

# Materialistic values, shopping, and life satisfaction

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**Abstract.** *Various studies have shown that materialists are less happy in general than those lower in materialism. Several studies confirm that people who have a lower level of life satisfaction are more interested in shopping, therefore materialism determines directly and indirectly (mediated by life satisfaction) the desire of going shopping. There are only few studies that approach this topic within Romanian consumers. The conceptual model proposed here was tested on a convenience sample of 390 Romanians. Using structural equation modeling, our findings confirm only partially the hypothetical model. Materialism leads to life dissatisfaction and shopping, but life dissatisfaction does not increase shopping. To the contrary, there is a positive relationship between life satisfaction and desire for shopping. One possible explanation is that Romanians perceive materialism as a positive thing. Anyway, nuances should be done regarding the role of money and possession in bringing life satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** *materialism; materialist scale; shopping; life satisfaction; Romania.*

## Introduction

After the fall of the communist regime, the Romanian society has been living the experience of the market economy, characterized by affluence of products and services, advertising that exhilarates consumption and hope of a life full of satisfaction, respectively by the presence of materialistic values. The product and service purchase, the contentment achieved after exploiting them and the belief that, for instance, owning a bigger house, a more expensive car or famous branded clothes represent indicators of success. The presence of the materialistic values is associated with the opinion that achieving certain goods or some high earning will lead to a

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happier life. In this context of consumption society boost it is necessary to study the relationship between materialism, shopping, and life satisfaction in the Romanian society.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Thorstein Veblen (1889/2009) has tackled the issue of the ostensive luxury and consumption as indicators of the material wealth. Goods consumption represents a proof for the pecuniary power to the leisure class, and "in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence." (Veblen, 1989/2009, p. 43). The American economist and sociologist with Norwegian roots critically analyses the life style of wealthy people, who are mostly preoccupied with spending money on products, which are not really necessary, and spending their time profitlessly. After a century since the appearance of Thorstein Veblen's well known work, Marsha L. Richins and Scott Dawson (1992) approach the issue of materialism starting from the idea that the American society is consumerist, the life style being characterized by a strong interest in product purchase. Therefore, the economic development of the American society has been related to extending the importance granted to consumerism from a limited group of the population, leisure class, to a wider segment, datum that lead to naming the whole society consumerist.

Some researchers associated the increasing of incomes not only with the development of the consumption-based behavior but with the direction towards other satisfactions than the materialistic ones. In this regard, Amitai Etzioni (2001/2002, p. 70) states that in the post-abundance society people become the advocates of the "voluntary simplicity", that is abandoning, at will, the materialistic sources in favour of the spiritual satisfaction sources. As early as 1971, Ronald Inglehart revealed that, once the economic security achieved, the young generations attach importance to "a set of «post-bourgeois» values, relating to the need for belonging and to aesthetic and intellectual needs" (Inglehart, 1971, pp. 991-992). After three decades, Roy and Anderson (2000) show that there are people in the USA that share the values of the creative culture, namely values oriented, among other things, towards interpersonal relationships, expressing one's self and spiritual progress. A research on the Romanian students points out that people who share the values of the creative culture are rather interested

in the spiritual values and having a professionally stimulating job, even if it is associated with a lower salary (Frunzaru & Ivan, 2011).

This paper presents the results of a survey that has as a general objective the understanding of the relationships between the materialistic values, consumption behavior and life satisfactions. The literature in this field of study can be divided in three sections. Firstly, we analyze the concept “materialistic values” specific to consumption society, in which advertising plays a key role in stimulating the purchase of products and services. Secondly, we tackle the relationship between materialism and consumption behavior. Thirdly, we investigate the relationship between materialism and overall life satisfaction, and particularly satisfaction regarding family, friends, and income.

### **Materialistic values – definitions and measurement**

Approaching the materialistic values, as well as any other values, implies the risk of ideologization the scientific discourse. A critical analysis of the contemporary society can be achieved from the perspective of the arguments brought against the world that attaches more importance to material goods and less importance to spiritual goods. For instance, Jean Baudrillard (1970/2005, p. 29) considers that multiplication of the material goods and services lead to an opulent life in which people are no longer surrounded by other people, but by objects. Karl Marx (1867/1960, p. 110) had a critical perspective a hundred years ago, stating that, similarly to religion, “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race”. Thus, goods are seen as objects, without noticing the social relations among them, fact named by the author: “commodity fetishism” (Marx, 1867/1960, p. 110). Therefore, discussing the materialistic values and operationalizing this concept pose theoretical and methodological problems. However we will use the terms: “materialistic values”, “materialism”, or “materialistic people” without giving them negative connotations.

We have to mention that materialistic values do not have any connection (a direct connection, at least) with the philosophical concepts which explain

the ontological reality through the existence of matter, but they represent the importance given to materialistic goods by individuals as members of the society. In *Dictionary of Sociology*, edited by Gordon Marshall (1994/2003, pp. 350-351), the concept “materialism” is defined from three perspectives, the first one confers a derogatory connotation to the term, and the others refer to metaphysical or Marxist approaches. Hereby, from the first perspective, materialism refers to the prevalent aspiration to sensuous pleasures, material possession or physical comfort, detrimentally to any superior spiritual or moral values (Marshall, 1994/2003). In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, Allan G. Johnson (1995/2007) considers that “materialism” has two acceptances: one as a cultural value and the other as a materialistic explanation of social life (referring to Karl Marx). We can notice that, if in the first definition the materialistic values are associated with hedonism offered by material possession, in the second definition, which is similar to Thorstein Veblen’s approach, the materialistic values offer the possession of objects a role of social dignity.

More dimensions of materialism are underlined by Marsha L. Richins and Scott Dawson (1992), who consider that people, who share these values are focused on the purchase of goods, think that purchase of goods is a way of obtaining happiness and the possession of goods is an indicator of success (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 304). Therefore, the two authors developed a materialism scale with three subscales: “centrality”, “happiness”, and “success”. Hence, the materialists place possessions and getting them in the centre of their lives, aim at pursuing happiness rather through the purchase of goods than other means (such as interpersonal relationships or life experience), and tend to judge their or others’ success by the number or quality of possessions achieved.

The importance of material goods considered to be necessary in the pursuit of happiness is underlined by Marsha L. Richins (1987), who states that the materialistic values specific to the consumption society correspond to the “idea that goods are a means to happiness; that satisfaction in life is not achieved by religious contemplation or social interaction or a simple life, but by possession and interaction with goods” (Richins, 1987, p. 353).

Russell W. Belk (1985) developed a materialism scale with three subscales to measure possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy. Compared with Richins and Dawson (1992), Belk (1985) defines materialism focused on interpersonal relationships, taking into consideration the influence of people's feelings about objects on their interaction with other people. "Possessiveness" is the inclination to retain control or ownership of one's possession, materialistic persons being worried about people taking their possessions. Belk (1985) defines "nongenerosity" as an unwillingness to give or to share possessions with others. In this regard, a materialistic person agrees with the item "I don't like to lend things, even to good friends". Belk (1985) consider that "envy" is the desire for others' possessions, be they objects, experiences and persons. Therefore, another distinction between Richins and Dawson's (1992) and Belk's (1985) scales is that in the first scale there is only one subscale that measures how materialists compare themselves with other people (subscale "success"), when in the second scale all three subscales focus on this trait aspects of living in the material world.

In order to measure the relationship between media exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction, Richins (1987) elaborated a more simple scale, a six item-scale, where four items measure "personal materialism" and two items measure "general materialism". The personal materialism consists in the fact that people consider that they would be happier if they had enough money to buy anything they want. General materialism reflects a general belief that money can bring happiness. Therefore Richins's scale (1987) underlines the importance accorded to possessions and to the belief that owning goods can bring happiness.

To sum up, we observe that materialism means the emphasis on material things; people that share these values consider that owning and possessing commodities bring happiness and offer a higher prestige. As personality trait, materialism is shared by people that are possessive, not generous, and envious. In this article, we focus only on the materialism defined as the appreciation to a higher extent of the possessions seen as source of happiness and success.

### **Materialism values and consumption society**

Numerous studies done on all continents, in different cultures, have shown that there is a significant relationship between materialism and consumption. A cross-cultural study in the US and South Korea shows that for Korean sample materialism might have a stronger impact on consumption, and for the US sample there are higher levels of brand engagement (Flynn et al., 2013). At the same time, this study shows that even if materialism scales performed well in the translated form, the failure of the factor analysis proves that “materialism is culturally dependent and so materialism measures are culturally dependent too” (Flynn et al., 2013, p. 62).

A survey undergone in India shows that the more materialistic Indian consumers tend to have a more favorable attitude to television advertising and display higher consumption innovativeness (Mishra & Mishra, 2012). At the question if materialism is an universal construct that can be measured through the same scale everywhere, the authors show that Richins and Dawson (1992) scale of materialism administrated on an Indian sample has high reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

A research conducted in Malaysia confirms that materialism has a significant influence on compulsive buying. Moreover, credit card misuse was directly related to materialism, budget constraint, impulsive buying and compulsive buying (Asiah et al., 2014, p. 66). Consequently, the authors consider that the relationship between materialism, compulsive buying and credit card misuse raise the problem of the need to educate the public about prudent financial planning and responsible credit card usage.

For Nigeria, Steven Lysonski and Srinivas Durvasula (2013) measured the acculturation to global consumer culture and the consequences regarding consumer behavior and materialism. The findings show that acculturation leads to materialism to some extent, in the context where the respondents were exposed to marketing activities of multinationals, English language usage, social interactions, and global mass media.

In Europe, Otero-López et al. (2010) analyzed the relationship between materialism, life satisfaction and addictive buying on a Spanish sample.

Using structural equation modeling, the findings show that materialistic people determine addictive buying directly and mediated by life satisfaction. A study done on a Spanish female sample proves that anxiety and depression mediates the effects of materialism dimensions on addictive buying (Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013).

In summary, we consider that materialism values and consumption society are interrelated. Consumption society through advertising encourages the presence of the materialistic values and, in the same time, materialism emphasizes the acquisition of goods specific to consumption society. Much more, for materialistic people buying famous brands, sometime in a compulsive way, is a solution to own products that show their (material) success.

### **Materialism and life satisfaction**

Studies consistently show that materialists are less happy in general than people lower in materialism (Nickerson et al., 2007; Sirgy et al., 2012; Sirgy et al., 2013; Atay et al., 2010; Otero-López et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013). Nickerson et al. (2007) make an elaborated analysis of the studies regarding the impact of materialism on human life. For example, the authors underline studies that show that materialism negatively relate to agreeableness, self-esteem, self-actualization, educational level, openness to experience, and religious values. At the same time, materialism positively relates to narcissism, Machiavellianism, right-wing authoritarianism, hedonistic values, importance of security, need for recognition, and financial security. The survey conducted by Nickerson et al. (2007) proves that the stronger are the financial aspirations, the lower is the overall life satisfaction. Therefore, materialism correlates with a series of constructs, particularly with financial aspirations, that diminish overall life satisfaction.

A survey done by Sirgy et al. (2012) in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Egypt, Korea, Turkey, and the US shows that the exposure to advertising, perceived to be materialistic, contributes to materialism. In turn, materialism leads to various standards of comparison in making judgments about standard of living. The higher is the level of aspirations the more negatively is evaluated the standard of leaving. A similar study

published in 2013 by Sirgy et al. shows that materialism may lead to life dissatisfaction when people evaluate their standard of living using fantasy-based expectations. Consequently, not materialism per se brings unhappiness, but how people establish their standard of living: using fantasy-based or reality-based expectations. A similar explanation of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction is brought by Atay et al. (2010), where Joseph Sirgy is one of the authors. They discuss *ideal expectations* (people compare their own standard of living with those who are “filthy rich”), *deserved expectations* (about what people consider they deserve), and *minimum-need expectations* (people consider that they need more money to make ends meet). Therefore, when people’s expectations are not based on their past material possessions, they become unhappy because of the gap between what they have or can have and what they would like to have.

A particular situation can be found in more religious countries. A study realized in Malaysia shows that stress partially mediates the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (Baker et al., 2013). The authors suggest that “materialistic values in such cultures are in conflict with religious beliefs and such values tend to create stress that adversely affects one’s well-being” (Baker et al., 2013, p. 559). Thus, for more religious people materialism can lead to life dissatisfaction directly and mediated by stress brought by the incongruence between materialistic values and religious values.

Even if there are numerous studies that show the correlation between materialism and life dissatisfaction, only few of them present systematically how materialism leads to unhappiness. Based on a survey done on a random sample in the US, Marsha L. Richins (2013) analyzes if the attainment of products makes materialistic people happier. The findings show that materialistic people, compared to their peers, have higher positive emotions before purchase followed by hedonic decline after purchase. Therefore, acquisition brings to materialistic people happiness especially before the purchase and to a lesser extent shortly after the purchase of a desired object. Nevertheless, even if buying things brings happiness on a short term, research consistently shows that high-materialism consumers are less happy than others (Richins, 2013, p. 14).



Joseph Sirgy (1998) considers that materialistic people experience life dissatisfaction because they have inflated and unrealistically high expectations regarding possessions. People that share materialistic values have *affective-based expectations* that are ideal and influenced by the comparison with the standard of living of others from their community, town, state, country, or other countries. The nonmaterialistic people *have cognitive-based expectations* that are predictive, past, and ability based expectations. They compare their material situation with the wealth, income, and material possessions of the family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues; therefore they compare themselves with people like them. Based on these comparisons, when there is a higher gap between reality and expectations, people experience higher feelings of inequity, injustice, anger, or envy, fact that diminishes overall life satisfactions.

Many studies underline the negative impact of materialism on different aspects of living that consequently diminish life satisfaction. Materialism can lead to loneliness (Pieters, 2013), work-family conflict (Promislo et al., 2010), negative job satisfaction (Sardz ska & Li-Ping Tang, 2012; Richins & Dawson, 1992, Deckop et al., 2010), or psychological traits like low self-esteem, low level of self-actualization, and narcissism (Nickerson et al., 2007).

If materialism leads to unhappiness, the satisfaction regarding family life, friends and money leads to overall life satisfaction. Joseph Sirgy et al. (1998) show that there are top-down vertical spillover and bottom-up vertical spillover that explain the relationship between material satisfaction and overall life satisfaction. Generally, "overall life satisfaction is held to be a function of satisfaction within each life domain (job, family, personal health, leisure, material possessions, and so forth" (Sirgy et al., 1998, p. 105). Consequently, overall life satisfaction is negatively determined by materialism, and positively determined by satisfaction to family, friends and money.

In summary, materialism leads to life dissatisfaction not only because of the negative correlation between the financial or material aspirations and the overall life satisfaction. Though, in this paper we focus on the relationship between the desire of acquisition and possession of commodities and

life satisfaction. Accordingly, it is proposed that the higher is the level of materialism, the lower is the overall life satisfaction and the higher is the desire for shopping.

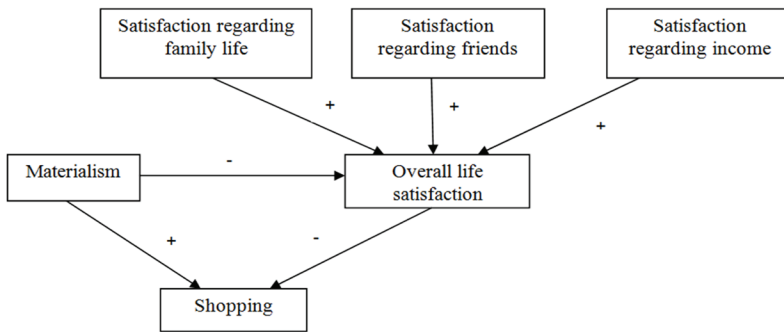
### **Materialism, shopping, and life satisfaction. A possible explicative model for Romanians**

Only few studies examine the presence of the relationship between materialistic values, life satisfaction and behavior consumption in Romania. Based on comparative qualitative research conducted in Romania and Turkey, Belk and Ger (1994) show that in Romania consumption is seen as a good thing and it is associated with the prosperous life in the western European society. Compared to Turkish buyers, Romanians want to buy everything, are more innocent, confused, and frustrated. A study done by Ger and Belk (1996) on 12 countries, including Romania, shows that there are differences regarding how students see materialism in different countries. For example, if the American students see materialism as a weakness and an excessive behavior, Romanian students see materialism as an empowerment expression of control and freedom. This qualitative and quantitative study revealed that Romanians are the most materialistic, followed by students in the US, New Zealand, Ukraine, Germany and Turkey.

The studies done by Belk and Ger (1994) and Ger and Belk (1996) were conducted immediately after the fall of the communist regime, when Romanians discovered the free market and the possibility to buy everything they wanted (if they had money). This paper aims to see if there is a relationship between materialism, consumption and life satisfaction after more than two decades since the end of the Ceaușescu's regime.

Based on the theory presented in the first part of this article, we develop a theoretical model that presents the direct and mediated (by overall life satisfaction) relationship between materialism and level of interest in going shopping (Figure 1). We hypothesize, also, that the overall satisfaction is positively determined by satisfaction

regarding family life, friends, and income, and negatively determined by materialism.



**Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between materialism, shopping, and life satisfaction**

## Method

### *Sample*

We conducted a sociological survey based on a convenience sample of Romanian consumers ( $N = 390$ ). The majority of the respondents were women (57,8%), with higher education (58%), and employed (71,4%). The respondents' age was between 14 and 78 (mean= 29,5, S.D.=10.6) and the majority of them (70%) was younger than 30 (skewness = 1,62).

### *Measures*

The materialistic values were measured with a six item-scale developed by Martha Richins (1987) translated and adapted into Romanian. Coefficient alpha was .62 for all six items and 0.77 if the item "People place too much emphasis on material things" were deleted. Because this item was one of the two items that measure general materialism (the other four measure individual materialism) we counted a single mean score for the scale based on the other five items (see Appendix). To test convergent validity we asked the respondents what their income was (no matter the

sources – salary, family, etc.) during the last month and what the monthly income would be in order to satisfy their needs. According to Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 311), “people who desire a lot of possessions will need more money to acquire those possessions and thus are expected to report a higher desired level of income”. Our findings show that respondents high in materialism consider they needed significantly more income compared to those lower in materialism ( $r=.26$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Thus, we can consider that the materialist scale translated into Romanian has convergent validity.

The overall life satisfaction, satisfaction regarding family life, friends, and income were measured on a Likert 5 point scale (from “1” – “not at all satisfied” to “5” – “very satisfied”). We measured the pleasure of shopping on a Likert 5 point scale (from “1” – “very little” to “5” – “very much”), as well.

## Results

The positive significant relationships between overall satisfaction and satisfaction regarding family, income and friends confirm the theory developed by Joseph Sirgy et al. (1998) concerning bottom up vertical spillover (Table 1). Moreover, results show that materialistic people are less satisfied with life in general and with their income, and have higher shopping satisfaction. In contradiction with other studies (Otero-López et al., 2010; Asiah et al., 2014), our findings indicate that people who like to spend their leisure time shopping have higher overall life satisfaction and higher satisfaction regarding family.

**Table 1. Correlations between variables**

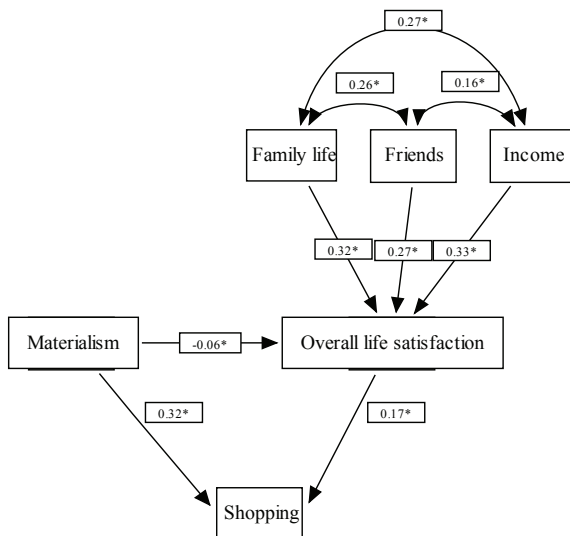
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Overall life satisfaction	1.000	.48**	.45**	.39**	-.17**	.15**
2. Satisfaction regarding family	.48**	1.000	.25**	.28**	-.04	.19**
3. Satisfaction regarding income	.45**	.25**	1.000	.17**	-.13**	.06

4. Satisfaction regarding friends	.39**	.28**	.17**	1.000	-.09	.08
5. Materialism	-.17**	-.04	-.13**	-.09	1.000	.26**
6. Shopping satisfaction	.15**	.19**	.06	.08	.26**	1.000

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To investigate the hypothesized model (Figure 1), we used the EQS program for structural equation modeling and the fit indices show that the model fits the data (SRMR=.042, CFI=.0978, RMSA=.058). Even if the Chi-Square value was significant ( $\chi^2(6, N=390)=13.73, p=0.3$ ), because this statistic “nearly always rejects the model when large samples are used” (Hooper et al., 2008: 54), we can say that our model fits the sample data.

Standardized solutions reveal that materialism has a small but a significant negative impact on overall life satisfaction and, as expected, have a significant positive impact on how much people like shopping (Figure 2). Satisfactions regarding family life, friends and income have positive significant impact on overall life satisfaction. People with higher overall life satisfaction like more to go shopping.



\*. Standardized solution is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Figure 2. Observed Path-Analytic Model for the relationship between materialism, life satisfaction(s), and shopping pleasure**

## Discussions

Our data confirm only partially the hypothetical model regarding the relationship between materialism, shopping and overall life satisfaction. The positive relationship between the pleasure of going shopping and the overall life satisfaction in the Romanian sample do not fit other findings that show that the lower is the level of life satisfaction the higher is the pleasure of shopping experience (Otero-López et al., 2010; Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2013; Teleci, 2013; Asiah et al., 2014).

Therefore we have to answer to the following question: what is the nature of the relationship between life satisfaction and the pleasure of going shopping in our sample? Is there any causal relationship between these two variables? If yes, what is the direction of this causal relationship? The statistical relationships among the variables may not reflect causation. Nevertheless, prior research regarding materialism showed that Romanians see consumption as a good thing, as an empowerment expression of control and freedom (Belk & Ger, 1994; Ger & Belk, 1996). Thus, one possible explanation for the positive relationship between life satisfaction and shopping stems from the fact that Romanians perceive purchasing commodities as a good thing. Consequently, people who like to go shopping are people with a high level of satisfaction regarding life. Shopping has not (only) a therapeutic role for life dissatisfaction, but it is a source of satisfaction obtained in leisure time.

Nevertheless, future research should be conducted, both qualitative and quantitative. A qualitative exploratory study would be necessary for a deeper and detailed understanding of how Romanians perceive materialism, shopping and different sources of life satisfaction. Our study should be replicated with a survey that takes into consideration how mass media (television, advertising, social network websites, etc.) determines materialism within population.

Beyond these limitations, our findings bring into discussion two things: a methodological one and a theoretical one. First, we observe that the materialism scale developed by Richins (1987) has high reliability and convergent validity, fact that confirms other studies (Mishra & Mishra, 2012) that argue that materialism is a universal construct. Second, the negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction raises

questions concerning the happiness in a consumption society. The desire of possessions and the importance allocated to commodities (considered as source of happiness and prestige) diminish the level of overall life satisfaction. Materialism or what Marx called “commodity fetishism” (Marx, 1867/1960) can be a source of alienation. Eric Fromm (1983, p. 133) considers that, originally, the idea of consumption of more and better things meant to bring people a better and happier life. Consumption was considered a source for happiness, but afterward it became a goal per se.

Nevertheless materialism is not a negative thing per se. Belk (1985, p. 266) underlines that if the opposite of materialism is ascetism, the self-denial of material source of satisfaction can lead to masochism, self-hatred, anorexia nervosa or other psychopathologies. Richins and Dawson (1992) point out that the desire for owning goods may cause employees to work harder or longer enhancing their incomes and standard of living. Moreover, the two authors stress the possibility of “instrumental materialism”, when people want, for example, a bigger house not for them, but for their family to have a better life. Therefore it is important not only the desire of having more money but how to spent the money, as well. In this regard, Dunn et al. (2011, p. 115) bring arguments that “money is an opportunity for happiness, but it is an opportunity that people routinely squander because the things they think will make them happy often don’t”. Thus, money is a source of life dissatisfaction because we don’t know how to spend it. It should be invested in experiences, to the benefit of other people or to buy many small pleasures rather than fewer large ones. Likewise David G Myers (2000) and Leaf Van Boven (2005) underline the positive role of relationships and of investing resources in life experiences in bringing happiness. Concerning this Eric Fromm (1976) proposed to shift our lives from “having” to fully “being”. Therefore, only financial aspirations associated with the ultimate goal of possession of things, and not related with experiences and offering to others, lead to life dissatisfaction.

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## Appendix

Martha Richins (1987) materialistic scale

1. It is important to me to have really nice things.
2. I would like to be rich enough to buy everything I want.
3. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
4. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I want.
5. People place too much emphasis on material things.<sup>3</sup>
6. It's really true that money can buy happiness.

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3. This reverse item was removed to increase the reliability of the scale.