Materialism and Mental Health

There is a widespread misconception that having certain material possessions will bring us the happiness and respect we all crave. This belief perpetuated in our culture promotes unhealthy attitudes that leave people constantly wanting more rather than being content with what they already have. If a person can’t afford something they deem necessary for happiness, they may be left feeling inadequate, and overtime, they may even become depressed. Even if that person could afford everything they wanted, they may still feel unhappy because they have not addressed the true cause of their discontentment. Our materialistic society poses a great threat to our overall mental health and well being and we need to look for better ways to fulfil our lives and avoid these issues. Throughout this essay I explore the causes of these materialistic attitudes and what attitudes might be more positive to have.

First I must define materialism and clarify what it means in the context of this essay. Materialism is defined as “a preoccupation with or stress upon material rather than intellectual or spiritual things.” (materialism, n.d.). An example would be a person who wants a fancy sports car, or simply, a new pair of shoes when they already have enough practical shoes to wear. I do understand that a certain level of materialism is needed for survival and even just for maintaining a hobby, (eg. buying a tennis racket to play tennis). Materialism only becomes an issue when it
causes people to seek out things they do not truly need. From here on out, when I say the word materialism, I am only referring to the want for unnecessary things, rather than the need for essential material things such as food, water, and shelter.

Now, you may be asking yourself, “What causes this materialistic attitude and why is it so detrimental to our psychological well-being?” One of my theories is that much of it is related to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. In this hierarchy, there are five different levels of needs; First there are the physiological needs (air, water, food, shelter, etc.), then there’s the need for safety, social belonging, self-esteem, and finally, self-actualization, or the realization of one’s own potential and the strive to reach it. These levels are in order of priority in terms of their importance to our survival and psychological well-being. This all relates to materialism because of how marketed products can be portrayed as something required to fulfill one’s social belonging and self-esteem needs. A person will be highly motivated to get a certain object if he believes it’s the only way to fit in socially or to be respected. If that person is unable to obtain the desired object, he may feel unfulfilled in his need to be respected and belong.

The relationship between Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs and materialism go beyond simply my own speculation. A study published in the *South Pacific Journal of Psychology* (Shaun Saunders, Don Munro & Miles Bore, 1998) found a negative correlation between Need Satisfaction Inventory (NSI) scores (Lester, 1990) and Materialism Scale (MS) scores (Richins & Dawson, 1992). The NSI measures the degree to which a person’s perceived level of needs, as described by Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy, are satisfied; the MS measures the degree to which a
person sees material possessions as indicators of happiness and success. This study also found a positive association between NSI scores and psychological health scores (as measured by the collective scores from the Beck Depression Inventory, Beck Anxiety Index, and Anger Expression Scale). All this means is that people with lower NSI scores are more likely to have higher scores on the MS as well as lower scores for psychological health. These results support my hypothesis that a person who values materialistic things as a way of achieving happiness, is less likely to feel their needs have been met and subsequently more likely to experience mental health issues. With that being said, the article does point out the problem of directionality within their study. This problem raises the question of whether it’s the strong materialistic attitude (high score on the MS) that causes a person to feel as if their needs have not been met (low score on NSI), or is it the other way around. Also, does having a low NSI score cause a person feel depressed, or does feeling depressed cause a person to underestimate the extent to which their needs are met, leading to a lower NSI score? Whichever direction it goes in, however, doesn’t matter because both ways exemplify how materialism can be damaging to mental health, which was my main point to begin with. So, in either situation, it would be highly beneficial for one to stray away from any materialistic attitudes they may have in order to obtain a higher standard of well-being.

To further this idea that materialism has negative mental health effects, because it is important my reader is fully convinced, I will discuss the findings of Dr. Tim Kasser, an American psychologist and author. In his book, The High Price of Materialism, based off of the findings from his decades of studies, Kasser writes, “An individual with relatively central
materialistic values will have fewer chances to fulfill the needs required for psychological growth and happiness.” (Kasser, pg. 55). I concur with the author’s statement; I too believe that it is the materialistic values, or attitudes, that may cause a person to feel their needs haven’t been met, and as a result, they will feel less content. An important clarification Kasser goes on to discuss is that not all people will be affected by materialistic values to the same degree, despite them all being exposed to the same cultural messages that encourage it. One of the reasons for this, he explains, has to do with the person’s environment. So for example, a person who sees more commercial advertisements and who has parents who support materialistic goals, will be more likely to be materialistic themselves (pg. 55). If our values really are as reflective of our environment as Kasser states, it is no wonder why so many of us struggle in a society where materialistic values are so pervasive.

To give an example of just how pervasive materialism really is in our society, I will leave you with this, “Digital Marketing experts estimate that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements each day.” (Marshall, 2015). That is a significant amount of ads to be exposed to every day, and they have a great impact on us, whether we’d like to believe it or not. If these advertisements did not work, companies wouldn't be spending millions of dollars on them. Creating these ads involve a lot of clever marketing techniques designed to capture a person’s interest. A few of these techniques include personalized, word of mouth, and humanistic marketing. Personalized marketing is done when companies access a person’s internet activity, use the information to calculate her interests, then advertise the products they believe she would want based off those interests. Word of mouth marketing is just as it sounds, it’s when
information is passed from person to person through spoken communication, this often happens when a certain brand becomes trendy. The last one I’m going to talk about, although there are many more, is humanistic marketing, which involves making the customer feel as if they need that product in order to fulfill their human needs. This type of marketing is exactly what I was talking about before, about how products can be made to seem necessary in order for our social and self-esteem needs to be met, even though they’re not really necessary at all. All these marketing tactics are made specifically to turn us into consumers and they are very effective at doing so. Because it is impossible to get away from these thousands of ads we see every day, we must learn to resist their messages in order to maintain a healthier, less materialistic attitude.

Advertisements and social pressures created from marketing contribute to our materialistic environment as they keep consumerism alive and strong. The song “Wings,” by Macklemore sheds light on how much of a problem materialism is in our society; his lyrics go as follows:

“We want what we can't have, commodity makes us want it
So expensive, damn, I just got to flaunt it
Got to show 'em, so exclusive, this that new shit
A hundred dollars for a pair of shoes I would never hoop in
Look at me, look at me, I'm a cool kid
I'm an individual, yeah, but I'm part of a movement
My movement told me be a consumer and I consumed it”
In these lyrics, Macklemore talks about how people always want more stuff, and that they buy expensive things just to show off and be seen as “cool,” rather than simply using them for functionality. This leads me to discuss my next topic about how it’s not just advertisements contributing to the excessive consumerism, but also social pressures and the need to look “cool” that contribute greatly. An example of how social pressures affect people is when a person seeks out a status symbol, “something, such as a possession or an activity, by which one's social or economic prestige is measured.” (Status symbol, n.d.). People may be pressured to buy a status symbol to make themselves look more financially well off than they really are, they think as long as they seem wealthy, they will be more well-respected. As we now know however, this idea is simply a myth. Respect is based upon a person’s character, not the amount of money they have.

This misconception that the amount of money a person has will determine their self-worth may have negative consequences on that person’s mental state. People who cannot afford these things they deem so important to their social status, are at risk for feelings of inadequate and even depressed. A study in the Journal of Affective Disorders unmasks a new type of depression caused by these materialistic attitudes, called materialistic depression. Because this type of depression has different symptomatology than regular depression, it is often left undiagnosed or it is misdiagnosed. According to the article, “Using the Materialistic Depression Quiz, high scorers versus medium and low scorers had greater depression scores on two depression measures and greater materialism scores. Materialistic depression appears a masked form of depression not to be overlooked” (Elsevier B.V., 2013, p. 623). This means their results showed a positive correlation between scores on the Materialistic Depression Quiz and
scores on the materialism and regular depression tests. The study found that materialism and depression were linked and that materialistic depression is a real mental disorder of masked depression and needs to be taken seriously. There’s a possibility that other mental illnesses can be associated with materialism, but I will not be going over them specifically in this essay. The most important thing to keep in mind is that excessive materialism can truly be an issue, and if you believe it’s an issue for you personally, keep reading, as I try to provide ways to cope with materialistic attitudes and to find better ways to find fulfillment and joy in life.

Through my research I have found that materialism may be linked to poor mental health. So what should we do to avoid this? Well, I think the first step would be to try to worry less about material objects and focus more on building healthy relationships with friends, family, and peers. In an article, Tim Kasser, the author of *The High Price of Materialism*, was quoted stating, “Intrinsic goals tend to be ones that promote greater well-being and act as a kind of ‘antidote’ to materialistic values” (Rodriguez, 2014). Intrinsic goals include goals to build close relationships, get involved in the community, and to try to grow as a person, these are all things Kasser says are more likely to bring us happiness, rather than more extrinsic goals. Extrinsic goals would include the aspirations to have money, fame, and a better image. These types of extrinsic goals are characteristic of the materialistic values we said were so detrimental. So, in short, in order to get more enjoyment out of life, it would probably be best to focus on more intrinsic goals rather than extrinsic goals. Materialistic values surround us and they can be hard to escape, but it is up to the individual to determine how much they will let it affect them.


