



Paradox of materialism: Exploring the complex relationship between consumption and well-being

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Abstract – This study critically examines the complex relationship between consumption and well-being, emphasising the limitations of materialism and exploring alternative avenues for achieving lasting happiness. While material consumption may offer temporary satisfaction, it ultimately falls short of providing long-term well-being. Drawing from a wide range of empirical evidence and theoretical perspectives, this study argues that true and enduring happiness is more effectively attained through the pursuit of intrinsic values, meaningful relationships, and experiences and through sustainable and mindful consumption practices. Concepts such as hedonic adaptation and the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions are discussed to explain why experiences and non-materialistic values contribute more significantly to sustained satisfaction. The study also delves into the societal implications of rampant consumerism and economic disparity, advocating for policy interventions prioritising human well-being over economic growth. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study offers insights into fostering a more fulfilling and sustainable approach to living, both on an individual and societal level.

Keywords: Consumption, Intrinsic values, Hedonic adaptation, Materialism, Sustainability Materialism, Well-being

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE relationship between consumption and well-being has become a key focus in psychology, as this study seeks to understand how material goods and economic wealth influence individual and societal happiness. This study critically assesses the unpredictable relationship between consumption and happiness by examining empirical evidence, theories, and discussions surrounding its effects.

Since the beginning of time, consumption has been unpredictably connected to thoughts of flourishing, achievement, and satisfaction (Featherstone, 2018). In modern society, the quest for material belongings and wealth is often depicted as a pathway to happiness (Pandelaere, 2016). However, the connection between consumption and well-being is far from direct. While material wealth might provide temporary fulfillment and comfort, its long-term influence on happiness is debatable. From the perspective of positive psychology, which emphasises the importance of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, the role of consumption in fulfilling basic needs, enhancing pleasure, and facilitating personal growth will be examined (Martela & Sheldon, 2019). Conversely, critiques from perspectives such as anti-consumerism and minimalism will be considered, highlighting the potential pitfalls of excessive consumption, including environmental degradation, social inequality, and psychological distress (Humphery, 2019).

The central argument of this study is that while material consumption can provide temporary satisfaction, it is ultimately insufficient for achieving long-term well-being. Instead, true and lasting happiness is more effectively achieved by pursuing intrinsic values, meaningful relationships, and experiences and adopting sustainable

and mindful consumption practices.

Paradox of materialism and well-being

The paradox of materialism, which highlights the complex relationship between consumption and well-being, has garnered interest across various domains of study (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012). This paradox challenges the conventional assumption that material assets and wealth lead to increased happiness and well-being (Zainuddin, Russell-Bennett, & Previte, 2013). Studies have shown that materialism, characterised by a strong focus on acquiring and displaying material items, is inversely associated with emotional well-being (Pandelaere, 2016). For instance, a meta-analysis by Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, and Kasser (2014), which reviewed over 200 studies from various cultural contexts, corroborates earlier findings by demonstrating that individuals with strong materialistic values consistently report lower life satisfaction, increased anxiety, and diminished well-being. This study highlights that pursuing material wealth often undermines intrinsic goals such as personal growth and meaningful relationships, leading to persistent dissatisfaction and a pervasive sense of emptiness.

Moreover, this study, grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), sheds light on the underlying mechanisms that drive the paradox of materialism (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory posits that intrinsic goals, which align with basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are conducive to well-being. In contrast, extrinsic goals, such as pursuing wealth and status, are detrimental to mental well-being. Deci and Ryan (2013) contend that materialistic pursuits undermine individuals' autonomy and intrinsic motivation, leading to a reduced sense of vitality and fulfillment.

Furthermore, studies such as those by Diener et al. (1999, 2009) provide robust evidence for the paradox of materialism over time.

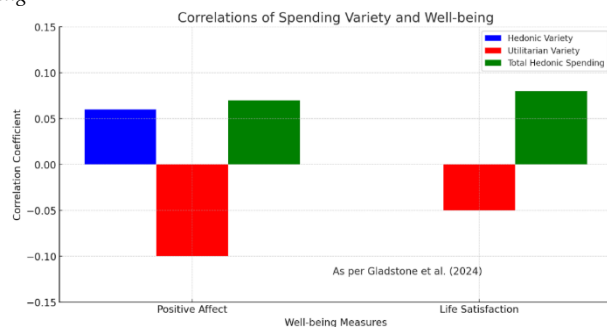
Diener's (2000) longitudinal analysis of subjective well-being consistently shows that materialistic values are associated with lower life satisfaction and mental well-being, even when controlling for economic factors. These findings challenge the notion that consumption and material wealth lead to greater happiness, underscoring the importance of considering alternative sources of well-being, such as personal relationships, community involvement, creative pursuits, and personal growth, beyond material possessions.

Hedonic adaptation and consumerism

Another significant aspect of the relationship between consumption and well-being is hedonic adaptation, the tendency for individuals to return to a baseline level of happiness despite changes in life circumstances, including increases in material wealth or consumption (Luhmann & Intelisano, 2018). This phenomenon indicates that while acquiring material possessions and wealth may lead to a temporary happiness boost, individuals often quickly adapt to these changes, returning to previous levels of well-being. Consequently, the relentless pursuit of material goods can trap individuals in seeking novelty without achieving lasting satisfaction, thereby undermining long-term well-being (Gladstone, Ruberton, Margolis & Lyubomirsky, 2024).

Studies tracking emotional well-being in individuals who experienced significant financial gains, such as lottery winners or inheritors, consistently show that despite an initial increase in happiness, well-being eventually reverts to baseline levels, further illustrating the effects of hedonic adaptation. On the other hand, those who focused on experiential purchases, such as travel or personal growth, sustained higher levels of well-being, underscoring the limitations of material consumption for enduring happiness. This study also suggests that while hedonic spending may temporarily boost positive affect, it does not significantly contribute to long-term life satisfaction, highlighting the importance of investing in meaningful experiences rather than material goods (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2018). This understanding of hedonic adaptation helps clarify the complex connection between consumption and well-being, reinforcing the value of experiences and intrinsic goals over pursuing material possessions (Gladstone et al., 2024).

Figure 1. Correlation between hedonic consumption and subjective well-being



Source: Gladstone et al. (2024).

Alternative paths to happiness

Despite the limitations of material consumption in promoting well-being, alternative paths to happiness emphasise non-materialistic values and experiences. Practices such as gratitude, mindfulness, and altruism have enhanced subjective well-being by fostering positive emotions, strengthening social connections, and promoting a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Stone & Parks, 2018). Additionally, this study suggests that investing in experiences rather than material possessions can lead to more significant long-term fulfillment and satisfaction (Shafqat, Ishaq & Ahmed, 2023). Prioritising relationships, personal growth, and community engagement over material wealth allows individuals to cultivate a deeper sense of well-being that transcends the fleeting pleasures of consumerism (Kumar, 2020). A study by Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson (2019) supports that investing in

experiences leads to greater long-term fulfillment and satisfaction than material possessions. The study found that individuals reported higher levels of happiness and well-being when spending money on experiences, such as travel, dining out, or attending events, compared to spending money on material goods. Participants also reported more enduring satisfaction and positive memories from experiential purchases, highlighting the lasting benefits of investing in experiences for overall well-being. This study underscores the importance of prioritising experiences over material possessions as a pathway to enduring happiness and life satisfaction (Dunn et al., 2020).

In addition, Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (2001) provides a psychological framework for understanding why experiences lead to greater long-term satisfaction. The theory suggests that positive emotions from experiences broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and help build enduring personal resources, such as resilience and social support networks. These resources contribute to sustained well-being, far outlasting the temporary pleasure from material possessions. By fostering lasting personal growth, experiences create a foundation for deeper and more enduring happiness, making them a more effective pathway to well-being than material goods.

Societal implications and policy interventions

The relationship between consumption and well-being impacts individuals and societies, particularly in rampant consumerism and economic disparity. In highly consumerist societies like the United States, economic disparities have widened, concentrating wealth among the elite and increasing stress, anxiety, and dissatisfaction among the broader population (Zucman & Saez, 2020). This pressure to consume and display wealth, especially in lower-income groups, contributes to negative mental health outcomes and exacerbates social inequalities (Ng & Diener, 2019). Additionally, rampant consumerism accelerates environmental degradation, as seen in advanced economies' growing carbon footprints and waste production (O'Neill et al., 2018).

Thus, the connection between consumption and well-being is complex and multifaceted, involving individual and societal dimensions. While material consumption might provide temporary satisfaction and status, its long-term influence on well-being is limited and often paradoxical. By recognising the limitations of consumerism and embracing alternative paths to happiness, individuals and societies can strive toward a more fulfilling and sustainable approach to living.

Suggestions for strategies aimed at enhancing happiness

Enhancing happiness in the context of consumption requires a multifaceted approach that considers both individual behaviours and broader societal factors. Here are several suggestions for strategies aimed at promoting well-being while addressing the impact of consumption:

1. Flexible Work Arrangements: Advocate for policies that provide flexible work schedules and arrangements, such as remote work, flexible hours, and compressed workweeks (Kossek, Gettings & Misra, 2021). Offering employees the ability to tailor their work schedules to accommodate personal and family responsibilities can help reduce stress and improve overall well-being.

2. Paid Time Off for Leisure Activities: Encourage employers to offer generous paid time off policies that allow employees to prioritise leisure activities and personal goals outside of work (Park et al., 2024). Providing ample vacation time, paid holidays, and sabbatical programmes can promote work-life balance and prevent burnout.

3. Promoting Boundaries: Educate individuals about setting boundaries between work and personal life to prevent work-related stress from encroaching on leisure time (Zhao, 2023). Encourage practices such as disconnecting from work emails and phone calls outside designated hours, setting clear expectations with employers and colleagues, and prioritising self-care activities.

4. Supportive Organisational Culture: Foster a supportive organisational culture that values work-life balance and prioritises employee well-being (Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022). Encourage

open communication between managers and employees regarding workload, stressors, and the need for accommodations. Promote employee assistance programmes, wellness workshops, and stress management resources.

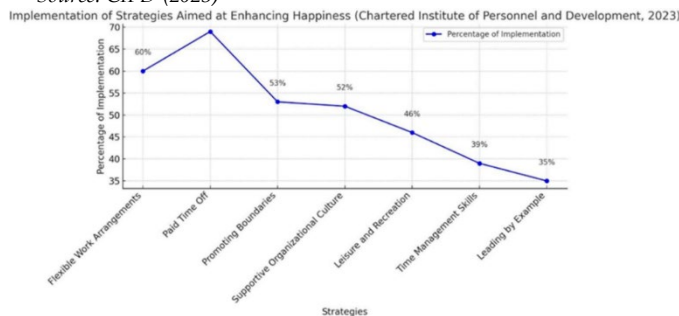
5. Promoting Leisure and Recreation: Encourage individuals to prioritise leisure and recreational activities that promote relaxation, rejuvenation, and enjoyment (Auger, 2024). Promote hobbies, sports, arts, and cultural activities that allow individuals to unwind, recharge, and engage in personally fulfilling activities.

6. Encouraging Time Management Skills: Provide education and resources to help individuals develop effective time management skills to balance work and leisure activities (Auger, 2024). Offer workshops, seminars, and resources on time management techniques, prioritisation, and goal setting to empower individuals to maximise their time and energy.

7. Leading by Example: Encourage leaders and influencers to role model healthy work-life balance behaviours and prioritise self-care (Inceoglu et al., 2018). By demonstrating the importance of work-life balance and setting a positive example, leaders can inspire others to prioritise their well-being and make conscious choices about allocating their time and energy.

By implementing these strategies to support work-life balance, individuals can create more fulfilling lives that prioritise well-being alongside professional success. Organisations and policymakers also play a crucial role in fostering conditions that promote work-life balance and contribute to happiness and satisfaction. Each strategy is vital to enhancing overall happiness [For a better understanding, refer to Figure 2].

Figure 2. Implementation of strategies aimed at enhancing happiness
Source: CIPD (2023)



II. CONCLUSION

The complex relationship between consumption and well-being has been extensively studied, revealing how materialism can negatively impact individual and societal happiness. This study underscores the paradox of materialism, showing the detrimental effects of excessive consumption on subjective well-being and illustrating the temporary satisfaction provided by materialistic pursuits through hedonic adaptation. This suggests a need to reassess what truly constitutes lasting happiness, with paths such as gratitude and experiential activities emerging as viable alternatives for enhancing well-being beyond material wealth.

Additionally, the broader societal impacts and policy implications underscore the need for systemic changes to mitigate the harmful effects of commercialisation and promote a more equitable and sustainable society. By encouraging work-life balance, nurturing supportive organisational cultures, and valuing leisure, individuals, and organisations can foster environments conducive to well-being.

Ultimately, enhancing happiness in the context of consumption involves a multifaceted approach that includes personal behaviours, cultural norms, and policy interventions. By adopting strategies prioritising well-being and addressing consumption's impacts, study supports moving towards a more fulfilling and sustainable lifestyle

where true happiness is accessible to everyone. Through collective efforts and mindful choices, it is possible to create a world where well-being is prioritised over mere material gain.

III. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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