

Materialistic people liked less by peers than 'experiential' people, study says

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People who pursue happiness through material possessions are liked less by their peers than people who pursue happiness through life experiences, according to a new study led by University of Colorado at Boulder psychology Professor Leaf Van Boven.

Van Boven has spent a decade studying the social costs and benefits of pursuing happiness through the acquisition of life experiences such as traveling and going to concerts versus the purchase of material possessions like fancy cars and jewelry.

"We have found that material possessions don't provide as much enduring happiness as the pursuit of life experiences," Van Boven said.

The "take home" message in his most recent study, which appears in this month's edition of the [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), is that not only will investing in material possessions make us less happy than investing in life experiences, but that it often makes us less popular among our peers as well.

"The mistake we can sometimes make is believing that pursuing material possessions will gain us status and admiration while also improving our social relationships," Van Boven said. "In fact, it seems to have exactly the opposite effect. This is really problematic because we know that having quality social relationships is one of the best predictors of happiness, health and well-being.

"So for many of us we should rethink these decisions that we might make in terms of pursuing material possessions versus life experiences," he said. "Trying to have a happier life by the acquisition of material possessions is probably not a very wise decision."

CU-Boulder marketing Professor Margaret Campbell and Cornell University Professor Thomas Gilovich were co-authors on the study.

Past studies have found that people who are materialistic tend to have lower quality [social relationships](#). They also have fewer and less satisfying friendships.

In the recent study, Van Boven and his colleagues conducted five experiments with undergraduate students and through a national survey. They sought to find out if people had unfavorable stereotypes of materialistic people and to see if these stereotypes led them to like the materialistic people less than those who pursued life experiences.

In one experiment undergraduates who didn't know each other were randomly paired up and assigned to discuss either a material possession or a life experience they had purchased and were happy with. After talking for 15 or 20 minutes they were then asked about their conversation partners by the researchers.

"What we found was that people who had discussed their material possessions liked their conversation partner less than those who had discussed an experience they had purchased," Van Boven said. "They also were less interested in forming a friendship with them, so there's a real social cost to being associated with material possessions rather than [life experiences](#)."

In another experiment using a national survey, the researchers told people about someone who had purchased a material item such as a new

shirt or a life experience like a concert ticket. They then asked them a number of questions about that person. They found that simply learning that someone made a material purchase caused them to like him or her less than learning that someone made an experiential purchase.

"We have pretty negative stereotypes of people who are materialistic," Van Boven said. "When we asked people to think of someone who is materialistic and describe their personality traits, selfish and self-centered come up pretty frequently. However, when we asked people to describe someone who is more experiential in nature, things like altruistic, friendly and outgoing come up much more frequently."

So what do you do if you're somebody who really likes to buy lots of material possessions?

"The short answer is you should try to change," Van Boven said. "Not just our research, but a lot of other research has found that people who are materialistic incur many mental health costs and social costs -- they're less happy and more prone to depression."

Van Boven says one thing you can do is choose to be around people who are less interested in material goods.

"It's not a quick fix, but it can be done," he said. "I think what makes it particularly challenging is that it requires some extra effort and mindfulness about the way we make decisions about how to be happy in life."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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