

## An Investigation of Materialism and Undergraduates' Life Satisfaction

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**Abstract:** Although there have been substantial empirical studies that have investigated the effect of materialism on life satisfaction, the nature of life satisfaction of Malaysian undergraduate students and its relationship with materialism still remain largely ambiguous and warrant an investigation. Against this backdrop, the present investigation attempted to examine the linkage between materialism and satisfaction of life among Malaysian undergraduate students. Data analysis was done based on responses of self-administered questionnaires that were completed by three-hundred and sixty-six students. The questionnaire consisted of inventories that assessed dispositions of materialistic values and perception of life satisfaction in general. Results of the study affirmed that materialism and its three dimensions were statistically correlated to life satisfaction. Interpretably, the greater endorsement of materialistic values as well as the three belief domains of materialism could undermine the feeling of satisfaction with life. From the evaluation of stepwise regression, the inclusion of Possession-defined Success and Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness elements successfully accounted for 21.5% of the variance of undergraduates' life satisfaction. Notably, Possession-defined Success items captured the most variance in undergraduates' life satisfaction. The findings of this study have important implications for contributing towards intellectual enrichment of a body of research in Malaysian context.

**Key words:** Materialism • Acquisition-Centrality • Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness • Possession-defined Success • Life Satisfaction • Undergraduate students

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### INTRODUCTION

To date, a growing number of researchers have been interested in understanding human subjective well-being [1, 2]. One of the elements of subjective well-being is life satisfaction [3]. According to Pavot and Diener [4], life satisfaction implies a cognitive appraisal of one's life as a whole or subjective evaluation with the accomplishment of one's wants and desires in life. Existing research depicted that high life satisfaction is associated with positive outcomes such as good psychological well being, socialization relationships and academic achievements [5]. By contrast, empirical Malaysian or non-Malaysian studies postulated that individuals with lower life satisfaction were highly involved in substance abuse, delinquent behavior and suicidal tendencies [2, 3]. An online poll conducted by YouthSays revealed that only 22.9% of Malaysian youths agreed that they were happy and satisfied with their lives [6]. Hence, it is

believed the number of youths who experience life dissatisfaction is rising.

To our knowledge, ongoing researchers have assessed determinants in explaining satisfaction or dissatisfaction in life. Among those determinants, the possibility of materialism influencing an individual's general life satisfaction has greatly drawn attention from among practitioners and psychologists. In fact, materialism is defined as "the value that guides people in conducting life events which attributed to the acquisition of material objects and possessions for achieving ideal aspirations" [7]. Consistent with the findings of Kashdan and Breen [8], the satisfaction and success in lives of individuals are determined by the amount and quality of extrinsic possessions.

Reviews of studies on humanistic perspectives have proposed that basic physiological needs have to be fulfilled first in order to ascend to higher levels of needs. In our lives today, these basic needs can only be fulfilled

through wealth. However, people who greatly overemphasized possessions and wealth are hindered from satisfying higher levels of needs such as psychological fulfillment [9]. On the other hand, Arndt, Solomon, Kasser and Sheldon [10] also illustrated that intrinsic needs cannot be achieved through pursuit of material objects. From the perspective of evolutionary processes, pursuit of material objects is a universal human goal and its functions are to advertise one's wealth, status and resourcefulness and increase competency [11, 12]. However, the psychological well-being could be undermined as a result of conflict between personal and societal values [13]. Along with this, numerous studies - both in Asian or Western contexts - have found that materialism was inversely related to life satisfaction [14-17].

Indeed, a cross-national study revealed that pursuit of material possession was negatively related to life satisfaction in a sample of college students [18]. Further, a study has documented the levels of well-being of law students progressively decreased as attainment of possession pursuits increased [19]. From the point of Christopher, Marek and Carroll [20], materialists solely highlighted the importance of possessions into the core of life and directed their thoughts and behaviors towards attainment of possessions instead of other pursuits. Hence, it could be a risk factor to trigger symptoms of physical, mental and psychological disorders [9].

Another study has postulated that a materialism-oriented environment is important to shape an individual's materialism value and its relationship with life satisfaction [21]. Apparently, our societies nowadays are inundated with various kinds of media tools that lead to incessant materialistic messages flowing out to the public, thereby stepping up the formation of materialistic environment [22, 23]. According to a survey by Sunday Star, YouthSays and University Tunku Abdul Rahman, the prevalence of materialism in our society has led most youths to aspire to become millionaires [24]. Similar findings also revealed that the majority of respondents agreed that achieving millionaire status is an important life-goal which can bring about a feeling of happiness and success. Such phenomenon could be ascribed to advocacy of materialistic ideologies rampantly [25]. This is especially true for the subjects living in the metropolitan area. Not surprisingly, study about life satisfaction in urban nature is current topic among researcher [26]. Furthermore, increasing temptation provides the impetus to get rich and progressively directs young adults to internalize and espouse materialism

values for achieving their perceived ideal self-satisfaction. However, these ideal levels are only momentary changes. It can be reasonably stated that materialism and life satisfaction are important indicators to prevent or counteract the exacerbating psychological disturbances manifesting nowadays.

Although there have been substantial empirical studies that have investigated the effect of materialism on life satisfaction, we are still unable to trace any study that has addressed these two variables within the settings of Malaysian public higher education institutions. With regard to this, the nature of life satisfaction of Malaysian undergraduate students and its relationship with materialism still remain largely ambiguous and warrant an investigation. Against this backdrop, the present investigation attempted to examine the linkage between materialism and satisfaction of life among Malaysian undergraduate students. Plainly, we hypothesized that having high levels of materialism (Acquisition-centrality, Possession-defined Success and Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness) will lead to more dissatisfaction with life in general. In addition, a stepwise regression was also performed to determine effects of all predictors on life satisfaction. Overall, interesting results can be highlighted from this study in order to increase understanding of materialism and life satisfaction.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Data for this study was gathered from 366 undergraduate students (182 males and 184 females) from University of Malaya which is generally considered the most established and reputed public university in Malaysia. Ethnically, 89.6% were Malay, 7.5% were Chinese, 2.4% were Indian and 0.5% was of other races. Our sample ranged in age from 19-24 years (mean: 21.4 years; SD: 1.51 years) who voluntarily participated. They were from randomly selected classes, from randomly selected faculties. The self-administered questionnaire was used and consisted of inventories that assessed dispositions of materialistic values and perception of life satisfaction in general. Previously, permission had been obtained from the Ministry of Higher Education and relevant authorized faculties in the university. Questionnaires were distributed to students before lecture hours and it took approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Researchers informed all respondents about the terms of anonymity and confidentiality. Altogether, 480 questionnaires were distributed and 366 were returned, indicating a response rate of 76.25%.

In this study, life satisfaction was measured using Satisfaction with Life Scale (SLWS) [27]. This scale is intended to examine respondent's judgment towards life in general. A seven Likert-based scale was applied (i.e. 1="strongly disagree", 7= "strongly agree") for the 5-items (e.g. 'In most ways my life is close to ideal'). Higher score indicates greater sense of satisfaction with life in general. As for materialism, a 15-item Material Values Scale (MVS) was used to measure the level of materialistic disposition of an individual [7]. Explicitly, the MVS is constructed using three separate scores. Respondents were asked to rate the extent of agreement to all three dimensions of materialism, which include Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness (e.g. 'I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things'), Acquisition-centrality (e.g. 'Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure') and Possession-defined Success (e.g. 'I like to own things that impress people') using Likert-based scale from 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree". All items were summed up to calculate the overall materialism score, coupled with the summation items in each dimension, to form indices of each type of materialistic values. Higher scores indicated greater disposition toward materialism.

## RESULT

Initially, psychometric properties were analyzed on both MVS and SLWS scales based on the responses provided for the items. Exploratory Factor Analysis was applied to identify factorability correlation. The value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.813, which was over the acceptable threshold, while Bartlett's test of Sphericity also was significant ( $\chi^2(105) = 1201, p < 0.001$ ). Further, communalities of all items were greater than 0.3, which indicated that each item had some shared variance in data structure. By taking all these into account, Principal Component Analysis was performed on all 15 items.

During the process, eigenvalues have resulted in the emergence of five factors. The first factor explained 26.392% (eigenvalues = 3.959), second factor explained 11.294% (eigenvalues = 1.694), third factor explained 8.23% (eigenvalues = 1.235), fourth factor explained 7.701% (eigenvalues = 1.155) and fifth factor was able to explain 6.761% of the variance. However, the fifth factor (eigenvalues = 1.014) was weak. We then examined Three, Four and Five factor solutions using Varimax rotations. As a result, the three-factor solution was preferred because:

- This solution supports preceding theoretical model
- Diagram of Scree plot illustrated the inflexion at third factor before its leveling off and
- The items were clearly dissociated onto latent factors after extraction process

Subsequently, item interpretation in each factor was conducted and labeling was done similar to Richins (2004). The first factor was labeled as Possession-defined Success, where quality and quantity of possessions becomes a yardstick to measure one's own accomplishment and also that of others. The second factor was labeled Acquisition-centrality, where the items highlighted the importance of possessions in a person's life. The third factor was intended to measure enjoyment derived from possession attainment and was named as Acquisition as Pursuit of Happiness. However, the item "I have all the things I really need to enjoy life", was excluded as it did not load above 0.3 onto any of the factors. In sum, the EFA yielded a 14-item measurement with three-factor solution and explained 45.915% of the variance. All items had primary loadings over 0.4 and only one item had a cross-loading above 0.30; however the item was retained for further analysis as it had a strong primary loading of 0.658.

On the other hand, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy of SLWS was 0.867 whilst Bartlett's test of Sphericity also was significant ( $\chi^2(10) = 971.11, p < 0.001$ ). Also, communality values of all items were greater than 0.3. Thus, EFA was performed on all five items. During the process, the result supported earlier-reported model (unidimensional) as all five items were loaded onto a single factor. The eigenvalues for the factor was 3.423 and explained 68.456% of the variance. In terms of reliability, the computation of alpha coefficients for overall materialism score and its three domains, as well as overall life satisfaction score was performed. The results of all scales ranged from 0.50-0.88. In sum, both measures showed acceptable psychometric properties. All the findings are presented in Table 1 and 2.

Next, both descriptive and inferential statistics were performed. With regard to descriptive statistics, Table 3 profiled each study variable in terms of mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. Using mean $\pm$ 1 S.D. 13.9% undergraduates reported having mild materialism, 70.5% exhibited average materialism and the remaining 15.6% indicated high materialism (M = 45.51, S.D = 6.326). On the other hand, result of frequency distribution for life satisfaction showed that 17.21% of undergraduates had

Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis Result for MVS

	Factor		
	1	2	3
Items (Composite reliability = 0.737)	Com		
Possession-defined Success (subscale reliability = 0.751)			
I like to own things that impress people.	0.795		
	0.679		
Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	0.746		
	0.631		
I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	0.704		
	0.588		
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	0.532		
	0.494		
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I like.	0.461		
	0.453		
Acquisition-centrality (subscale reliability = 0.773)			
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.		0.837	
	0.734		
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.		0.745	
	0.684		
I like a lot of luxury in my life.	0.392	0.658	
	0.600		
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	0.546	0.622	
Acquisition as Pursuit of Happiness (subscale reliability = 0.59)			
I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success. *	0.555		0.649
I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know. *	0.597		0.636
I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things. *	0.486		0.592
The things I own aren't all that important to me. *	0.560		0.464
I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned. *	0.762		0.443

Note: \* indicated reverse item; Com= communality; Factor loadings < 0.3 are suppressed

Table 2: Exploratory factor analysis result for SWLS

	Factor	
	1	
Items (Composite reliability= 0.88)	Communality	
The conditions of my life are excellent.	0.874	0.695
I am satisfied with my life.	0.866	0.763
In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.	0.834	0.750
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	0.819	0.671
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	0.737	0.543

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for study variables (N= 366)

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Overall material value score	45.51	6.326	0.275	0.810
Acquisition-centrality	14.15	2.960	-0.162	-0.028
Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness	14.39	2.641	0.072	0.742
Possession-defined success	16.97	3.417	-0.481	0.426
Overall life satisfaction score	22.05	6.244	-0.491	-0.309

M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation

Table 4: Means and standard deviations for MVS and SLWS

Instrument	M	SD
MVS items		
I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.*	2.45	0.874
I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.*	2.71	0.946
I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.*	2.75	0.890
I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.*	3.22	0.949
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	3.25	0.978
The things I own aren't all that important to me.*	3.26	0.975
I like to own things that impress people.	3.30	0.949
I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	3.34	1.098
Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	3.35	0.944
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I like.	3.40	0.933
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	3.45	0.916
I like a lot of luxury in my life.	3.47	0.995
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	3.58	0.890
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	3.98	0.948
SWLS item		
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	3.97	1.680
The conditions of my life are excellent.	4.35	1.520
So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.	4.50	1.584
In most ways, my life is close to being ideal.	4.52	1.364
I am satisfied with my life.	4.72	1.426

\* Reverse coded; M: Mean; SD: Standard Deviation

less satisfaction, 67.49% exhibited average satisfaction and the remaining 15.3% indicated high satisfaction in life (mean = 22.05, SD = 6.244). In short, more than half (50%) of the respondents were in the average level for the aspects of materialism and life satisfaction. However, more respondents were found in the high level of materialism and low level of life satisfaction when we compared between mild level (disagree) and high level (agree). Comparison of mean scores of MVS subscales and the materialism in undergraduates' rating was as follows: Possession-defined success (16.97±3.417), Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness (14.39±2.641) and finally, Acquisition-centrality (14.15±2.96). This reflected that more respondents treated possession attainment as the basis for one's and other's success. Furthermore, a data check for skewness and kurtosis indexes showed that all the variables were within acceptable range of normality [28].

In essence, we also analyzed undergraduates' responses to each item of MVS and SLWS (Table 4). Both results were sorted in ascending order based on mean scores. The highest ranking response was "I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things" (mean= 3.98, SD = 0.948). Interpretably, purchasing and acquiring material objects that they don't have leads them to feel happy and pleasurable. By contrast, the statement with the lowest ranking response was

"I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned" (mean= 2.45, SD = 0.874), which indicated that most undergraduates chose to lead a life without being agitated about what they can't have. As for SWLS, the highest ranking response was "I am satisfied with my life" (mean = 4.72, SD = 1.426). This indicated that the majority of respondents have experienced slight satisfaction with life. It may imply that improvements to enhance their life satisfaction still need to be negotiated. On the other hand, item "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing" was the lowest ranking response (mean = 3.97, SD = 1.68). This reflects that most of the respondents will change their current life conditions if given a second chance.

As for inferential statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation and multiple regressions with stepwise were undertaken. As seen in Table 5, there were significant correlations between all three dimensions of materialism towards life satisfaction and clear patterns of negative relationships were observed. More specifically, the results were as follows: overall score for Materialism and satisfaction with life ( $r = -0.414, p < 0.001$ ); Acquisition-centrality and satisfaction with life ( $r = -0.188, p < 0.001$ ); Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness and satisfaction with life ( $r = -0.280, p < 0.001$ ); and Possession-defined success and satisfaction with life ( $r = -0.388, p < 0.001$ ).

Table 5: Correlations for Overall Materialism Score and its Subscales towards Undergraduates' Life Satisfaction

MVS dimension	Life satisfaction ----- r
Overall materialism score	-0.414***
Acquisition-centrality	-0.188***
Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness	-0.280***
Possession-defined success	-0.388***

Note: \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 6: Regression of undergraduates' life satisfaction against materialism

Variable	Beta	t
Materialism scales		
Possession-defined success	-0.376	-8.095***
Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness	-0.263	-5.669***
F	51.020***	
Adjusted R2	0.215	

Note: \*\*\*p<0.00

Interpretablely, the greater endorsement of materialism values as well as three belief domains of materialism could undermine the feeling of satisfaction with life. Since there was a significant correlation between three dimensions of materialism with life satisfaction, regression analysis was carried out.

In multiple regression analysis with stepwise method, life satisfaction was taken as the criterion variable and each dimension of materialism as the predictors. Overall materialism score was not entered in regression model to avoid data redundancy. Analysis of linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity were conducted and results yielded that no statistical correction is required. During the process, predictors were inserted one by one into the model which followed the sequence of high-zero correlation variables to low-zero correlation variables. The regression model indicated that inclusion of acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success successfully accounted for 21.5% of the variance in undergraduates' life satisfaction scores ( $F = 51.02^{***}$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.215$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). Standardized beta values for possession-defined success and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness were -0.376 (significant at 0.001) and -0.263 (significant at 0.001) respectively. The negative values of standardized beta value indicated the predictors are inversely correlated to life satisfaction. In simple terms, undergraduates who had reported lower life satisfaction were high endorsement of Possession-defined Success and Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness. On the other hand, Acquisition-

centrality did not contribute in explaining the variance of life satisfaction. Overarching, there were two predictors that are able to explain levels of undergraduates' life satisfaction and Possession-defined Success was the strongest predictor. The result of the regression analysis is presented in Table 6.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted in a public higher education institution in Kuala Lumpur with the aim of determining the correlation between materialism values in relation to undergraduates' life satisfaction. Also, the relative importance of each dimension of materialism to undergraduates' life satisfaction was explored. Furthermore, we profiled each study variable using descriptive analysis. Owing to that, the present study outlined three important findings. Firstly, most undergraduate students reported moderate to high levels of endorsement of materialism values. A logical explanation is that the sample in this study was recruited in Kuala Lumpur, capital city of Malaysia which is inundated with a variety of media tools that lead to an incessant materialistic message outflow to the public. According to Kasser and Ahuvia [21], the degree at which an individual holds a materialism value depends on materialism-oriented environment. As expected, the tendency of undergraduates' materialistic orientation in Kuala Lumpur is high. Simultaneously, descriptive analysis of undergraduates' life satisfaction showed that

a majority of respondents have moderate to low satisfaction. Based on Pavot and Diener [4], life satisfaction is defined as subjective evaluation with the accomplishment of one's wants and desires in life. Therefore, the result obtained implies that most of the respondents regard themselves as still not having achieved what they desire in life.

Secondly, parallel with proposed hypothesis, overall materialism score and three materialism domains or subscales were inversely correlated to undergraduates' life satisfaction. Thus, once again we confirmed that the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction is in a negative direction. More specifically, undergraduates who reported less satisfaction with life showed more signs of engaging in (a) Acquisition-defined success (b) Acquisition-centrality and (c) Possession as the Pursuit of Happiness. The results were coherent with the majority of research findings [7, 16, 17, 21]. The results are justifiable as higher endorsement of materialism value reflects more pursuit of extrinsic goals. However, as the journey of possession pursuit is endless, thus could hamper fulfillment in subjective well-being [9]. Additionally, some practitioners claimed that satisfaction with intrinsic needs (for example, psychological fulfillment) cannot be achieved even though individuals have countless possessions [10].

Thirdly, the ranking of a set of materialism values, according to which was the most important in predicting the variance of life satisfaction, was analyzed. Notably, Possession-defined Success items captured most variance in undergraduates' life satisfaction. The plausible explanation is that youths nowadays are being instilled with survival rules that view wealth as a sign of one's own and others' success in life. Eventually, they tend to equate success with possessions attainment in order to show their competency abilities. On the other hand, the inappropriateness of pursuing extrinsic goal leads them to suffer psychological distress and leading to the possibility of reducing their subjective well-being [29]. Coupled with the second significant predictor, i.e. Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness, this result connotes that undergraduates believed possession attainment can bring happiness when their wants or desires are already in hand. Nevertheless, Acquisition-centrality did not contribute in explaining the variance of life satisfaction. A logical explanation is that the interaction effect of predictors confounds its contribution, as it was the least important dimension, compared to the other two dimensions [30].

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study have important implications for contributing to the intellectual enrichment in the body of knowledge in the Malaysian context by utilizing materialism and its subscale in predicting general life satisfaction. More importantly, we need to really see the world through the eyes of young people to understand what is crucial in influencing the levels of their life satisfaction. Besides this, the results also can spur public policy officials to consider strategies that promote literacy in dealing with materialism acquisition so as to steer undergraduates towards positive development. Considering the elevated pervasiveness of undergraduates having obtained moderate to high MVS scores and moderate to low SWLS scores, a systematic program pertinent to healthy financial aspirations and life dissatisfaction prevention can be organized as part of the curriculum in university settings. Based on development psychology, undergraduates are in the period of emerging as adults and having greater autonomy in shaping their own values and behaviors. In other words, the attitude, belief and behavior in early life are significant contributor for long-term implication in later life as these attributes have been shaped and hard to change [31]. As such, we hope that this study can provide insights for them to adopt proper skills in pursuit of materialistic goals for the sake of fostering their well-being. Empirical study has suggested that spiritual orientations about life are associated with numerous positive outcomes such as physical condition, psychological health and improved well-being [32, 33]. Therefore, some benign practices like life skills, emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence training should be taken to yield an individual with non-desirable and gratitude with life.

Nevertheless, some limitations of the study have also been noted. First, this study focused on undergraduate students in an urban area who were fairly well educated, were randomly selected and had been interviewed only once. Thus, the finding is only applicable to the cross-sectional research design and urban undergraduates only. Therefore, the longitudinal design is recommended for determining causal relationships between materialism and life satisfaction. Furthermore, we affirmed that significant correlation between materialism and life satisfaction had been established in Malaysia educational settings. Thus, future researchers can make an attempt to identify the driving force of materialism values among undergraduates. Besides, we also suggest that future

studies examine other domains of materialism in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic orientations towards life satisfaction. We speculate that different orientations yielded different levels of life satisfaction. In terms of life satisfaction, both objective and subjective indicators encourage to combine for understanding antecedents and consequence of life satisfaction [33]. Other than that, a more heterogeneous and nationwide sample is suggested to allow for generalization of findings onto a larger population. To conclude, the current study supports a model to predict the perception of life satisfaction among students in Kuala Lumpur by employing materialism.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The researchers would like to show appreciation to the authors for allowing us to adopt the scales in this study. Their contribution vastly supported the emergence of this study. Besides, the researchers also would like to thank for all participants from University of Malaya.

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