (a) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness,
- (b) possession-defined success, and
- (c) acquisition centrality.

First, materialistic individuals require material goods and possessions to be content in their life and prefer to pursue happiness by acquiring assets and possessions. Second, such individuals have a tendency to judge a person's success by the quantity and quality of the material goods and financial assets owned by them. Lastly, these individuals consider material goods and possessions to be the central aspect of their lives.

A materialistic individual is someone preoccupied with the acquisition of material possessions and equates them to happiness and fulfillment. This is observed especially in the instances when the owning of the possessions is motivated by emotional reasons (such as to look better and feel better) rather than functional reasons (such as to communicate with others, to connect with others, to travel, and so on). In *The Affluent Society* (1998), Galbraith claimed that despite the increasing wealth of the society, people are not happier, rather they have become unhappier. He maintained that materialism breeds discontentment and affluence creates unintended consequences and attracts scholarly attention over the rise of materialism as a social value. It is observed that money is a diagnostic indicator of status and power (Belk, 1985). Richins (1994) asserted that the material goods reflect the values individuals embrace. Mukerji (1993) defined materialism as "*a general lust for goods*" (cited in Mannion and Brannick, 1995, p. 2).

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There are two forms of materialism proposed by Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981):

- A. Positive instrumental materialism: When possessions and money make life easier, safer, or more enjoyable. For instance, material objects like photo albums aid in strengthening the interpersonal relationships while also serving a functional purpose of acting as a personal narrative and reminding individuals of important relationships in their lives (Ahuvia, 2005; Dittmar, 2004, 2008; Belk, 1988;).
- B. Detrimental terminal materialism: When consumption accords social recognition to the consumer, and also status and external rewards that terminal materialists view tied to their wealth and possessions (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

### Marital Satisfaction

The concept of marital satisfaction finds its roots in Social Exchange Theory (Thibault & Kelley, 1959), Role Theory (Waller & Hill, 1951), and Symbolic Interaction Theory (Burr et al., 1979). Marital satisfaction may be defined as the amount of satisfaction husbands/wives report with their marriages. Marital satisfaction is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon extensively explored by the most diverse fields (Acevedo et al., 2012; Selcuk et al., 2010; Feeney, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Gottman, 1993; Feeney & Noller, 1992, 1990). Marital satisfaction is being content and happy within one's marriage (Bagwell, 2006). Factors with cultural, religious, legal and educational origins, and the like, help in shaping of our ideal of what is required for constituting an affective relationship, especially a marital one (Wendorf et al., 2011; Lucas et al., 2008; Lalonde et al., 2004).

The spouses estimate their marital satisfaction by keeping track of costs and benefits of their liaison, from the time since they're together and for this reason the socio-cultural context is of great importance in interpersonal relations, acting as a means of ecological adaptability for the individuals in a marital relationship. Studies also reveal that there are differences within the same culture that may persuade spouses to adopt different criteria for marital satisfaction, influenced by the socio-political and socio-cultural contexts of the countries they live in (Lucas et al., 2008). In western industrialized cultures i.e. individualistic cultures, the criteria of marital satisfaction are related to goals of self-gratification or to the ideals of happiness established between spouses whereas in the countries with a more collectivist background, the criteria of marital satisfaction relate to the way relatives of the spouses are treated (Lalonde et al., 2004). It has been found that couples, who value money and possessions highly tend to have less effective communication, struggle with conflicts in their relationship, are less responsive to each other compared to the couples who are non-materialistic. Materialism can have an eroding effect on relationships (Carroll et al., 2011).

Various factors influence marital satisfaction in couples such as demographics, like religious heterogamy (Williams & Lawler, 2003), individual factors such as attachment security (Cobb et al., 2001) or alcoholism (Kelly et. al, 2000), marital interactions like the husband's contribution to household labor (Allen & Webster, 2001) or intimacy goal (Sanderson & Canter, 2001), and

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also the influence of external stress (Neff & Karney,2004). Depression plays a major role in marital satisfaction in married couples (Dillaway & Broman, 2001; Spangenberg & Theoran, 1999). The more costs a marriage partner inflicts on an individual, the less satisfied one feels with the marriage and with the marriage partner (Xuanningfu et al., 2001).

Research has clearly shown that there are psychological and physiological benefits to intimate relationships, particularly marriage (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Romantic relationships, particularly high quality romantic relationships, confer benefits such as social support, companionship, love, and sexual involvement (Laumann et al., 1994; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

### **Narcissism**

The term narcissism was coined by Havelock Ellis in 1898. He meant it as a sexual perversion characterized by the taking of the self as a sexual object. Kazdin (2002) described it as any aspect of the complex state of self-esteem which includes things as overweening pride, arrogance and sensitivity to insult. Freud (1957, 1914) located narcissism in the developmental history of the individual when they pass through anal phase of their psychosexual development with its attendant focusing on the physical self. He thought of narcissism as the "Love of the self", in terms of the libido (1914). A narcissist, according to Freud, is a person who is in love with himself and feels sexual satisfaction from admiring himself/herself in mirror and caressing his/her body as if it were that of another person. Individuals when impelled by these fixations may continue to seek ways to satisfy their narcissistic cravings.

Jacobson (1964) explained narcissism in object-relationship terms by developing the concept of self representations. He implicated the role of intricate interplay of feelings of both love and hatred directed towards self-representation in the development of self-esteem.

Empirical studies on narcissism accelerated owing to the development of Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) by Raskin and Hall (1979). Multivariate analysis of the NPI revealed that narcissism is a multi-dimensional construct. Emmons (1984) found that the three adaptive NPI scales were positively associated with self esteem, extroversion, dominance and independence and negatively related with self abasement, self-ideal discrepancy, neuroticism and social anxiety.

The DSM IV described narcissistic personality as possessing a grandiose sense of self importance. The individual's exhibitionism and desire to gain attention and admiration from others is particularly notable. The manual's diagnostic description and criteria for the narcissistic personality are:

- (1) Inflated self-image,
- (2) Inter-personal exploitativeness,
- (3) Cognitive expressiveness,

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- (4) Insouciant temperament and
- (5) Deficient social conscience (Corsini & Auerbach, 1998).

Subclinical (or normal) narcissism has three key characteristics: an inflated self-concept, a relative lack of interest in warm interpersonal relationships, and reliance upon self-regulatory strategies.

Narcissists tend to be egocentric, self-obsessed and self-focused. They believe that they are unique and special, and also have feelings of grandiosity and entitlement. They exhibit low empathy, are indifferent toward others' needs, and are exploitative in relationships. They are more interested in getting attention and admiration from others than closeness and intimacy with them. They make special efforts to ensure that they look good, feel positive and important, and look for opportunities for self-enhancement (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Narcissists demand and need constant attention, admiration, affirmation, and applause from others in order to reinforce their false sense of themselves. They are self-aggrandizing and have manipulative interpersonal orientation coupled with a sense of entitlement. They only bother about appearances and are shallow. They lack empathy and everything and everyone around them are mere objects, which they consider are unconditionally and uncomplainingly available for their instant gratification. Narcissists are firmly convinced of their superiority, immunity, omnipotence, self-importance, entitlement to special treatment, immediate gratification, and leniency (indulgence) (Vaknin, 2002).

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Materialism is a complex concept requiring lot of exploration and contextual research (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Kilbourne et al., 2005). The concept always arouses controversy as it does not allow for clear classification in terms of “good” and “evil.” A large majority of researchers have remained critical of this concept, describing it as a *dark side variable* (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002) emphasizing its strong negative relationship with happiness, well-being, and satisfaction with life (Belk, 1985; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992) as well as several other variables (Kasser, 2002). Some researchers also point to the positive aspects of materialism (Kilbourne et al., 2005) or its positive and negative aspects (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Górnik-Durose, 2002). Positive or “instrumental” materialism views possessions as a means of accomplishing aims and achieving goals inclusive of values aimed at self-fulfillment. However, negative or “terminal” materialism makes possession a goal in itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Richins and Dawson (1992) identified the following traits in materialistic individuals:

- (a) a need for a high level of income,
- (b) a greater emphasis on financial security and less on interpersonal relationships,
- (c) a preference to spend more on themselves and less on others, and
- (d) a lower level of satisfaction with their life in general.

### **Materialism and Marital Satisfaction**

Studies have discussed how a materialistic-based approach to impress others can lead to self-detrimental behaviors or cultural fads that constitute health risks to people in society such as unsafe sexual practices, drug abuse, and eating disorders (Christopher & Schlenker, 2004; Leary et al., 1994); many of which document risk factors for marital dissolution and lower marital quality (Locke & Newcomb, 2003; Teachman, 2003; Woodside et al., 2000; Newcomb, 1994; Kahn & London, 1991).

Researchers contend that materialistic individuals focus less on the fulfillment of intrinsic needs, such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy and place a high value on income and possessions (Kashdan & Breen, 2007; Kasser et al., 2004). While intrinsic needs could be fulfilled in both work and family life, the extrinsic needs are likely to be satisfied through income from work. This supremacy of work over family as a source of extrinsic need fulfillment indicates that the pursuit of materialism may be important in explaining work-family conflict.

Materialistic individuals demonstrate greater levels of relationship conflict (Belk, 1985; Kasser et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 2002). Some authors suggest that this negative relationship with well-being results from the fundamental value conflicts that arise from having a predominantly self-focused worldview (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). It is also found that those individuals higher in materialism were also less satisfied with particular aspects of their life such as 'standard of living' (satisfaction with material possessions), 'family life' (satisfaction with spouse/partner/children) and 'amount of fun and enjoyment' (satisfaction with fun and enjoyment in life), than those less materialistic individuals (Sirgy, 1998; Richins & Dawson, 1990; 1992; Richins, 1987). Studies have revealed that in comparison to non-materialistic individuals, materialistic individuals tend to be less satisfied with specific aspects of their lives, such as relationships with their friends (Richins & Dawson, 1992). It has been observed that materialism is also linked with feelings of inadequacy in an individual, which lead to increased efforts to enhance self-image through possession and use of material goods (Lee et al., 2000; Yurchisin & Johnson, 2004). Based on such findings, it is reasonable to hypothesize that materialistic tendencies may create a perceptual context which influences how marriages are affected by financial variables. Financial matters are closely linked to family discord, marital problems and divorce (Poduska, 1995; Madanes, 1994; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Koutstaal (1998) in his study found that financial satisfaction was positively related to marital satisfaction, and conflict over finances was inversely related to marital satisfaction.

Materialistic individuals experience difficulty in establishing close relationships (Kasser et al., 2004) and rate their relations less favorably (Kasser & Ryan, 2001). Because they express less empathy and objectify people, materialists may feel alienated from others (Kasser et al., 2004).

Materialistic individuals focus their thoughts and behaviors toward possessions over other pursuits. They place more emphasis on acquiring material goods as compared to investing in

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relationships, social experiences, or intellectual enrichment (Christopher et al., 2004; Richins & Rudmin, 1994; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Dean et al. (2007) hypothesized that materialism affects marital satisfaction in two ways: (a) via a direct negative relationship with marital satisfaction and (b) via an indirect negative impact on marital outcomes by increasing the degree to which spouses' perceive there are financial problems in their relationship.

It was found that there is a direct negative relationship between wife's materialism and husband's marital satisfaction, however, husbands' materialism was not found to be significantly related to wives' marital satisfaction.

Kasser (2002) found that students with high materialism scores reported lower quality relationships with others. Materialism removes other pursuits from one's life, as time and resources are spent on obtaining material things and relationships are neglected and suffer (Kasser, 2002). Vohs et al. (2008) observed that people who are reminded of money desire less physical intimacy with others and prefer to participate in more solitary activities.

### **Materialism and Narcissism**

William James (1890) asserted that possessions are an integral part of one's self-concept. He opined, "A man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house,... his yacht and bank-account" (p.291). In the same vein, Sartre (1943, 1958) stated, "The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have" (p.591).

In data obtained from a sample of undergraduate consumers (N=238) with varying degrees of spending problems, positive associations emerged between narcissism, materialism, and compulsive buying (Paul, 2007). The ones who vouch for consumerism are unable to see the needs of others (Easwaran, 1997).

Dunning (2007) and Sedikides et al. (2007) suggested that narcissists as consumers are likely to make purchases of prestigious and exclusive products to sustain and heighten the feeling of self-positivity. And they tend to show an inclination towards prestigious products with high symbolic value. In doing so, they attempt to enhance their self-esteem by increasing their apparent status, through obtaining admiration and envy from others (Sedikides et al., 2007). Researchers reveal that when narcissistic consumers make a choice, they have a greater tendency to sacrifice utilitarian aspects of the products (Sedikides et al., 2007).

For narcissists, the purchase and consumption of rare and unique products is likely to function as an interpersonal strategy to project a colorful lifestyle to others (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). Recent research indicates that narcissistic consumers have a strong affinity for scarce products

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(Lee & Seidle, 2012). They are motivated to validate their positive and grand self-view by procuring a scarce product that they perceive will confer a unique value upon them. And when these individuals are presented with a scarce product, they rush to interpret the scarcity-related purchase situation as an opportunity to validate their excessively positive self-view and elevate their status through the purchase (Lee & Seidle, 2012).

The possession of unique products is likely to be considered as an accomplishment for narcissists, which elicits praise and positive feedback from others (Marshall et al., 2015). People purchase products for pragmatic reasons, but people purchase products as means to define and express themselves (Dittmar, 1992; Belk, 1985), to regulate their moods or emotions (Dittmar, 2011), to enhance their self-esteem or elevate social status (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007; Sedikides et al., 2007), and they buy products to fulfill their needs for self-efficacy or mastery also (Dittmar, 2011). Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) asserted that individuals resort to conspicuous consumption in an attempt to restore their threatened self-image, treating consumption as an indirect source of self-affirmation (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). Material possessions are a rich source of information about others' identity (Burroughs et al., 1991).

Narcissists report more interest in collecting wealth and social status than in pursuing affiliation (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). They desire material possessions (Cohen & Cohen, 1996) and exhibit high economic aspirations (Roberts & Robins, 2000), they prioritize financial goals over social goals, and are prone to purchasing high-status and expensive goods, which signal status and sophistication (Richins, 1994).

It is suggested that materialism may exacerbate the signature narcissistic characteristics such as self-sufficiency or autonomy, egocentricity, competitiveness, unwillingness to help others, and poor interpersonal relationships in the individuals. In a research study, participants primed with money (vs. those in a control condition) were found to be less likely to ask for help and to help others, prefer to work and play alone, and tend to keep a larger physical distance between themselves and others (Vohs et al., 2006). Individuals preoccupied with money are found to be egocentric (Belk, 1985) and feel disconnected from others around them (Pieters, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

Materialism is an important concept, which is of utmost interest to academicians, policy-makers, and market researchers. The purpose of the article was to review materialism literature and trace its link with marital satisfaction and narcissism. It comes as no surprise that people who are materialistic tend to be narcissistic and concerned with impressing people by flaunting their wealth. They have a tendency to be insecure, depressed and have relatively poor relationship skills which in turn can cause marital problems. To turn the situation on its head, narcissism, whose incidence rate is steadily increasing across the globe (Twenge et al. 2008), and the marital conflict along with its correlates need to be attended. However, researchers are yet to determine if this association between materialism and marital dissatisfaction is due to value differences



between spouses or if materialism is problematic even when both partners place a similar priority wealth (Carroll et al., 2011).

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