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Stigmatizing Materialism: On Stereotypes and Impressions of Materialistic and Experiential Pursuits

Leaf Van Boven[1], Margaret C. Campbell[1], and Thomas Gilovich[2]

Abstract

Five studies examined the stigmatization of materialism. Participants expressed negative stereotypes of materialistic people, considering them to be more selfish and self-centered than experiential people (Study 1). Participants also viewed materialistic pursuits as more extrinsically motivated than experiential pursuits (Study 2). These stereotypes led respondents from varied demographic backgrounds to form less favorable impressions of individuals who were associated with prototypically materialistic versus experiential purchases, a result that was statistically mediated by impressions that materialistic purchases were more extrinsically motivated (Study 3). These differential impressions are primarily attributable to the denigration of materialistic people rather than the admiration of experiential people (Study 4). The stigmatization of materialism led participants to like less and enjoy interacting less with their conversation partners when discussing materialistic rather than experiential purchases (Study 5). The authors discuss these findings' implications for self-perception, accurate social perception, and well-being.

Keywords

materialism, social cognition, stereotypes, well-being

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Modern materialism is widely viewed as detrimental to society. In a recent national survey, 88% of respondents said that Americans are too materialistic, 93% said that Americans are too focused on working and making money, and 87% said that consumer culture makes it difficult to instill positive values in American children (Center for a New American Dream, 2008). Social scientists have argued that materialism "crowds out" social relationships (Kasser, 2002; Lane, 2001), detracting from social engagement (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, people who are highly materialistic, believing that happiness can be obtained through the acquisition of money and material possessions, have poorer social relationships than people who are less materialistic. Highly materialistic people rate their social relations less favorably (Kasser & Ryan, 2001), tend to be in social relationships that are rated as less satisfying by friends and family (Solberg, Diener, & Robinson, 2004, Study 1), and are more likely to be diagnosed with psychological disorders reflecting poor social functioning (Cohen & Cohen, 1996; Kasser & Ryan, 1996).

Why might materialistic behavior pose barriers to successful social relationships? Answers to this question tend to focus on materialistic people's problematic personalities. For example, materialistic aspirations can supplant social desires (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), and materialistic people tend to be more Machiavellian (McHoskey, 1999), report lower levels of empathy (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995), and behave less cooperatively in social dilemmas (Sheldon & McGregor, 2000; Sheldon, Sheldon, & Osbaldiston, 2000). Materialistic people behave badly, and such behavior makes social relationships difficult.

In addition to materialistic people's problematic personalities, we suggest a complementary reason why materialistic behavior poses barriers to successful social relationships: Materialistic people are stigmatized—perhaps rightfully so—as having undesirable personality traits, as being extrinsically motivated, and hence as being relatively less likable. The stigmatization of materialism means that being associated with

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materialistic behavior can lead people to be liked less, which makes friendship formation more difficult.

Our analysis of the stigmatization of materialistic people draws on a distinction we have made between material and experiential purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Van Boven, 2005; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). *Material purchases* involve the expenditure of discretionary resources with the primary intention of acquiring tangible objects. *Experiential purchases* involve the expenditure of discretionary resources with the primary intention of "acquiring" events that one lives through. The distinction between material and experiential purchases resonates intuitively with people from varied demographics who show great consensus about which purchases are material (e.g., clothing and jewelry) and which are experiential (e.g., travel and outdoor activities), even when considering very brief descriptions of others' purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

We suggest that people also draw a similar intuitive distinction between materialistic and experiential people. That is, we contend that people have distinct and largely negative stereotypes of *materialistic people* who pursue happiness through material purchases, in contrast to *experiential people* who pursue happiness through experiential purchases. These stereotypes, which entail a pronounced stigmatization of materialism, lead people to form unfavorable impressions of those associated with materialistic behavior. To the degree that people stigmatize materialistic versus experiential people, simply observing others engaged in materialistic versus experiential behavior might be sufficient to activate the corresponding stereotype and evaluation (Dunning & Sherman, 1997; Kunda, Sinclair, & Griffin, 1997; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 2001). Engaging in materialistic behavior may therefore pose a barrier to successful social relationships not only because materialistic people are prone to having problematic personalities, as previous research has shown, but also because people who are associated with material purchases are *perceived* as having problematic personalities and are therefore liked and valued less than those associated with experiential purchases.

Given that stereotypes often have some grounding in reality (McClauly, Lee, & Jussim, 1995), materialistic people are likely to be stereotypically associated with the traits and motives that materialistic people often possess, such as being extrinsically motivated, selfish, and self-centered (Cohen & Cohen, 1983, 1996 ; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; McHoskey, 1999; Sheldon, Ryan, Deci, & Kasser, 2004). Experiential people, in contrast, may be seen as less extrinsically motivated, relatively outgoing, and open-minded (Frank, 1999; Fromm, 1976; Scitovsky, 1976; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Although some existing evidence implies that people do indeed have relatively unsavory stereotypes of materialistic people (Fournier & Richins, 1991), we know of no research examining the stereotypes of experiential people.

A particularly important component of stereotypes of materialistic and experiential people is the distinction between people who are extrinsically versus intrinsically motivated. The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motives appears to be fundamental (Deci, 1975; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Sheldon et al., 2004) and is present across cultures (Grouzet et al., 2005). Although extrinsic motives entail pursuing goals as means to external ends such as money, status, or popularity, intrinsic motives entail pursuing inherently rewarding goals such as autonomy, self-acceptance, and community belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Grouzet et al., 2005). Given the fundamental distinction between extrinsic versus intrinsic motives, the distinction may be of great importance in everyday judgments of others' motives and traits.

We suggest that the stereotypic distinction between materialistic and experiential people partly reflects a distinction between extrinsically (materialistic) and intrinsically (experiential) motivated people. Stereotyping people as materialistic or experiential thus serves to link specific, observable, everyday behaviors—the pursuit of material possessions versus life experiences—with extrinsic versus intrinsic motives. This analysis implies that people's tendency to form relatively unfavorable impressions of those associated with materialistic behavior is at least partly mediated by people's inference that those associated with materialistic behavior are more extrinsically motivated. That is, people's impressions of others based on observed behavior (making material or experiential purchases) may be based on inferences of underlying motives (being extrinsically or intrinsically motivated; Sheldon et al., 2004).

Our analysis also assumes that people like extrinsically motivated people less than intrinsically motivated people. We believe the tendency to like extrinsically motivated people less than intrinsically motivated people reflects a deep-seated tendency to be suspicious of and unfavorably disposed toward others who are disingenuous—those whose actions serve external goals and whose trustworthiness might therefore be called into question. The following pilot study provides preliminary evidence that people do indeed distinguish between those who are extrinsically versus intrinsically motivated based on the decisions they make and that people like extrinsically motivated people less. A total of 26 people read about two individuals faced with a choice between extrinsically and intrinsically appealing employment:

> Mark and Craig are both completing their Masters degrees, and have both been offered two jobs, Job A and Job B. Job A is with a respectable, medium status firm that pays moderately well, enough to support a decent living but not so much as to make one feel wealthy. Job B, in contrast, is with a highly respectable, prestigious firm that pays extremely well, enough to make one feel wealthy. Job A is in an extremely

> desirable location, especially given Mark's and Craig's recreation interests, but where housing is relatively expensive. Job B is located in a moderately desirable location where housing is less expensive. Job A's work atmosphere is very friendly. Job B's work atmosphere is moderately friendly.

Respondents read that Craig chooses Job B, the job with more extrinsic appeal (higher prestige and salary, lower housing costs) but less intrinsic appeal, whereas Mark chooses Job A, the job with less extrinsic appeal but more intrinsic appeal (more desirable recreation opportunities, friendlier work atmosphere). The overwhelming majority of respondents liked Craig less than Mark (92.31%, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 75%, 98%) and were less interested in being friends with Craig than with Mark (92.31%, 95% CI = 75%, 98%). People thus distinguish between those whose choices reflect extrinsic versus intrinsic motives, and they like less and are less interested in forming friendships with those who choose on the basis of extrinsic dimensions. The present studies test whether people form similar distinctions and impressions based on others' materialistic versus experiential purchases.

We tested in five studies the hypotheses that people have distinct, unfavorable stereotypes of materialistic people and that these stereotypes lead people to form relatively unfavorable impressions of those associated with materialistic versus experiential behavior. The first two studies examined the content of people's stereotypes about materialistic and experiential individuals' traits (Study 1) and motives (Study 2). We then tested whether respondents from a demographically diverse sample would report less favorable impressions of someone who bought a prototypical material purchase than of someone who bought a prototypical experiential purchase and whether their impressions would be mediated by inferences about the person's extrinsic motives (Study 3). We then tested whether these differential impressions are attributable to the denigration of people associated with materialistic behavior, the admiration of people associated with experiential behavior, or both (Study 4). Finally, we tested whether participants would report less favorable impressions of each other following face-to-face conversations about either materialistic or experiential purchases, even when the experimenter assigned the conversation topic (Study 5).

Study 1: What's in a Stereotype?

We first sought to assess the content of people's stereotypes about those who pursue happiness through material possessions versus life experiences. One sample of participants was asked to list the personality traits that they associated with people they know who prefer to spend discretionary income on material purchases, and the traits of people they know who prefer to spend discretionary income on experiential purchases. A different sample of participants was then asked to evaluate a randomly selected subset of the traits that the first sample generated without any knowledge that the traits were initially associated with materialistic or experiential individuals. We predicted that participants in the first sample would list qualitatively different traits, reflecting the distinct stereotypes of materialistic versus experiential people, and that participants in the second sample would evaluate the traits initially associated with materialistic people less favorably than the traits initially associated with experiential people.

Method

Trait generation. Participating in exchange for course credit, 30 undergraduate students read that some people prefer to pursue happiness by spending discretionary resources on "material purchases, which involve spending money with the primary intention of acquiring a material good. For example, a new shirt, a piece of jewelry, and a pair of shoes are all material purchases." Other people, participants read, prefer to pursue happiness by spending discretionary resources on "experiential purchases, which involve spending money with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience. For example, going to a play, going skiing, and dining at fine restaurants are all experiential purchases" (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

Participants were asked to think of a specific person they knew whom they would describe as primarily interested in materialistic purchases and a specific person they knew whom they would describe as primarily interested in experiential purchases. Participants were then asked to list up to 20 personality traits they associated with each person. The order in which participants listed the person and associated traits was counterbalanced, with no effect of order. In total, participants listed 191 distinct personality traits.

Trait evaluation. In a subsequent phase of the study, 58 undergraduates were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire for course credit. They were asked to read between 16 and 31 of the personality traits randomly selected from the 191 listed in the initial phase of the study. Participants were simply asked to read and evaluate the traits without any mention of the initial phase or of the distinction between materialistic and experiential people. Participants were asked to rate the overall desirability of each trait (1 = *very undesirable*, 4 = *equally desirable and undesirable*, 7 = *very desirable*) and how likable someone who possessed each trait would be (1 = *very unlikable*, 4 = *neither likable nor unlikable*, 7 = *very likable*).

Results and Discussion

Trait generation. Participants listed approximately the same number of traits on average to describe materialistic and experiential people (7.80 and 8.03, respectively; $t < 1$).

Table 1. The Personality Traits That at Least 5 of 30 Participants Associated With Materialistic and Experiential People and the Percentage of Participants Who Listed Each Trait for the Type of Person in Question (Study 1)

Materialistic people		Experiential people	
Trait	Percentage	Trait	Percentage
Trendy	43.33	Humorous	33.33
Enjoys buying things	33.33	Friendly	33.33
Self-centered or selfish	33.33	Open-minded	30.00
Insecure	23.33	Intelligent	30.00
Enjoys luxuries	23.33	Caring	30.00
Generous	20.00	Outgoing	26.67
Friendly	20.00	Open to experience	26.67
Judgmental	16.67	Adventurous	23.33
Materialistic	16.67	Optimistic	23.33
Humorous	16.67	Easy going	20.00
Concerned with appearance	16.67	Talkative	16.67
		Inquisitive	16.67

Of 191 total unique traits listed, materialistic people were uniquely associated with 77 traits, as were experiential people. The remaining 37 traits were used at least once to describe both material and experiential people.

Displayed in Table 1 are the traits that at least 5 of the 30 participants (16.67%) associated with either materialistic or experiential people. Only two of these traits (humorous and friendly) were associated with both materialistic and experiential people. Thus, 9 of the top 11 traits associated with materialistic people and 10 of the top 12 traits associated with experiential people are unique. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that the traits associated with experiential people are not simply the absence or opposite of the traits associated with materialistic people. Although *judgmental* might be considered something of the opposite of *open-minded*, the remaining traits are not easily aligned into antonym pairs. The distinction between the two sets of traits supports our hypothesis that people have different stereotypes of materialistic and experiential people and that these stereotypes reflect more than simply high or low levels of materialism.

Trait evaluation. Because more than one participant from the trait evaluation phase evaluated each trait from the trait generation phase (e.g., more than one person evaluated the trait *self-centered*), and because each person in the trait generation phase listed more than one trait associated with experiential and materialistic people, we used the individual participant in the trait generation phase as the statistically independent unit of analysis ($n = 30$). We first computed, for each trait, the average evaluation made by participants in the trait evaluation phase. We then aggregated these average trait evaluations into two composite evaluations for each participant from the trait generation phase: one composite evaluation of that participant's materialistic person and one of that participant's experiential person.

As predicted, the traits associated with materialistic people were rated less favorably ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.14$) than the traits associated with experiential people ($M = 5.78$, $SD = 0.65$), paired $t(29) = 8.33$, $p < .001$. The traits originally associated with materialistic people were also rated as less likable ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.32$) than the traits originally associated with experiential people ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 0.63$), paired $t(29) = 8.66$, $p < .001$.

These results suggest that people have distinct stereotypes of the traits associated with materialistic versus experiential people and that the traits associated with materialistic people are relatively undesirable. Participants listed personality traits that they associated with materialistic and experiential people that were qualitatively different. A separate group of participants rated the traits associated with materialistic people less positively than those associated with experiential people, without knowing that the traits were initially associated with materialistic or experiential people. Although materialistic people are seen as, among other things, trendy, insecure, and self-centered, experiential people are stereotyped as open-minded, intelligent, and outgoing.

Study 2: Stereotypic Motives

We next sought to examine people's inferences about the extrinsic and intrinsic motives underlying specific purchases made by materialistic and experiential people. Participants were randomly assigned to think either of an acquaintance who preferred to pursue happiness through material purchases or an acquaintance who pursued happiness through experiential purchases and to describe a specific material purchase made by the former or a specific experiential purchase made by the latter. Participants then reported how much they thought the purchase was extrinsically and intrinsically motivated. Extrinsic motives were defined as engaging in activities because of their instrumental value in obtaining external rewards such as status. Intrinsic motives were defined as engaging in activities for their inherent value (Deci, 1975; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002). We predicted that participants would view the material purchase as relatively more extrinsically motivated than the experiential purchase.

Method

A total of 44 participants recruited in exchange for a candy bar from a university commons area ($M_{age} = 23.68$, $SD = 6.65$) were asked to think of a person with whom they were at least somewhat familiar and to consider how that person spent money "with the intention of advancing happiness and satisfaction with life." Participants randomly assigned to the

materialistic person condition ($n = 22$) were asked to think of a person who typically spends discretionary money on "material purchases, which involve spending money with the primary intention of having a material possession." Participants randomly assigned to the experiential person condition ($n = 22$) were asked to think of a person who typically spends money on "experiential purchases, which involve spending money with the primary intention of having a life experience." Participants in the former condition were asked to describe a specific material purchase made by the person in question, and participants in the latter condition were asked to describe a specific experiential purchase. Participants also reported the person's age and sex and rated how well they knew the person (1 = *not well at all*, 7 = *very well*); none of these measures differed significantly by condition and are not further discussed.

After listing a purchase, participants were asked how much they thought six different motives guided the purchase (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). The six motives were based on previous research distinguishing between extrinsic and intrinsic motives (Sheldon & Kasser, 1995; Sheldon, Kasser, Smith, & Share, 2002). To measure how much the purchase was seen as extrinsically motivated, participants rated how much they thought the person was trying "to be admired by other people," "to look good and to appear attractive to others," and how much the purchase was made "because of the external rewards such as status that the purchase would provide." To measure how much the purchase was seen as intrinsically motivated, participants rated how much they thought the person was "seeking to fulfill him- or herself and have a meaningful life," "trying to establish or maintain relationships with others," and how much the purchase was made "because of the inherent enjoyment and stimulation that the purchase would provide." For data analysis, we averaged into two indices the three ratings of intrinsic motives ($\alpha = .85$) and the three ratings of extrinsic motives ($\alpha = .58$). Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants thought that the materialistic people's purchases were more extrinsically and less intrinsically motivated than the experiential people's purchases, as reflected by the significant interaction in a 2 (material vs. experiential purchase) × 2 (extrinsic vs. intrinsic motives) ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor, $F(1, 42) = 10.39$, $p < .01$. Participants thought that materialistic purchases were significantly more extrinsically motivated than experiential purchases ($M = 4.71$ and 3.58, $SD = 1.69$ and 1.70, respectively), $t(42) = 2.21$, $p < .05$, and significantly less intrinsically motivated ($M = 4.71$ and 5.51, $SD = 1.17$ and 0.93, respectively), $t(42) = 2.50$, $p < .025$ (see Table 2). People thus infer that materialistic people's materialistic purchases are more extrinsically and less intrinsically motivated than experiential people's experiential purchases.

Table 2. Participants' Estimates of the Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motives Underlying a Materialistic Person's Purchase of a Material Possession and an Experiential Person's Purchase of a Life Experience (Study 2)

	Purchase type			
	Materialistic		Experiential	
Motive type	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Extrinsic	4.71	1.69	3.58	1.70
Intrinsic	4.71	1.17	5.51	0.93

Together, the results of Studies 1 and 2 indicate that people have relatively unfavorable stereotypes of the traits and motives of materialistic people. Given these stereotypes and given stereotypes' power to influence impressions, the remaining studies test the hypothesis that people form less favorable impressions of those who are associated with materialistic rather than experiential purchases.

Study 3: Inferences From Prototypical Purchases

We next tested whether those who are associated with prototypical material purchases would be evaluated more negatively than those associated with prototypical experiential purchases. We first sought to identify prototypical materialistic and experiential purchases by asking participants in a pilot study to describe the "best example" of each purchase type. Based on the relative frequency of participants' responses, we selected a prototypical material purchase (a new shirt) and a prototypical experiential purchase (a ski pass) for use in the main study.

We then asked a separate, demographically diverse group of participants to read about a person who made either the prototypical material or experiential purchase. The use of a demographically diverse sample—consisting of people participating for entry in a cash lottery who were recruited through a metropolitan business school's marketing department—minimizes concerns that unfavorable impressions of materialistic behavior emerge only among people residing in "experiential" locations (e.g., Boulder, CO, or Ithaca, NY). These participants reported their overall impression of the person and estimated how extrinsically versus intrinsically motivated the purchase was. We predicted that participants would judge the material purchase to be more extrinsically motivated than the experiential purchase, that participants would form a less favorable impression of the person who made the material rather than the experiential purchase, and that inferred extrinsic motives would at least partially mediate the differential impressions.

Three features of this design are worth noting. First, no mention was made in the main study of the distinction

between material and experiential purchases; participants read only about another person's purchase. In addition to minimizing demand characteristics associated with the labels "materialistic" and "experiential," this procedure better represents how people learn about others in everyday life—that is, by learning about specific purchases they make. Second, demand characteristics are also minimized by the between-persons nature of the impression formation phase of the study. Finally, responses were anonymous, which minimized any potential concern on the part of participants about conveying a poor impression by, say, favorably evaluating someone who made a material purchase.

Pilot Study: Prototypical Purchases

In exchange for course credit, 40 university students anonymously completed a questionnaire. Participants were asked to describe two kinds of purchases that people might make in pursuit of happiness. After reading the definitions of material and experiential purchases provided in Studies 1 and 2, participants were asked to describe what they considered to be the "best example" of each type. The cost of each purchase was to be between $100 and $500 and was to be "something that a young adult might actually purchase." The order of purchase descriptions was counterbalanced.

The most frequently listed examples of material purchases (see Table 3) included clothing (n = 15; shirts, jeans, and jackets), electronics (n = 12; stereo speakers, televisions, and iPods), jewelry and accessories (n = 9; watches, necklaces, and purses), and sporting equipment (n = 4). The most frequently listed examples of experiential purchases included travel (n = 12; trips to Mexico, the Caribbean, California, and New York City), ski tickets and season passes (n = 11), events and meals (n = 10; tickets to X-Games, concerts, sporting events, and meals), and other outdoor activities and hobbies (n = 7; hiking, biking, and rafting). These materialistic and experiential purchases comport with earlier research in which people asked to describe their own material purchases most commonly listed clothing, jewelry, and electronics; people's most commonly listed experiential purchases were fees and admissions to concerts, skiing, and travel (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Given these descriptions, we selected a new shirt as a prototypical material purchase and a ski pass as a prototypical experiential purchase. We shied away from experiential purchases of travel given that such expenses often exceed $500.

Table 3. Prototypical Material and Experiential Purchases Provided by Participants, and the Frequency With Which They Were Mentioned, With Frequency Percentage (Study 3)

Prototypical purchase category	Description frequency	Frequency %
Material purchases		
Clothing (e.g., jackets, shirts, and jeans)	15	37.50
Electronics (e.g., television, stereos)	12	30.00
Accessories and jewelry	9	22.50
Sporting equipment	4	10.00
Experiential purchases		
Travel (domestic and Mexican or Caribbean)	12	30.00
Skiing (weekends and passes)	11	27.50
Events, concerts, and meals	10	25.00
Non-snow-sport outdoor activities (e.g., hiking, rafting, skydiving)	7	17.50

Method

In exchange for entry in a $100 lottery, 305 participants (49 males, 254 females, 2 unspecified) anonymously completed an online study. A marketing laboratory in an East Coast metropolitan business school administered the survey. The sample included a range of ages (M = 35.55 years, SD = 11.33 years, range = 18–68 years, interquartile range = 27 years, 44 years) from various regions of the United States (East Coast = 35%, Southeast = 28%, Midwest = 19%, Southwest = 6%, West Coast = 11%, other and unspecified = 1%). Respondents spanned various occupations (clerical and retail = 12%, homemaker = 21%, manual labor = 3%, professional = 32%, student = 19%, retired and unemployed = 8%, and other [e.g., mystery shopper and coffin maker] = 5%).

Participants learned that they would read a description of a purchase made by an undergraduate student at the University of Colorado at Boulder who was asked to describe a discretionary purchase that cost between $100 and $500. Participants read that the student purchased either a new shirt or a ski pass, randomly assigned.

Participants evaluated the student on non-numbered scales that we translated into 7-point numeric scales for data analysis. Participants reported their overall impression of the student (1 = *very unfavorable*, 7 = *very favorable*) and estimated the extent to which the student was "happy and well adjusted" (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Participants also estimated how much the student made the purchase because "of the intrinsic rewards such as personal enjoyment that the purchase would provide rather than the extrinsic rewards such as status" (1 = *primarily extrinsic rewards*, 7 = *primarily intrinsic rewards*). Participants then provided some basic demographic information (summarized above), were thanked, and were invited to contact the researchers for a complete debriefing.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, participants reported less favorable impressions of the person who purchased a prototypical material

Table 4. Participants' Impressions of a Person Who Made Either a Prototypically Material Purchase (a New Shirt) or a Prototypically Experiential Purchase (a Ski Pass, Study 3)

	Purchase			
	Material (new shirt)		Experiential (ski pass)	
Evaluation	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Overall impression	4.50	1.22	5.49	1.35
Psychologically well adjusted	4.72	1.61	5.80	1.44
Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation	4.24	1.25	5.74	1.07

good ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.22$) than the person who purchased a prototypical experience ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.35$), $t(303) = 6.69$, $p < .001$ (see Table 4). Participants also thought that the person who purchased the prototypical material good was less happy and well adjusted ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.61$) than the person who purchased the prototypical experience ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(303) = 8.23$, $p < .0001$. Finally, participants estimated that the person who made the prototypical material purchase was less intrinsically (and more extrinsically) motivated ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.25$) than the person who made the prototypical experiential purchase ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(303) = 8.54$, $p < .0001$.

A mediation analysis (Kenny & Bolger, 1997) indicated that the effect of purchase type on inferred motives mediated the effect of purchase type on overall impressions. The effect of purchase type on overall impressions of the other person was significantly reduced (from $b = –.50$, $t = 6.69$ to $b = –.29$, $t = 3.69$, $p < .001$) when participants' estimates of the other person's motives ($b = .28$, $t = 6.02$, $p < .0001$) were included in the model (Sobel $z = 4.92$, $p < .001$). The effect of learning that an individual made a prototypically materialistic versus experiential purchase on participants' estimates of that person's motives thus partially mediated the effect of purchase type on participants' liking of that person.

The overall tendency to evaluate less favorably the person who purchased a prototypical material possession was not significantly moderated by participant sex, $t < 1$, age, $t(297) = 1.52$, *ns*, or region, $F(6, 291) = 1.66$, *ns*. However, participants' occupation significantly moderated the difference between participants' impressions of the target person who bought a shirt versus a ski pass, $F(9, 285) = 2.45$, $p < .025$. Respondents who worked as laborers, unlike every other occupation, evaluated the person who made the material purchase more favorably than the person who made the experiential purchase ($M = 5.00$ and 3.33). Unfortunately, only a small fraction of our sample ($n = 8$, 3%) indicated that they were laborers. Although the possibility of occupational, and possibly socioeconomic status, differences in evaluations of materialistic and experiential people is intriguing, we hesitate to generalize from such a small sample. Further inquiry into potential occupational and socioeconomic differences is an important task for future research.

In this study, a largely nonstudent sample of respondents who varied substantially in age, geographical location, and occupation evaluated an individual who made a prototypically material purchase less favorably than an individual who made a prototypically experiential purchase. Importantly, participants formed these differential impressions based simply on learning that the target person made a particular material or experiential purchase. No mention was made of the distinction between materialistic and experiential types of people or purchases.

Study 4: Material Derogation or Experiential Admiration?

We next sought to refine our examination of the stigmatization of materialistic behavior in two ways. First, we examined whether the inferences people make about the motives underlying a particular purchase (e.g., the extent to which a person made a purchase for extrinsic reasons) extend to impressions about the broad motives and personality traits that characterize the person in question (e.g., the extent to which a person is generally extrinsically motivated and possesses unsavory personality traits). Given the large body of research indicating that people readily make broad dispositional inferences (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977), we expected that people would infer that those associated with material purchases were generally more extrinsically motivated and possessed relatively negative personality traits compared with those associated with experiential purchases. We also expected that, as in Study 3, participants' inferences about others' extrinsic and intrinsic motives would statistically mediate the relatively unfavorable impressions people were expected to form of those associated with material rather than experiential purchases.

Second, we sought to examine whether the tendency to judge differently those who purchase material possessions than those who purchase life experiences is attributable to derogating those who pursue material possessions, admiring those who pursue life experiences, or both. Because derogation and admiration might both have contributed to the differential evaluations in previous studies, we included a neutral control condition for comparison in Study 4. Accordingly, we asked participants to report their impressions of other people after reading answers purportedly written by that person in response to several relatively neutral questions of the type that might appear on a job application. In addition to these neutral questions, some participants also read a response to a question in which the target individual was asked to describe a purchase made with the intention of advancing happiness. Depending on random assignment, the ostensive

answer described either a prototypical material purchase or a prototypical experiential purchase. Participants in the control condition did not read about the target's response to a question about a purchase made in the pursuit of happiness. We predicted that participants would form less favorable impressions of a person who described a prototypical material purchase than either a person who described a prototypical experiential purchase or a person who was not associated with a purchase of either type.

We were less certain about whether people would evaluate those associated with experiential purchases more favorably than those in the control condition. On one hand, people generally have stronger reactions to negative information than to positive information (Rozin & Royzman, 2001) and they consider negative information to be more diagnostic of a person's true nature (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991), so people might more readily and strongly derogate people associated with the pursuit of materialistic possessions than admire those associated with pursuing life experiences. On the other hand, the personality traits that people stereotypically associate with people who prefer experiential purchases (Study 1) are more favorable than the traits associated with people who prefer material purchases, so people might form correspondingly more favorable impressions of those associated with the pursuit of life experiences.

Method

In exchange for course credit, 70 undergraduate students were asked to read another student's answers to a set of interview questions and report their impression of that student. Each set of responses included answers to three filler questions such as "What is your favorite fruit?" Each question was answered with a relatively neutral response such as "I like lots of fruit, but I guess I would have to say that apples are my favorite. They are nutritious and delicious!"

Depending on random assignment, participants in the experiential and material purchase preference conditions also read a response to a question in which respondents were ostensibly asked to "Please describe a purchase that cost between $100 and $500 that you recently made with the intention of increasing your happiness and life satisfaction." In the experiential purchase condition, the response described one of two prototypical experiential purchases: a $300 ski weekend or a $150 concert by a favorite band. In the material purchase condition, the response described one of two prototypical material purchases: a $300 watch or a $150 ski jacket by The North Face. There was no main effect of purchase price on our key dependent measure, nor did it interact with purchase type, so it is not discussed further. The target person's response to the question about experiential or material purchases appeared before the responses to the three filler questions.

Table 5. Overall Impressions of Other People and of Their Traits and Motives After Reading That They Purchased a Prototypical Experiential Purchase or a Prototypical Material Purchase or Made No Purchase (Study 4)

	Purchase condition					
	Material		No purchase		Experiential	
Impression and inference	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Overall impression	4.51	0.83	4.90	0.72	5.17	0.85
Traits and motives	4.07	0.66	4.53	0.61	4.69	0.66

After reading the other student's ostensive answers to the interview questions, participants reported their overall impression of the student on two 7-point scales (1 = *not favorable*, 7 = *very favorable*; 1 = *unlikable*, 7 = *very likable*) and rated how much they would like to get to know the person (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We measured participants' inferences about the other student's motives and personality traits by first asking participants to rate on two scales how much (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) they thought the person generally makes decisions with the goal of maximizing "*intrinsic rewards* such as personal enjoyment, stimulation, and the inherent satisfaction associated with the decision outcomes" and "*extrinsic rewards* such as prestige, status, and other external rewards associated with the decision outcomes?" We also asked participants to rate on separate scales (1 = *doesn't describe at all*, 7 = *describes very well*) how well each of 11 traits describes the person they read about: *altruistic/helpful, arrogant, humorous, likable, open-minded, optimistic, outgoing, self-centered, selfish, shallow*, and *superficial*. After providing these ratings, participants answered a few follow-up questions, were thanked, and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

We first analyzed participants' general impression of the other student by averaging their ratings of their overall impression of the other student, how likable that person was, and how much they would enjoy getting to know that person ($\alpha = .74$). As predicted, participants' ratings varied across conditions, $F(2, 68) = 4.24$, $p < .025$ (see Table 5). Subsequent planned comparisons indicated that participants' impressions of the target person in the material purchase condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.83$) were significantly lower than in the experiential purchase condition ($M = 5.17$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(68) = 2.88$, $p < .005$, and marginally significantly lower than in the no-purchase control condition ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(68) = 1.67$, $p < .1$. The experiential

and no-purchase control conditions were not significantly different, $t(68) = 1.09$, *ns*. Relative to the control condition, participants thus denigrated the target person associated with material purchases but did not hold in particularly high esteem the person associated with experiential purchases.

We next analyzed participants' inferences about the target persons' motives and personality traits by averaging their 13 ratings into an overall index, after appropriate reverse scoring such that higher numbers reflected more intrinsic motives and more desirable traits ($\alpha = .70$). As predicted, participants' inferences about the target person's motives and personality traits differed significantly between conditions, $F(2, 68) = 7.08$, $p < .005$ (see Table 5). Subsequent planned comparisons indicated that participants' inferences about the other person's motives and traits in the material purchase condition ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.66$) were significantly lower than those in the experiential purchase condition ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.66$), $t(68) = 3.59$, $p < .001$, and than those in the no-purchase control condition ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.61$), $t(68) = 2.61$, $p < .025$. The inferences made by participants in the latter two conditions were not significantly different ($t < 1$). Mirroring their global impressions, participants stigmatized the motives and traits of the target person associated with material purchases, but they did not particularly admire the target person associated with experiential purchases.

A mediation analysis (Kenny & Bolger, 1997) indicated that the effect of purchase condition (contrast coded: *material purchase* = –1, *no purchase* = 0, *experiential purchase* = +1) on overall impressions was significantly reduced (from $b = .34$ to $b = .13$; Sobel $z = 2.89$, $p < .005$) and was no longer significant ($t = 1.18$, *ns*) when participants' inferences about the target person's traits and motives were included in the model ($b = .65$, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$). Importantly, the reverse pattern of mediation was not significant: Purchase condition remained a significant predictor of participants' inferences about the target person's motives and traits ($b = .19$, $t = 2.38$, $p < .025$) when participants' overall impressions of the target person were included in the model ($b = .38$, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$). This meditational pattern implies that people form less favorable impressions of those who purchase material possessions because they infer that such individuals are less intrinsically motivated and possess less desirable personality traits compared with those who purchase life experiences and those who are not associated with a purchase at all.

These results suggest that the stigmatization of materialistic behavior leads people to form less favorable impressions of others' traits and motives and to like them less after learning that they purchased material possessions. The results yielded no evidence, however, that people form more favorable impressions of others after learning that they purchased life experiences. These results therefore suggest that the relatively unfavorable impressions people form of others who are associated with materialistic rather than experiential purchases is primarily attributable to the stigmatization of materialism rather than any particularly keen admiration of experientialism. These results are consistent with the possibility that people are sensitive to detecting (and deriding) others' relatively negative extrinsic motives (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Nevertheless, as we discuss later in more detail, we think it is important to compare the impressions people form based on learning about others' materialistic purchases with the impressions they form based on others' experiential purchases because such comparisons hold constant the fact that people have spent money to make themselves happy.

Study 5: Face-to-Face Impressions

In our final study, we examined whether the stigmatization of materialism is sufficiently potent to influence people's impressions of each other even in the informationally rich interpersonal setting of a live, face-to-face conversation. In live interactions, people's impressions might be strongly swayed by nonverbal behavior (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000) as well as people's strategic self-presentation (Leary, 1996), which might overwhelm the stigmatizing influence of being associated with materialistic behavior. On the other hand, stereotypes can automatically influence impression formation (Devine, 1989; Dunning & Sherman, 1997), even in the context of more diagnostic information. And much research indicates that salient behavior—such as association with a stigmatized behavior—strongly influences impression formation (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977).

To examine whether people form less favorable impressions of those associated with material purchases compared with those associated with experiential purchases even in live, face-to-face interactions, we asked pairs of previously unacquainted individuals to discuss either material or experiential purchases. We then asked discussants to confidentially report their impressions of each other, how interested they were in forming a relationship with one another, and how much they enjoyed the conversation. Notice that, in this design, the experimenter determined whether the conversation was to be about materialistic or experiential purchases—a constraint of which both participants were aware. We predicted that the conversation topic would nonetheless influence participants' impressions. That is, we expected participants to form less favorable impressions of each other after discussing material rather than experiential purchases. Such impressions would echo the longstanding social psychological theme that salient behavior—the conversation topic, in this case—can influence impression formation even when, from a normative perspective, it should not (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977).

In addition to examining interpersonal impressions, we also tested whether people might enjoy discussing experiential purchases more than material purchases (Van Boven, 2005). There are at least two reasons why they might. One is

simply that people enjoy interacting with people they like more than with people they like less. We tested this possibility by examining whether the effect of materialistic or experiential conversation type on discussants' impressions of each other statistically mediated the effect of conversation type on conversational enjoyment. Another reason that experiential conversations may be more enjoyable is simply that experiences may lend themselves more readily to a narrative structure with a beginning, middle, and end (Van Boven, 2005).

Method

In exchange for course credit, 24 pairs of previously unacquainted undergraduate students participated. After arriving at the lab, participants learned that they were to have a conversation about purchases that had contributed to their happiness in life, with the experimenter assigning the specific type of purchase to be discussed. Participants were then randomly assigned to discuss either material ($n = 12$ pairs) or experiential purchases ($n = 12$ pairs) and were given the purchase definitions used in previous studies.

Participants were then individually escorted to private rooms where they spent approximately 5 min selecting and jotting down notes about the purchases to be discussed. The pairs of participants were then reunited and asked to have a conversation in which they described their purchases to each other. Participants were encouraged to ask questions, make comments, and engage in conversational back and forth. They were given up to 20 min for their conversation, which typically lasted 15 min.

Following the conversation, the pairs of participants were separated and escorted to private rooms where they provided the following confidential evaluations. Participants first rated their overall impression of their conversation partner (1 = *very negative*, 9 = *very positive*). They then read that students who had been paired in one experiment were sometimes paired again in subsequent experiments, and they were asked to rate their interest in being paired again with the same partner (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very interested*). These two ratings were averaged into an index of participants' overall impressions ($r = .69$). To measure participants' enjoyment of the conversation, they were asked to rate how much they enjoyed the conversation overall and how much they enjoyed hearing about their partner's purchases (for both scales: 1 = *not at all*, 9 = *a great deal*), which we averaged into an index of enjoyment ($r = .72$). Participants were then thanked and debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Because of the inherently interdependent nature of participants' responses, the dyad was used as the unit of analysis. As predicted, participants formed less favorable impressions of their partners after discussing material purchases ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 0.63$) than after discussing experiential purchases ($M = 6.52$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(22) = 4.04$, $p < .001$. Participants also reported enjoying conversing about material purchases less than conversing about experiential purchases ($M = 5.69$ and 6.52, $SD = 0.67$ and 1.10, respectively), $t(22) = 2.24$, $p < .05$.

We conducted two mediation analyses to examine the relations between conversation topic, participants' impressions of each other, and how much they enjoyed the conversation. In one analysis, the effect of conversation topic on participants' evaluation of their partner remained significant, $t(21) = 2.99$, $p < .01$, when controlling for reported conversational enjoyment, which was also a significant predictor of evaluations, *partial* $r = .46$, $t(21) = 2.39$, $p < .05$. The reduced effect, after controlling for conversational enjoyment, of conversation topic on overall impressions was thus only marginally significant (Sobel $z = 1.63$, $p = .10$). In a second analysis, the effect of conversation topic on participants' reported enjoyment was no longer significant ($t < 1$) when participants' impressions of each other were included in the model (and which was significant, as just reported). The effect of conversation type on enjoyment was significantly reduced (Sobel $z = 2.06$, $p < .05$) compared to when impressions were not included in the model. Together, these analyses suggest that the tendency for people to enjoy conversations about material purchases less than conversations about experiential purchase is partly because they like their conversation partner less.

These results are notable in that even in the informationally rich setting of live, face-to-face interactions, participants liked each other less after discussing material rather than experiential purchases. These different impressions, furthermore, represent a further instance of the well-documented fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) because participants knew the conversation topic was determined by, and hence could normatively be attributed to, the experimenter. These results thus suggest that being associated with materialistic rather than experiential pursuits can pose a barrier to successful social relationships even in "live" interactions by causing people to like each other and enjoy their interactions less.

General Discussion

People's decisions about whether to pursue happiness through material possessions or life experiences occur in social contexts and may therefore have social ramifications. The present research indicates that people stigmatize materialistic people, who are stereotypically perceived as having relatively unfavorable personality traits and being extrinsically motivated, and that being associated with prototypical materialistic rather than experiential behavior can therefore pose a barrier to successful social relationships. Participants reported that their materialistic acquaintances possessed less appealing personality traits than their experiential acquaintances (Study 1) and that material purchases made by

materialistic people were relatively more extrinsically motivated than experiential purchases made by experiential people (Study 2). The negative stereotype of materialistic people led participants from diverse demographic backgrounds to form relatively unfavorable impressions of a target person who had made a prototypical material purchase compared to a target who made a prototypical experiential purchase, even though no explicit mention was made of the purchase distinction (Study 3). These differential impressions were primarily attributable to the denigration of materialistic people rather than any great admiration of experiential people (Study 4). People formed relatively unfavorable impressions of those associated with materialistic pursuits even in live, face-to-face conversations when the experimenter constrained the conversation topic (Study 5).

We contend that people form relatively unfavorable impressions of those associated with material purchases partly because they infer that such people have relatively unfavorable personality traits and are more extrinsically motivated than those associated with experiential purchases (as demonstrated in Studies 1 and 2). Consistent with this claim, participants' inferences about the traits and motives underlying others' purchases (Study 3) and their dispositional orientations (Study 4) statistically mediated the relatively unfavorable impressions participants formed of those who had purchased material possessions rather than life experiences. The stigmatization of materialism thus entails the perception that materialistic people are relatively extrinsically motivated and that people associated with materialistic behavior consequently suffer social costs.

One might wonder about the degree to which participants reported not what they actually believed about people who prefer to purchase material possessions versus life experiences but what participants believed to be socially desirable. After all, the results show that being perceived as materialistic is, in fact, less socially desirable than being perceived as experiential. Nevertheless, we believe that participants' responses were genuinely based on real stereotypes about materialistic and experiential people. Participants' responses in Studies 1, 3, and 4 were anonymous, so they had no reason to worry about being observed responding in socially undesirable ways. Furthermore, neither the instructions nor the dependent measures in these studies made any mention of the distinction between materialistic and experiential pursuits, so participants were unlikely to be concerned about favorably evaluating those explicitly linked with the label *materialistic*. Finally, we used between-persons designs in all but one study, minimizing the salience of the materialistic versus experiential distinction.

The results of our studies indicate that people infer that those who pursue material possessions have relatively unfavorable personality traits and motives—and are therefore evaluated relatively unfavorably—compared to those who pursue life experiences. It appears, however, that the unfavorable stereotypes of those who pursue material possessions are more potent than the favorable stereotypes of those who pursue life experiences. Although participants in Study 4 reported less favorable impressions of those associated with prototypical material purchases than of those in a control condition who were not associated with a purchase, participants did not report more favorable impressions of those associated with prototypical experiential purchases compared to those in the control condition. These results imply that although people stigmatize and derogate those who pursue happiness through material possessions, they do not as strongly admire those who pursue happiness through life experiences.

Nevertheless, we believe the comparison between the impressions people form of those who purchase material possessions and those who purchase life experiences is of theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, comparisons of people who pursue material possessions to those who pursue life experiences holding constant the fact that the people in question are purchasing something and thus involve comparative assessments of how—and not whether—people make purchases in pursuit of happiness. Practically, knowing that being associated with material purchases is more stigmatizing than being associated with experiential purchases may be a useful consideration for people who are concerned about the social ramifications of their decisions about how to pursue happiness.

In examining people's inferences about others' motives and traits based on the pursuit of material possessions rather than experiential purchases, our findings raise at least three questions for future research. One is whether the stigmatization of materialism might influence self-perceptions—that is, whether engaging in materialistic behavior might lead to unfavorable self-perceptions. Research indicating that people often infer their own traits and motives based on self-observation (Bem, 1967) and that members of stigmatized groups sometimes exhibit stereotypic self-perceptions (Simon & Hamilton, 1994) implies that pursuing material possessions may lead people to perceive themselves as extrinsically motivated, as possessing relatively undesirable personality traits, and possibly even as less likable. However, because being materialistic is undesirable, people's need for favorable self-regard (Dunning & Beauregard, 2000; Taylor & Brown, 1988) may make it difficult for them to recognize their own extrinsic motives and undesirable personality traits (Ger & Belk, 1999; Heath, 1999; Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson, 2006). Such blindness to unfavorable motives and traits in oneself could help explain why people think others are more materialistic than they are themselves (Ger & Belk, 2002; Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson, 2006; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004). Consistent with the possibility that materialistic behavior might influence self-perceived motives but that people would view their own behaviors more favorably than others', when we asked people to imagine either themselves or someone else purchasing

either prototypical material possessions or prototypical life experiences, people expected that their material purchase would be relatively more extrinsically motivated compared with their experiential purchase but also that their own purchases—material or experiential—would be less extrinsically motivated than other people's purchases (Van Boven & Campbell, 2009). Whether these patterns of perceived motives would also influence self-evaluation is an important question for future research.

A second question for future research concerns the accuracy of people's impressions of those who pursue happiness through material versus experiential purchases. Research on individual differences in materialism indicates that materialistic people do, in fact, possess relatively undesirable personality traits and motives and have less successful social relationships (see Kasser, 2002, for a review). Imputing such traits and motives to those who pursue material possessions might therefore yield moderately accurate impressions. Nevertheless, we suspect that the impressions people form based on others' materialistic or experiential behavior are broader and stronger than might be warranted. Our skepticism stems largely from the results of Study 5, in which people liked those with whom they discussed material possessions less than those with whom they discussed life experiences even though the experimenter's assignment of the conversation topic might have provided adequate explanation of the behavior they witnessed.

A final question for future research concerns the cultural boundaries and moderators of the stigmatization of materialism. We suspect that the pursuit of material possessions may have more favorable meanings, and hence be less stigmatized, in cultural contexts where basic material needs are not met or are met with great difficulty (Ger & Belk, 2004). Such a difference in affluence might help explain the tendency hinted at in Study 3 for laborers to evaluate the pursuit of material possessions more favorably than those employed in other occupations.

Still, there is extensive evidence that the divide between extrinsic and intrinsic motives represents a fundamental distinction (Deci, 1975; Deci et al., 1999). Most religions shun materialistic pursuits in favor of intrinsic pursuits. The Bible has Jesus admonishing, "One's life does not exist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, New King James Version). Buddhism's second noble truth holds that suffering originates in craving, especially for material and sensual goods. This critique of extrinsically motivated materialism is echoed in Western philosophy's historical roots. Epicurus (1966) wrote, "We regard independence of outward things as a great good . . . so as to be contented with little if we have not much" (p. 51). The pervasiveness of such negative evaluations of extrinsically motivated materialistic behavior and positive evaluations of nonmaterialistic behavior implies that any cultural bounds on the stigmatization of materialism may be rather wide.

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