

WELL-BEING AS A PREDICTOR OF MATERIALISM IN CROATIAN PREADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Materialism can be defined as a belief that material possessions are essential for happiness and success. Given the increasing prevalence of materialism in the lives of preadolescents and its potential impact on preadolescent well-being, it is crucial to investigate the factors associated with materialism in this age group. This study aims to explore the possibility of explaining materialism in Croatian preadolescents aged 10 to 14 years based on their age and gender, frequency of parent-child conflict over purchases, parental permissiveness, and life satisfaction. The sample consisted of 332 preadolescents aged from 10 to 14 ($M=12.32$, $SD=1.189$), of which 184 were girls, and one of their parents who agreed to participate in the study and filled out the questionnaires that were provided to them. The results showed that the male gender, older age, more parent-child conflict over purchases, and more permissive parents, as well as lower life satisfaction, predict higher materialism. The model explains 21% of the variance in materialism, with almost 4% of this being contributed by life satisfaction after controlling for previous factors. This is an important finding because it points to the importance of individual psychological factors, such as well-being, for the development of materialism beyond the contribution of environmental factors.

Keywords: materialism; well-being; preadolescents; parents

INTRODUCTION

Materialistic values or materialism can be defined as a value orientation emphasising the importance of material wealth in pursuit of happiness and successful life (Yang & van den Bos, 2024). With studies showing that materialism in adolescents is becoming a prominent ideology, it is important to investigate factors that influence it, especially since materialism is often negatively related to adolescent's well-being (Kasser et al., 2014; Moldes & Ku, 2020). Well-being is a multidimensional construct comprised of objective and subjective aspects. Subjective well-being consists of cognitive aspects, e.g. life satisfaction, and affective aspects, e.g. positive and negative emotions (Diener, 2006). Studies show that materialism is linked to lower life satisfaction (Dittmar et al., 2014; Dittmar & Isham, 2022; Kasser et al., 2014; Ku, 2015; Oprea et al., 2012); but also, poor social relations and poor life quality, and low self-esteem (Chaplin et al., 2014; Dittmar & Isham, 2022; Jiang et al., 2015; Lenka, 2014). In a meta-analysis of 259 research papers, Dittmar et al. (2014) found a negative correlation between materialism and well-being but also concluded that the age of participants had a moderating effect in a way that the link between materialism and well-being was more negative in participants who were 18 or older, than those that were younger than 18. Additionally, the authors noticed that studies involving children and adolescents younger than 18 are rather scarce and that there is a need for more research on adolescents – a notion made by other researchers as well (Dittmar et al., 2014; Chaplin & John, 2007).

As for the nature of this relationship, most studies focus on theoretical accounts that suggest lower well-being is a result of higher materialism. For example, following self-determination theory, the pursuit of material wealth and focus on extrinsic rather than intrinsic values undermine well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dittmar et al., 2014). However, it is also possible that the relationship is bidirectional, with people who are less satisfied with their lives turning to the pursuit of material goods to compensate for this emotional state. However, such materialistic values create dissatisfaction (Kasser et al., 2004). Indeed, some studies show that in children and adolescents aged 8 to 18, self-esteem is a significant cause of changes in expressions of materialism and that inducing high self-esteem can lead to a decrease in materialism (Chaplin & John, 2007). In a longitudinal study with children aged 8 to 11, Oprea et al. (2012) showed that in children frequently exposed to advertising, life satisfaction leads to decreased materialism and not the opposite. In a longitudinal study with adolescents aged 11 to 18, Ku (2015) found that participants suffering from lower life satisfaction reported higher endorsement of material goals. The theoretical account these studies are based on is that preadolescents compensate for lower life satisfaction by focusing on material possessions.

Studies show there are other individual factors related to materialism, and these are age and gender. For example, a study by Chaplin and John (2007) showed that materialism increases from middle childhood to early adolescence, only to decline from early to late adolescence.

The authors explain the initial increase in materialism by a drop in self-esteem, which is common at this age and triggers a focus on material possessions as a means of self-enhancement (Chaplin & John, 2007). Similar findings come from a study by Flouri (2004), who found a positive relationship between age and materialism in children aged 11 to 19. The same study showed that compared to girls, boys scored higher in materialism.

Given possible negative outcomes related to materialism, such as lower academic achievement (Ku et al., 2014) or a greater likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours such as smoking and drinking alcohol (Williams et al., 2000), it is important to study a wider range of factors that endorse higher materialism in children and adolescents because a better understanding of these factors might provide ways for its reduction. Previous studies point to the importance of family environment and parent-child interactions for well-being as well as materialism. Kasser (2016) proposed that children whose parents are unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment often seek approval from external sources. Williams et al. (2000) showed that adolescents who are more materialistic perceive their parents as dismissive regarding their feelings and concerns, as well as controlling. This is in line with Cholen and Cohen's (1996) notion that one of the three characteristics of parents whose children are highly materialistic is a lack of consistency in rule enforcement. In line with these findings, we hypothesise that two important aspects of materialism and the parent-child relationship are conflict and parental behaviour, in particular parental permissiveness. Studies show that despite adaptations due to child development, there is a stable structure of parental behaviours (Loeber et al., 2000), which can be described in three dimensions: emotionality and psychological and behavioural control (Barber et al., 2005). Parental permissiveness is a type of parental behaviour that implies a low level of behavioural control. Another important aspect regarding materialism and the relationship between parents and children is conflicts that might arise when children ask for things their parents can or will not buy. Based on the hypothesis that materialism is a response to threats to the self and that family conflict presents undesirable family circumstances that foster a sense of insecurity, Ching and Wu (2018) showed that parental destructive conflict is linked to higher children's materialism and that emotional insecurity mediates the link between conflict behaviour and materialism.

Current study

Previous studies show that materialism in children and adolescents is related to lower well-being, particularly life satisfaction. Additionally, studies suggest that family environment, namely how parents interact with their children, may contribute to their levels of materialism. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that have investigated the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction beyond the contributions of previously mentioned factors, such as age, gender, parent-child conflict over purchase, and parental permissiveness. Additionally, most of the previously mentioned studies were conducted in countries with high

life standards. Croatia is a Central European country, and, as such, it is underrepresented in research on materialism in adolescents. Also, according to the standard of living, specifically GDP, Croatia is 24% below the average of the European Union, according to which it is also possible to expect different results in this research.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the possibility of explaining materialism in Croatian pre-adolescents aged 10 to 14 years based on their age and gender, frequency of parent-child conflict over purchases, parental permissiveness, and life satisfaction. To our knowledge, no such comprehensive analysis of different variables of preadolescents' environment, as well as individual variables and their relation to preadolescents' materialism, has been undertaken so far.

METHODS

Participants

The sample consisted of 332 preadolescents aged 10 to 14 ($M = 12.32$, $SD = 1.19$), of which 184 were girls, and one of their parents (84.2% of mothers). The highest level of education reported by most parents is completed high school (61.8% of fathers, 52.2% of mothers), followed by completed college (15.7% of fathers, 22.3% of mothers), incomplete or completed primary school (10% of fathers, 9.1% of mothers), completed higher school/professional studies (6% of fathers, 9.4% of mothers), and finally achieved a master's degree or doctorate in science (6.6% of fathers, 6.9% of mothers). Most of the parents were employed for an indefinite period (84.4% of fathers, 70.7% of mothers), then for a certain period (7.3% of fathers, 10.4% of mothers), 3.5% of fathers and 18.9% of mothers were unemployed, and 4.8% of fathers were retired.

Measures

Childrens' assessments

Life satisfaction (LS). Children's LS was assessed using the Brief Multidimensional Student's Life Satisfaction Scale (Seligson et al., 2003). Using a seven-point Likert-type response scale, ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, participants assessed how satisfied they were with five different life domains: their family life, their friends, their school experiences, themselves, and the place where they live. Apart from individual satisfaction rates regarding each specific domain, the items can be averaged together, resulting in a total score, which represents overall LS. In this research, the total average score on the scale was used, and Cronbach's alpha was .84, which shows satisfactory reliability.

Children's materialism. Materialism in children was measured using the Material Values Scale for children (MVS-c; Oprea et al., 2011), which was adapted to the Croatian language. The

scale consists of 18 items (e.g., It is important to own expensive things). The children's task was to respond with how much they agreed with these statements by using the following scale: (1) I completely disagree, (2) I disagree, (3) I agree, (4) I completely agree. The total score is created as an average of scores on all items. The original scale measures material centrality, material happiness, and material success. The result can be formed as a sum of items on the subscales, but in this research, the total average result on the scale was used. The analysis of the main components explains 46.24% of the variance, and Cronbach's alpha was .92, indicating very good reliability of the measuring instrument.

Parental permissiveness. Parental permissiveness was assessed using a three-item subscale of Parental permissiveness from the Parental behaviour questionnaire (URP- 29; Keresteš et al., 2012.) on a scale from 1 (Not true at all) to 4 (Completely true) children rated statements about their parent that also participated in the study. The total score is created as an average of scores on all three items, with a higher score indicating a higher assessment of parental permissiveness. Cronbach alpha for this scale was .74.

Parental assessments

Parent-child conflict over purchase requests. The scale for assessing the frequency of parent-child conflict over a child's purchase request was created for this study. Parents were asked to rate how often they engage in conflict with their child's request to buy toys, candy /e.g. chocolate, ice cream), fast food, sodas or juices, clothes (e.g. sweatpants), shoes (e.g. sneakers), school supplies, technology (e.g. smartphone), video games and upgrades for those games. Parents provided their answers for each of the 10 items using a scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very often). The total score was calculated as an average of all items scores, with higher scores indicating more parent-child conflict over requests to buy things. Cronbach's alpha was .83, which shows satisfactory reliability.

Recruitment and Procedure

The recruitment process of the participants started on October 3rd, 2023, with e-mails sent to all primary schools in Croatia and ended on November 30th, when the last filled-out surveys were returned to the research team. The recruitment package sent by e-mail consisted of the following materials: the Permission of the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Croatia to conduct the research, the Permission of the Ethics Committee of the [blinded for anonymity purposes] to conduct research; An Example of the Participant Consent for parents and children, An Example of the Participant Consent for principals. These documents were sent to a pre-prepared list of primary schools in Croatia. The principals interested in participating in the research were asked to sign the Participant Consent for principals and send it by e-mail to the research team. The research team prepared the research materials and sent them via post to schools. In total, nine primary schools in Croatia decided to participate, and a total of 900

packages consisting of one questionnaire for a child, one for the parent, and a consent form for parents to sign were distributed. The schools were asked to give the children the envelopes with the materials so they could take them home and show them to their parents. Parents were asked to sign the Consent for parents if they wanted to participate in the research, and 332 gave their Consent for their children to participate in the research. They were also asked to fill in the questionnaire at home on their own and to allow their children to fill in the child questionnaire on their own. They were asked to put the materials in an envelope and return it to school. If they chose not to participate, they were asked to return the materials to school unsigned and unfilled. The school was asked to collect the envelopes from the children and send them to the research team by post.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, correlation analysis and hierarchical regression analysis were used. All analyses were performed in the statistical program SPSS 23.0.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for variables in the study are shown in Table 1. Children show high satisfaction with their lives and moderate assessments of parental permissiveness. Parents, on average, rate parent-child conflict over purchases as occurring rarely. The average result on the children’s materialism scale indicates average materialism.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for variables in the study

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach Alpha
Children’s materialism	1.00	3.72	1.68	.48	.65	.35	.92
Parental permissiveness	1.00	4.00	2.06	.61	.55	.35	.74
Conflict over purchase	1.00	3.78	1.65	.55	.83	.48	.83
Children’s life satisfaction	1.00	7.00	5.76	1.1	-1.97	5.4	.84

Notes: TR (theoretical range) for Children’s materialism is 1 to 4, Parental permissiveness 1 to 4, Conflict over purchase 1 to 4, and Children’s life satisfaction 1 to 7.

Correlations between all variables in the study are shown in Table 2. Children’s materialism is significantly positively related to their age and male gender, parent-child conflict over purchase, and parental permissiveness. It is also negatively related to children’s life satisfaction.

Table 2*Correlations between all variables in the study*

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Age	-	.01	.18**	-.09	.03	-.07
2. Gender+		-	.15*	-.06	-.09	.04
3. Children's materialism			-	.20**	.30**	-.17**
4. Conflict over purchase				-	.07	-.01
5. Parental permissiveness					-	-.03
6. Children's life satisfaction						-

Notes: + Female gender is coded as 1, and male as 2; ** coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results of the hierarchical regression analysis are shown in Table 3. The dependent variable was materialism in children. As predictors, age and gender were introduced in the first step. This model explained around 5% of the variance ($F = 6.52, p = .002$) with older age and male gender as significant positive predictors. The parent-child conflict over purchase and parental permissiveness were entered in the second step. This step explained an additional 13% of the variance ($F = 13.61, p = .000$), with both variables as significant positive predictors. In the final step, children's life satisfaction was introduced as a predictor. This step explained an additional 3% of the variance ($F = 13.76, p = .000$), and children's life satisfaction was a significant negative predictor of materialism in children. The final model explained around 20% of the variance of materialism.

Table 3

Prediction of children's materialism by age and gender (block 1), parent-child conflict over purchase, and parental permissiveness (block 2), and children's life satisfaction (block 3) – hierarchical regression (N = 283)

	Block 1			Blocks 1 & 2			Blocks 1 & 2 & 3		
	Beta	t	p	Beta	t	p	Beta	t	P
Constant		2.14*	.033		2.14*	.033		.99	.319
Age	.18	2.94**	.004	.19	3.34**	.001	.19	3.29**	.001
Gender	.13	2.09*	.038	.16	2.85**	.005	.16	2.90**	.004
Conflict over purchase				.19	3.27**	.001	.18	3.25**	.001

	Block 1			Blocks 1 & 2			Blocks 1 & 2 & 3		
	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
Parental permissiveness				.30	5.11**	.000	.30	5.30**	.000
Children's life satisfaction							-.19	-3.46**	.001
R		.22			.42			.47	
R ²		.05**			.18**			.22**	
delta R ²					.13**			.04**	

Notes: ** coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the possibility of explaining materialism in Croatian preadolescents aged 10 to 14 years based on their age and gender, frequency of parent-child conflict over purchases, parental permissiveness, and life satisfaction. The results showed that the male gender, older age, more parent-child conflict over purchases, and more permissive parents, as well as lower life satisfaction, predict higher materialism. The model explains 21.7% of the variance of materialism, with life satisfaction contributing by almost 4% after controlling for previous factors. This is an important finding because it points to the importance of individual psychological factors, such as well-being, in the explanation of materialism beyond the contribution of environmental factors.

As mentioned, the male gender and older age were shown to be significant predictors of higher materialism, which is in line with previous studies (Chaplin & John, 2007; Flouri, 2004). Age differences in materialism at this age range have been related to changes in self-esteem, which have been noted in this developmental period (Chaplin & John, 2007). As for gender differences, studies with adults also show that men are more materialistic than women (Kaminieni, 2005).

Beyond these individual factors, we were interested in the environmental factor's contribution to materialism in preadolescents. Flouri (2004) showed that inter-parental conflict, which was assessed by children, was positively related to children's materialism. Other studies also show that conflict within a family, especially destructive conflict, can be related to materialism (Ching & Wu, 2018). Ching and Wu (2018) explain this relationship through emotional insecurity. Previous studies also show that undesirable family circumstances threaten children's need for security and result in the adoption of more materialistic values (Kasser, 2002). However, unlike the above-mentioned studies that investigated the effect of a general conflict between

parents and adolescents or parents themselves, in this study, we focused on the parent-child conflict over purchase, thereby placing more attention on the aspects of the parent-child relationship that are more directly linked to consumer behaviour. Additionally, we investigated parental permissiveness, which is a type of parental behaviour characterised by parents giving way to children's wishes and demands (Keresteš et al., 2012). By choosing such variables, we wanted to analyse the effect of parent's behaviour on children's materialism in a different way – not by measuring their parental materialism but rather through the parent-child conflict over purchase and parental permissiveness. While there may be a correlation between materialistic parents and materialistic children, it is essential to recognise individual differences and the influence of external factors. Not all children with materialistic parents will adopt the same values, and external influences such as peer relationships, education, and personal experiences can shape children's perspectives independently of their parents' beliefs (Dávila & Casabayó, 2013; Kiang et al., 2016). Results from this study show that parent-child conflict over purchase is not significantly related to parental permissiveness, but both variables are significant positive predictors of children's materialism. This is in line with the previously mentioned hypothesis that materialism is a response to threats to the self and that family conflict presents undesirable family circumstances that foster a sense of insecurity (Ching & Wu, 2018). It is also in line with the hypotheses that higher materialism in children can be linked to parental lack of consistency in rule enforcement (Cohen & Cohen, 1996) or, in the case of this study, parental permissiveness.

Finally, results from this study confirm our hypothesis that even after controlling for environmental factors, children's life satisfaction still has a significant contribution in explaining the variance of materialism. Previous studies also show similar findings regarding the relationship between life satisfaction and materialism (Ku, 2015; Opre et al., 2012.). Ku (2015) found a negative relationship between life satisfaction and materialism in 516 Hong Kong adolescents aged from 11 to 14, and also a negative lagged effect of life satisfaction on materialism in a 9-month longitudinal study involving 123 adolescents with a mean age of $M=13.81$. These results show that young adolescents who initially have lower life satisfaction later show more importance to financial goals (Ku, 2015). The same study by Ku (2015) also highlights some specific cultural differences concerning materialism, implying that there is more need for studies on the relationship between life satisfaction and materialism in different cultures.

As mentioned earlier, as a Central European country, Croatia is underrepresented in research on materialism in adolescents. When it comes to research on materialism and children in Croatia, one research by Varga et al. (2024) showed that children aged 11 to 15 employ persuasion, bargaining, and negotiation communication to acquire their desired items. As a response, parents employ bargaining and negotiation, budgeting and financial communication, usefulness and need communication, and postponed purchase communication. It is important to study the correlates of materialism in different cultures because they might show different

directions of connection to one another. For example, in a study with children aged from 9 to 13 years, Nairn and Oprea (2021) showed that children from deprived backgrounds were more materialistic than children from more affluent backgrounds. However, Zawadzka et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and materialism in Polish adolescents aged 13 to 16. As one possible explanation of these results, the authors propose the cultural effect related to the changes that happened in that Central European country during the 1990s when some families gained certain material prosperity, which became a success symbol, and by that, it strengthened the adolescents' attitudes about the importance of material possessions. As for cultural influences, research shows that in some cultures or social circles, materialism may be more prevalent or valued. For example, a study done in China by Li et al. (2023) emphasises the high prevalence of materialism in Chinese culture and shows that early material parenting may lead to children's overt narcissism and subsequently foster their materialistic values in adolescence. However, the results of one study in South Africa by Senooane (2024) revealed that while South African adolescents are active in consumer culture, they are largely not materialistic. Further intercultural studies are needed to gain better insight into the universality of materialism correlates.

This study is not without limitations. The first pertains to self-reported measures known to be biased, so behavioural measures are needed before bringing stronger conclusions (Dang et al., 2020). Out of all the primary schools in Croatia that were invited to participate in the research, only nine schools agreed to participate, and the sample is convenient, which can be a disadvantage since only the highly motivated decided to participate in the research. Also, the study collected cross-sectional data, which prevented us from concluding about the direction of causality in the findings.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that the male gender, older age, more parent-child conflict over purchases, and more permissive parents, as well as lower life satisfaction, predict higher materialism in Croatian preadolescents aged 10 to 14 years. The important contribution of this study is that it shows how life satisfaction contributes to the explanation of materialism beyond the contribution of specific environmental factors, thereby laying the ground for future studies that would investigate the hypothesis of how materialism can be partially explained as a coping mechanism by which individuals with lower life satisfaction focus on material possessions.

The result that environmental factors such as parent-child conflict over purchase and parental permissiveness also contribute to the explanation of materialism is important because recognising patterns of materialism development within a family can provide opportunities for reflection and change. Parents can assess their values and behaviours, consider the messag-

es they convey to their children, and intentionally promote alternative values such as gratitude, generosity, and personal fulfilment beyond material possessions. Children who receive emotional support and validation from their parents may be less inclined to seek fulfilment through material possessions. When emotional needs are met through meaningful relationships and experiences, the desire for material goods as a source of happiness may decrease.

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DOBROBIT KAO PREDIKTOR MATERIJALIZMA U HRVATSKIH PREDADOLESCENATA

Sažetak

Materijalizam se može definirati kao vjerovanje da su materijalna dobra neophodna za sreću i uspjeh. S obzirom na sve veću prevalenciju materijalizma u životu djece i adolescenata te njegov potencijalni utjecaj na dobrobit predadolescenata, ključno je istražiti čimbenike povezane s materijalizmom u ovoj dobnoj skupini. Cilj je ovoga istraživanja istražiti mogućnosti objašnjenja materijalizma kod hrvatskih predadolescenata u dobi od 10 do 14 godina, i to na temelju njihove dobi i spola, učestalosti sukoba roditelj – dijete oko kupovine, roditeljske popustljivosti i zadovoljstva životom. Uzorak se sastojao od 332 predadolescenta u dobi od 10 do 14 godina ($M = 12,32$, $SD = 1,189$), od čega 184 djevojčice, te je jedan od njihovih roditelja koji je pristao sudjelovati u istraživanju i ispunio upitnike koji su im dostavljeni. Rezultati su pokazali da muški spol, starija dob, više sukoba roditelj – dijete oko kupovine, popustljiviji roditelji, kao i niže zadovoljstvo životom, predviđaju viši materijalizam. Model objašnjava 21 % varijance materijalizma, a zadovoljstvo životom pridonijelo je s gotovo 4 % nakon kontrole prethodnih faktora. Ovo je važno otkriće jer upućuje na važnost individualnih psiholoških čimbenika, kao što je primjerice dobrobit za razvoj materijalizma, izvan doprinosa okolišnih čimbenika.

Ključne riječi: materijalizam, dobrobit, predadolescenti, roditelji