

# Consumerism and its antisocial effects can be turned on—or off

April 09, 2012

Money doesn't buy happiness. Neither does materialism: Research shows that people who place a high value on wealth, status, and stuff are more depressed and anxious and less sociable than those who do not. Now new research shows that materialism is not just a personal problem. It's also environmental. "We found that irrespective of personality, in situations that activate a consumer mindset, people show the same sorts of problematic patterns in wellbeing, including negative affect and social disengagement," says Northwestern University psychologist Galen V. Bodenhausen. The study, conducted with colleagues Monika A. Bauer, James E. B. Wilkie, and Jung K. Kim, appears in [\*Psychological Science\*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

In two of four experiments, university students were put in a materialistic frame of mind by tasks that exposed them to images of luxury goods or words mobilizing consumerist values (versus neutral scenes devoid of consumer products or words without such connotations). Completing questionnaires afterwards, those who looked at the pictures of cars, electronics, and jewelry rated themselves higher in depression and anxiety, less interested in social activities like parties, and more in solitary pursuits than the others. Those primed to materialism by exposure to certain words evinced more competitiveness and less desire to invest their time in pro-social activities like working for a good cause.

In two other experiments, participants completed tasks that were framed as surveys—one of consumer responses, another of citizens.' The first experiment involved moving words toward or away from the participant's name on a computer screen—positive and negative emotion words and "neutral" ones that actually suggested materialism (*wealth, power*), self-restraint (*humble, discipline*), transcendence of self, or self-indulgence. The people who answered the "consumer response survey" more quickly "approached" the words that reflected materialistic values than those in the "citizen" survey. The last experiment presented participants with a hypothetical water shortage in a well shared by four people, including themselves. The water users were identified either as consumers or individuals. Might the collective identity as consumers—as opposed to the individual role—supersede the selfishness ordinarily stimulated by the consumer identity? No: The "consumers" rated themselves as less trusting of others to conserve water, less personally responsible and less in partnership with the others in dealing with the crisis. The consumer status, the authors concluded "did not unite; it divided."

The findings have both social and personal implications, says Bodenhausen. "It's become commonplace to use *consumer* as a generic term for people," in the news or discussions of taxes, politics, or health care. If we use term such as *Americans* or *citizens* instead, he says, "that subtle difference activates different psychological concerns." We can also take personal initiative to reduce the depressive, isolating effects of a materialist mindset by avoiding its stimulants—most obviously, advertising. One method: "Watch less TV."