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Materialism and Loneliness: Is There Really a Vicious Cycle?

Despite being much-maligned, materialism is not always bad for consumers. Loneliness may cause materialism, but the opposite is not necessarily true, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“It is widely believed that there is a vicious cycle in which loneliness leads to materialism and materialism in turn contributes to loneliness. But, contrary to popular beliefs about the universal perils of materialism, the pursuit of material possessions as part of a lifestyle of ‘happy hedonism’ may not actually be detrimental to consumer well-being when kept within certain limits,” writes author Rik Pieters (Tilburg University).

The author studied more than 2,500 consumers over a period of six years and found that loneliness was likely to lead to materialism. However, while materialism sometimes caused loneliness, it could also decrease loneliness. Loneliness increased over time for consumers who valued material possessions as a measure of success or a type of “happiness medicine,” but decreased for those who sought possessions just for the sheer joy and fun of consumption.

The study also found that singles were lonelier than other consumers. Singles pursued material possessions less for the pleasure of acquiring and owning them and more as a type of “material medicine.” In addition, men were more likely to view possessions as a measure of success in life and as a material medicine, whereas women viewed possessions more as a source of “material mirth.”

Materialism does not necessarily lead to a vicious cycle in which shopping makes consumers lonelier. While materialism can be bad for consumers who seek meaning or status through their possessions, it can actually benefit consumers who acquire possessions solely for pleasure and comfort. In other words, materialism may not entirely deserve its bad reputation.

“While materialism can increase loneliness, it may actually reduce loneliness for some consumers. Increasing opportunities for social interaction and improving social skills may be more effective at reducing loneliness than the usual appeals to turn off the television or stop shopping,” the author concludes.

Rik Pieters. “Bidirectional Dynamics of Materialism and Loneliness: Not Just a Vicious Cycle.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2013. For more information, contact Rik Pieters (f.g.m.pieters@uvt.nl) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.



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