

Review

Materialistic value orientation and wellbeing

Helga Dittmar^b and Amy Isham^a**Abstract**

People with a strong materialistic value orientation (MVO) believe that the acquisition of more money and expensive material possessions will improve their wellbeing and social standing. Paradoxically, striving for evermore money and material goods as a means of improving wellbeing often undermines quality of life. This paper documents how MVO has been linked to poorer wellbeing across different facets of wellbeing (personal, social, and environmental) and that these negative associations have been recorded across the lifespan. However, it also shows that the link is complex in that it can be moderated by certain personal and cultural factors and is bidirectional in its nature. By demonstrating a predominantly negative effect of MVO on wellbeing, the evidence highlights a need for interventions to reduce MVO and alter how people relate to material possessions.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101337>2352-250X/© 2022 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).**Keywords**

Materialistic Value Orientation, Materialism, Wellbeing, Environment.

Abbreviations

MVO, materialistic value orientation.

Consumption itself is neither good nor bad for wellbeing. What matters is the motives driving the acquisition of a product and how people relate to the items they are buying. If someone purchase an item with the intention to learn a new skill using it, or to gift it to another individual as a sign of their love, this may enhance their wellbeing. However, when people view

the acquisition of products as a means of improving their image, increasing their happiness, or achieving a certain social status, this often has detrimental effects on their wellbeing. This latter view can be described as a materialistic value orientation (MVO).

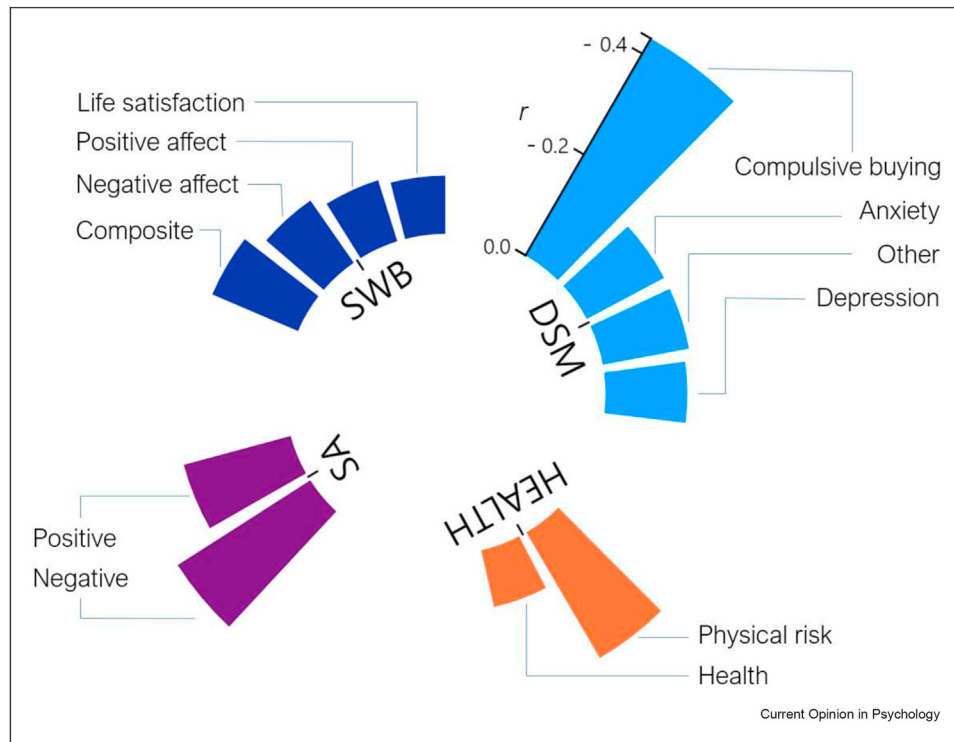
Defining materialism

MVO describes an orientation that people have toward money and material goods. It is commonly defined as a person's "long-term endorsement of values, goals, and associated beliefs that center on the importance of acquiring money and possessions that convey status" [1, p. 880]. An individual with a strong MVO therefore strives to acquire money and material goods to achieve certain expected psychological benefits, in particular an attractive image, recognition, status, and greater happiness. MVO can be measured by questionnaire scales such as the *Material Values Scale* [2,3] which assesses people's beliefs that acquiring money and material possessions is highly important, and will lead to higher levels of happiness, success, and status for the individual, or the *Aspirations Index* [4] which assesses how much importance individuals place on wealth, fame, and image as (extrinsic) life goals in comparison to other (intrinsic) life goals, such as community involvement, personal relationships, and self-development. It is important to note that MVO reflects an individual's desire to be wealthy and own expensive material goods, rather than whether they actually have money and luxury possessions. An individual can be wealthy and not be materialistic, providing they have not pursued their wealth and possessions for the reasons of acquiring the rewards of image, status, and happiness that we have outlined. By focusing on the desire to acquire material possessions, MVO shares some similar qualities to greed, the consequences of which are discussed by Zeelenberg and Breugelmans in this volume.

Materialism impacts many facets of personal wellbeing

There is now a solid body of evidence that demonstrates that holding a strong MVO is related to lower levels of personal wellbeing. A wide-ranging meta-analysis [1] showed that the negative association was consistent across various facets of personal wellbeing (see [Figure 1](#)). These included a person's evaluation of their life quality and their experience of positive rather

Figure 1



Average effect sizes between MVO and wellbeing outcomes in Ref. [1]. Note. SWB = subjective wellbeing, SA = self-appraisals, HEALTH = physical health, DSM = measures related to emotion-based disorders within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, r = effect size. All scores were transformed such that a larger bar represents a greater association between MVO and *low* wellbeing. This means that a larger bar for positive self-appraisals indicates a lower level of positive self-appraisal whilst a larger bar for negative self-appraisals indicates a higher level of negative self-appraisal, for example.

than negative emotions (i.e., their subjective wellbeing), a person's evaluation of themselves (e.g., their self-esteem or self-doubt), and indicators of mood-related mental health problems (e.g., symptoms of depression and anxiety). MVO was even linked to somatic symptoms of ill health and risk behaviours, such as alcohol or drug addiction.

A limitation of the evidence base highlighted by this meta-analysis was that there was an overreliance on correlational data. However, more recent research is helping to fill this gap. Numerous longitudinal [5,6] and experimental [7,8] studies are showing that changes in MVO can lead to changes in personal wellbeing. A meta-analysis of only the experimental research into MVO and wellbeing [9] concluded that there was a small to medium-sized effect of priming MVO on personal wellbeing. MVO therefore appears to be able to cause lower personal wellbeing.

More recent research is also adding further facets of personal wellbeing to the list of those that can be negatively impacted by MVO [10]. For example, we now know that MVO can directly limit the extent to which

people are able to have optimal experiences of 'flow' [11]. Flow describes a state of total engagement in an activity, and it is shown to be an important component of personal wellbeing as well as drive higher levels of performance [12].

Materialism and wellbeing across the lifespan

Most studies exploring the link between MVO and wellbeing utilise adult samples. However, this is not to say that MVO only emerges in adulthood and begins to have detrimental effects then. MVO can manifest early in childhood, often in response to intrapersonal factors such as feelings of insecurity or contextual factors such as exposure to commercial advertising. Researchers have suggested that, in response to the experience of insecurities, some children form transitory attachments with material objects [13]. Here, they become temporarily attached to multiple objects, but then quickly move to desire new or more objects, hence displaying a manifestation of materialism as they continually want more and more material goods. Children are also highly susceptible to advertising messages. Studies have shown that the more children between ages 9 and 11 watch

commercial television, the more likely they are to endorse materialistic ideals and use material goods as a means of achieving higher wellbeing or popularity [14]. Believing advertising messages was also positively linked to MVO in a sample of children between the ages of 9 and 13 in the UK [15].

In adulthood, the strength of MVO tends to vary such that it is highest in young adulthood and older age whilst dipping in middle age [16]. This pattern has been suggested to reflect the developmental profile of different goals. For instance, in middle age goals tend to be more other-oriented as people take on tasks such as caring for their children, and hence they tend to be less concerned with pursuing their own wealth and status. Despite these fluctuations in the strength of MVO, the negative impact of MVO on wellbeing has been shown to be significant across age groups [17]. In childhood, MVO appears to have the same detrimental effects on personal wellbeing as for adults, although the size of the negative link may be slightly smaller [18]. MVO has been linked to lower life satisfaction in a sample of 8- to 15-year-olds [19] and symptoms of depression among 7- to 11-year-olds [18]. One study has suggested that MVO is only linked to lower self-esteem for children from deprived backgrounds [15], implying that the link may be moderated by sociodemographic factors.

Materialism doesn't only affect personal wellbeing

MVO appears to be detrimental not only to the wellbeing of the individual holding the MVO, but also to that of the people around them and the environment [10]. Individuals holding strong MVO tend to engage more often in anti-social behaviours [20] and have poorer quality relationships, even when paired with other highly materialistic individuals [21]. Exposure to materialistic cues such as consumer advertising or luxury shopping centres has been shown to lead to anti-welfare attitudes [22], less helpful behaviours [23], and an increased desire to outdo others [7]. Moldes and Ku's [9] meta-analysis of experimental studies documented that MVO may even have a larger, negative impact on measures relating to interpersonal wellbeing than those relating to self-evaluations.

MVO is related to lower levels of environmental concern which, in turn, makes it less likely that highly materialistic individuals will engage in pro-environmental behaviours. Such findings have been widely replicated across participant samples in the US [24], Sweden [25], the UK [26], Turkey [27], Chile [28], and China [29], and confirmed in a comprehensive meta-analysis [30].

MVO may reduce concern for other people and the environment because it conflicts with values such as universalism and benevolence [31], making it difficult

for both types of values to be held concurrently. Universalism and benevolence can be considered as self-transcendent values in that they are concerned with the wellbeing of other people and the environment. MVO, in contrast, is a self-enhancement value because people are concerned with pursuing outcomes that benefit themselves. MVO could also be linked to negative impacts on environmental wellbeing because highly materialistic individuals place a lot of importance on acquiring material goods and thus are expected to consume more material products. Research documents that materialistic individuals are more likely to engage in both impulsive [32] and compulsive [33] buying.

Moderators in the materialism-personal wellbeing link

That the link between MVO and wellbeing may be moderated by certain factors was highlighted back in the 2014 meta-analysis [1]. Here, it was found that although a few factors influenced the size of the association between MVO and wellbeing, none of the moderators influenced its direction. That is, MVO was always linked to *lower* wellbeing. One example of a significant moderation effect from this work was that the negative effect of MVO on personal wellbeing was weaker when a larger proportion of the sample were working in an educational or occupational environment likely to support MVO such as business students or marketing managers ($r = -.19$ if nobody worked in such an environment versus $r = -.12$ if all participants did). Based on this, it was reasoned that the detrimental effects of MVO were weaker when people were in an environment that actively supports MVO [18]. More recent research has further supported this idea. Holding MVO in environments that simultaneously encourage pro-environmental values has been shown to lead to value conflict and consequently, poorer personal wellbeing [34] whilst holding MVO alongside market-based values of competitiveness and self-interest, or within a family environment which also prioritises MVO, can eliminate its negative effects on wellbeing [35,36]. These findings are in line with the person-environment fit theory which highlights that congruence between an individual's values and those that are predominant in their environment leads to self-validation in that individuals have more opportunities to attain their goals, fewer social sanctions, lower internal conflict and thus, higher subjective wellbeing [36].

Since the meta-analysis publication [1], research has highlighted several further factors that could moderate the link between MVO and personal wellbeing, with some of these being shown to alter not only the size of the link but also its direction. Certain moderators concern personality traits. For instance, it has been documented that MVO had a larger, negative effect on subjective wellbeing when individuals also display high

levels of neuroticism [37] but a positive effect on life satisfaction for individuals with alexithymia [38]. Alexithymia is a trait characterised by difficulty identifying, describing, and regulating one's emotions. Individuals with alexithymia tend to be very external focused because they struggle to derive satisfaction from intrinsically meaningful experiences. Materialistic pursuits are therefore suggested to improve the wellbeing of individuals with alexithymia because they focus on extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, rewards.

Other moderators focus more on cultural factors. In East Asian cultures, which tend to emphasize the importance of interrelatedness and where people more often desire money and material goods to improve their social relationships, MVO has been documented to positively predict relational wellbeing [39]. Similarly, choosing to define the self through social relationships (rather than personal success), as is common in East Asian cultures, has been shown to eliminate the negative association between MVO and self-esteem [40]. These new insights tell us that the link between MVO and wellbeing is more nuanced than perhaps first suggested.

The bidirectional relationship between materialism and wellbeing

When considering the processes that lead to the development of MVO, exposure to advertising, materialistic role models, and the experience of insecurity have all been suggested to play a role [41]. In recent years, the antecedent of insecurity and low personal wellbeing has been granted particular attention. It is theorised that, in response to feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem, individuals choose to orient towards material goods either as a distraction or in an attempt to build a 'better' self [42]. Numerous studies now document that MVO can increase in response to emotional insecurity induced through exposure to parental conflict [43], loneliness [44], and feelings of fear [45]. Evidence has also shown that changes in self-uncertainty can explain differences in the strength of MVO across age groups [46]. That is, at ages when self-uncertainty is highest, MVO also tends to be high. Coming from a background of economic insecurity can also lead to greater increases in materialism into adulthood [47] with research showing that inducing perceptions of being low social class through a social comparison manipulation leads college students to show higher MVO to compensate for low self-esteem [48]. What this now well substantiated evidence shows is that feelings of insecurity can lead to the adoption of MVO. Yet, we have also seen that possessing a strong MVO does little to ease these feelings of insecurity and, in fact, often has detrimental effects on personal wellbeing. Hence, we perceive a vicious cycle whereby MVO and psychological insecurity only work to exacerbate each other over time.

The future of materialism

MVO can therefore have wide-ranging, detrimental effects on personal, social, and environmental wellbeing. Given this, attention is being granted to how we might reduce the prevalence of MVO, or at least limit its negative effects on wellbeing. Studies are starting to show that interventions such as keeping gratitude journals can lead to reductions in MVO among adolescents [49]. However, other interventions focused on promoting intrinsic goals and self-transcendent values among young European adults have only been able to influence MVO when assessed through the Aspirations Index and not the Material Values Scale [50], highlighting the complexity that comes with trying to design interventions that are widely effective. Promisingly, there are signs that, despite the COVID-19 pandemic leading to increases in factors that support the enhancement of MVO such as media consumption and insecurity, there have been reductions in the importance individuals grant to money and spending during this period [12,51]. Such reductions may have beneficial effects on wellbeing in the long-term, but this needs to be confirmed in future research.

If we cannot eliminate MVO, we may want to consider forging a 'new materialism' that is less harmful to wellbeing. Kramarczyk and Oliver [52] have distinguished between what they call 'accumulative materialism', which is in line with the MVO we have discussed in this article and focused on acquiring more, and 'appreciative materialism', where possessions are still at the centre of a person's life but are cared for and carefully selected amongst alternatives. This latter form of materialism may be more sustainable in that it promotes the ownership of fewer objects and practices such as upcycling as consumers construct their identities by not using certain brands or items.

In summary, MVO can have negative impacts on personal, social, and environmental wellbeing which appear to be largely consistent across age groups and different facets of wellbeing, although occasionally moderated by certain individual or cultural characteristics. When individuals use MVO as a means of compensating for insecurity, they risk becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of increasing MVO and poor wellbeing. Trialling interventions to reduce MVO or change the way people relate to products is a fruitful area for future work.

Credit author statement

Helga Dittmar: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing; Amy Isham: Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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 This paper proposes the distinction between accumulative and appreciative materialism based on a two-year ethnographic study of voluntary simplifiers in Poland. It highlights how appreciative materialism presents a new form of materialism whereby individuals purposefully choose a smaller number of products that they care for, and partly signal their status and identity through non-acquisition of certain items. Such a form of materialism is suggested to be able to lead to a more sustainable future and therefore worthy of further exploration.