

**CURBING THE MATERIALISM-LONELINESS-HAPPINESS TRAP BY TWO  
CONSCIOUS INTERVENTIONS: A DOUBLE RANDOMIZED EXPERIMENT**

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**ABSTRACT**

Materialism and its predominant socio-cultural impacts are widely researched as the emerging social issues of the modern era. The two very prominent fallouts of materialism are loneliness and the inability to indulge in happiness over a continuous spectrum of time. The theory of materialism-loneliness-happiness (MLH) trap (Khalid & Qadeer, 2017) had identified loneliness as the mediating variable that gives the trap its characteristic cyclical shape. If the trap is cyclical, that means it is a never-ending process. Once trapped, the consumer will not be able to break free from it. However, this study argues that the consumer can stop themselves from entangling in the trap by bringing conscious changes in the purchase process. In other words, a consumer can prepare against the trap. This paper attempts to empirically test the mitigation prospect to the MLH trap with the help of an extensive experiment spanned over 14 weeks of experimental manipulation of purchase training. The experiment followed a double randomization design for making the two successive interventions (materialism intervention and loneliness intervention). We found that materialism can be curbed in the shorter run by conscious efforts and training of the consumer. There was an overall decrease of about 44% in materialism, a 56% decrease in perceived loneliness, and about a 27% increase in overall happiness scores from the start of the experiment (t1) till the end (t3). This shows that both materialism and loneliness can be handled by conscious efforts of the consumer, controlling the purchase mechanism. We also discuss the implications and provide future research directions.

**INTRODUCTION**

Materialism is an emerging social issue not only for sociopsychologists but for marketers as well. *Materialism* is a consumer value that leads to the belief that success and achievement in life are dependent upon acquiring a great quantity of worldly valuable possessions. At one end, consumers indulge in unrestrained buying patterns which render them financially distressed, emotionally disconnected, unhappy, and perceptually frustrated. This craze for over-consumption has posed several psychological, health and hygiene issues for the consumers (Bartolini & Sarracino, 2017). At the same time, the marketers have analyzed characteristic switching behavior and uncalled-for discontent regarding brands, as a result of over-consumption. Materialism has been identified to be the root cause behind such behavior.

There is widespread evidence that materialism increases the perception of loneliness (Bauer et al, 2012; Kasser, 2003; Kilbourne et al., 2005; Lane, 2000; Larsen et al., 1999;

Pieters, 2013; Schwartz, 1992). Furthermore, materialism has a strong bi-directional relationship with loneliness (Pieters, 2013) that strengthens with time. Where, *loneliness* is described as a comparatively consistent perceived feeling of pressure, anxiety, and trauma that impacts the individual emotionally, physically, and socially. Loneliness can be caused by either social or cultural rejection, segregation, marginalization, alienation, and lack of projected chances for meaningful intimate relationships. Loneliness is more of a perception of inability to form meaningful relationships or fulfill social needs or fear of facing various situations. It may be farther away from the real diagnosis of the situation. Furthermore, many researchers found that materialism negatively impacts happiness (Bauer et al., 2012; Caldas, 2010; Hsee, Yang, Li, & Shen, 2009; Kasser, 2003; Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Soscia, 2007; Tatzel, 2003; Tybout & Artz, 1994). Where, *happiness* is a combination of several aspects such as being extrovert and materialistic, positivistic self-esteem, and life roles at any point in time. Happiness is directly related to satisfaction with life and perceived fortune and is negatively related to adversity. The two research streams that study the effects of materialism on the loneliness path and that of materialism on happiness are highly isolated from each other. Extremely few studies cover the three variables simultaneously.

The 'socio-psychological theory of MLH trap' for the first time deliberated loneliness as a process variable between materialism and happiness and also elaborated how it takes the shape of a cycle introducing the MLH trap (Khalid & Qadeer, 2017). The MLH trap theory explored the role of loneliness in propagating the negative relationship between materialism and happiness. Nonetheless, this theory did not offer any empirical evidence to justify the claims. Therefore, the prior research is inadequate in empirically establishing the MLH trap. The whole academic endeavor to establish the MLH trap remains meaningless if the trap cannot be broken. Just as the consequential process of the MLH trap is under-researched, so is the solution to it. The present study focuses only on identifying that whether the trap can be broken with the conscious efforts of the consumer. Thus, by introducing several manipulation interventions, an extensive experimental study was designed to curb materialism and loneliness and thereby enhancing happiness by changing how the consumer makes consumption decisions and evaluates himself.

The empirical contribution of the experiment has several implications. Firstly, this study provides an answer to the unsolved dilemma that why the consumers are reportedly less happy, lonely, habitually switch brands, and exhibit post-purchase dissatisfaction; even though marketers make all attempts to build a long healthy customer relationship. The experimental materials used for consumer training highlight all these aspects. Secondly, the switching behavior could be understood and favorably manipulated. Thirdly, materialism can be curbed in its nipping stage by bringing about habitual change and conscious efforts of the consumer. If left unchecked, it can quickly turn into a cyclical dysfunction. Finally, the study highlights the use of sustainable practices in consumption that can ensure long-lasting happiness, giving the experiment more of a recommending eminence.

## **MATERIALISM AND ITS IMPACTS ON CONSUMER**

Materialism has been defined as either being a personality trait (Belk, 1995) or a consumer value that steers the consumer in his consumption decisions (Richins & Dawson,

1992). According to the materialist's belief having lots of material wealth is the sole way of getting happiness and success in life (Richins & Dawson, 1992), or being synonymous with achievement in life (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Tybout & Artz, 1994; Vargas & Yoon, 2006). Materialism is inversely related to subjective well-being, self-actualization (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002), and self-esteem (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012; Richins & Dawson, 1992). It can damage social and psychological relationships or impact their quality, can cause anxiety (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002), and enhance the time spent unhappy and in depression (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Materialism plays with the connective ability of the individual (Kasser, 2003; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002), disturbing the quality of the social relationships (Lane, 2000). This results in crowding out of relationships due to indulgence in such consumption patterns that blocks-in the consumer in a spiral consumption (Bauer et al., 2012; Kasser, 2003; Pieters, 2013). This eventually turns into less importance for self-acceptance, affiliation, or community fame and high importance for material possessions (Kasser & Ryan, 2001).

Materialists thereby sometimes make happiness and satisfaction conditional upon attainment of material goods, not only causing dissatisfaction but neglecting social needs as well. Materialism disturbs communal associations of the consumer (Bauer et al., 2012; Kasser, 2003; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Pieters, 2013; Solomon et al., 2012) and the consumer indulges himself in egocentric consumption patterns. Moreover, materialists develop a narrow vision of 'self' often controlled by views of others around them (Gao et al., 2009; Richins, 2017). Materialism has its roots in motives (Solomon et al., 2012). It is an outgrowth of a combination of unmet higher-order psychological needs, incomplete dubious development of self-concept, and inability to form loving and close social relationships (Burroughs et al., 2013; Richins, 2017; Watson, 2014). As elucidated by motivational theory, four types of insecurities lead to materialism (Burroughs et al., 2013; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Materialists often try to conciliate the unfulfilled core needs with material and prized possessions, but such products often are meaningless substitutes (Richins, 2017) and are poorer motivations towards well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Adults reared in disruptive families are more materialistic, exhibit high levels of compulsive consumption, stress, and general insecurities (Rindfleisch et al., 1997) and use materialism to cover up their insecurities. Moreover self-esteem discrepancy increases materialism (Park & John, 2011; Richins, 2017).

Consumption and material goods are a natural and healthy part of a consumer's routine. However, when this pursuit extends beyond the healthy point, the disintegrative impact of materialism becomes pronounced for the individual as well as the society (Muncy & Eastman, 1998). Moreover, the current consumerism is particularly ineffective in bringing happiness to the consumer, (Caldas, 2010) as it plays an ineffective role in strengthening the relationships with others (Burroughs et al., 2013). Therefore, materialism is considered a recurrent and escalating consumer phenomenon that needs both theoretical and practitioner elaboration (Belk, 1995; Burroughs et al., 2013; Hurst et al., 2013; Moschis, 2017; Watson, 2015).

### **Materialism and Loneliness**

Loneliness is a feeling of emotional turmoil that is experienced tenaciously and is caused by exclusion from a social group, facing rejection in gaining opportunities, by being

misjudged and withdrawn, by lacking suitable and desirable social partners, by lack of participation in events that furbish prospects for intimacy and a sense of collective integration (Rook, 1984). Loneliness is a perception and is often associated with the quantity, significance, and quality of social relationships not meeting the individual's social needs (Gordon, 1976). Loneliness usually becomes visible through experiencing distress, feeling of marginality, anxiety, and aversion accompanied by sadness, stress, and depression (Hawkley et al., 2010; Seeman, 2000; Rubenstein et al., 1979; Weeks et al., 1980). Loneliness can alter or disturb the normal social functioning of an individual (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010) and his ability to develop meaningful relationships. Materialism may contribute to increasing loneliness (Kasser, 2002) specifically due to intrinsic goal motivation.

According to attachment theory, consumers' primary attachments are intimacy and connectivity. The consumer resorts to compensating with secondary attachments (material goods) when he is unable to fulfill his primary attachments. (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). Moreover, sometimes lonely consumers fail to establish such relationships because of fear of rejection. They feel materialistic standing is the only thing that can get them accepted (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). They may adopt a materialistic lifestyle trying to avoid the pain of social isolation (Pieters, 2013) rather than for sake of self-esteem or self-portrayal. Moreover, lonely consumers anthropomorphize famous brands to a greater extent than normal (Chen et al., 2017). Loneliness in itself gives rise to anti-social, unethical behaviors (Gentina et al., 2018). As consumers compare and contrast their social and material standing with others continuously (Guillen-Royo, 2008; Howell & Hill, 2009), they are never satisfied with what they already possess, as elucidated by social comparison theory. Materialism plays the ego-defensive function for the consumer making him feel safe, secure, and esteemed (Kardes et al., 2014), only for the time being. However, it disturbs the connectivity of the consumer with others (Bauer et al., 2012). Altogether, it suggests that once there is an onset of the materialism-loneliness influence, it is difficult to break free.

### **Materialism and Happiness**

Happiness is a measure of psychological and subjective well-being. It is a state of mind that results from being satisfied (Delle Fave et al., 2011). Satisfaction is a consequence of chances of pleasure attainment, pain avoidance, self-realization of a higher extent, and exploration of potentials (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Happiness is established by positive affect, the absence of negative affect, and satisfaction with life as a whole (Lu, 1999). Happiness is a trait that is reflected and predicted through feeling good about the self, excitement, pride, sociability, activeness as well as being in the conditions for flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). Happiness results from the interactive process between personality characteristics and the socio-economic dynamics surrounding the consumer (Haller & Hadler, 2006; Hsee et al., 2009).

In relationship to materialism, several kinds of hedonic experiences bring happiness to the consumer. Firstly, it is a monetary experience in which happiness depends upon the relative monetary value. It is the consumer's feelings about a specific sum of money and is compared with an external reference point. Secondly, it is the acquisition experience (feelings when buying) and the happiness is contingent upon personal attraction for the

product along with actual usage of the product (Hsee et al., 2009). Finally, it is the consumption experience (feelings during utilizing the bought product) and happiness depends upon delayed gratification.

Any shift from money and acquisitions experiences toward consumption experience alone can improve the satisfaction level (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Hsee et al., 2009). Accordingly, experiential and effective sensitization of hedonic purchases can bring lasting happiness (Diener et al., 2006; Hsee et al., 2009; Kurtz et al., 2007). Moreover, it is the socio-economic status, social skills, and religiosity levels of the individual along with demographic attributes that overall impact happiness (Argyle, 2003). Moreover, higher stress has been reported in adolescents that link happiness with material goods (Roberts et al., 2005). The ideal state of happiness is never reached due to materialistic relative comparison (Soscia, 2007). Moreover, indulging in materialism for the sole purpose of increasing social standing decreases happiness (Tatzel, 2003). Nonetheless, materialism cannot ensure happiness in itself (Caldas, 2010; Hsee et al., 2009). It is just a mirage that having more material possessions would ensure success, status, and social esteem (Kasser & Ryan, 2001; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Tybout & Artz, 1994) rather it portrays inadequacy and lack of accomplishment (Bauer et al., 2012) and this inappropriateness leads to stress and idio-synchronization (Bauer et al., 2012; Kasser, 2003; Pieters, 2013).

Materialism resonates highly with impulse buying and conspicuous consumption (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). Materialism, if kept uncontrolled, may lead to reduced happiness. However, materialism can also rebalance the equation by strengthening the support networks of the consumer (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012) in response to awe and admiration by others around. As money is a powerful resource for solving problems (Vohs & Baumeister, 2011) it does bring with it more authority and solutions to social issues. The understanding of the exact nature and effect of materialism on happiness points to the requisite for understanding how and in what ways materialism could be modified to impact happiness. This study has outlined parts of the consumption process that if aligned can curb materialism and enhance happiness.

### **Loneliness and Happiness**

When the lonely consumer tries to rectify the situation by indulging in increased consumption, there soon is a realization that it may not be worthwhile. Inability to achieve the comparative status leads to a decrease in happiness and an increased feeling of withdrawal or segregation (Howell & Hill, 2009). Loneliness also increases the negative effect and reduces positive effect resulting in decreased happiness, compared to socially bounded consumers (Bauer et al., 2012). The constant pursuit of happiness renders the consumer lonely (Mauss et al., 2012), and he isolates himself in the attempt.

### **The MLH Trap**

It is the motivations of the consumer that lead to the MLH trap. As the consumer follows consumption patterns that are focused on showing off to others, the importance of social and intimate relationships is reduced (Bauer et al., 2012; Kasser, 2002; Pieters, 2013). The major motivation in life becomes the accumulation of material wealth (Burroughs et al., 2013) which greatly undermines the importance of social relationships. At a point where the consumer starts feeling lonely as a result of it, the solution he usually

adopts is to indulge in greater consumption to have a feel-good factor. (Pieters, 2013). The substitution of material goods in place of relationships, however, is not effective. This is because materialism has already crowded out the consumer's social standing and the ability to continue with them. The achieved success from possessing valuables remains incomplete as there are no sharing scenarios. As the process is repeated over time, the consumer gets entangled in a cycle where he utilizes materialism as a coping mechanism when he feels lonely, but gets more lonely due to the effect of crowding out (Pieters, 2013). So the solution itself entails materialism and loneliness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Pieters, 2013; Ryan et al., 2009) and it becomes difficult to break free of this trap. A greater level of purchase does not translate into an increase in happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992). It may however provide happiness temporarily (Tsang et al., 2014). Eventually, a vacuum is created. The consumer tries to fill this with increased consumption, but the lack of connectivity and meaningful sharing prospects keep this attempt unsuccessful. The socio-psychological theory of MLH trap states loneliness as having the ability to influence materialism's capability to bring happiness. This study is designed to take both materialism and loneliness into account and use two different interventions one after the other.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

### The Experimental Method

The whole discussion of the MLH trap and its contingencies renders itself ineffective and pointless if materialism, loneliness, and happiness remain relatively stable. It was determined through an experiment that planned changes in consumer behavior can trigger a decrease in materialistic values and resultantly lower the level of loneliness and increase happiness, using interventions.

Our experiment followed a double randomization design (Imai et al., 2013; Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016) where the treatment variable (materialism) and mediator (loneliness) both were randomized and manipulated through established interventions. The extensive experiment makes use of a randomized controlled trial using pretest, midtest, and posttest measurements, denoted by Group A (R)  $O_1 X_1 O_2 X_2 O_3$ ; Group B (R)  $O_1 X_1 O_2$ ; Group C (R)  $O_1$  (control condition). The participants for both the interventions remained the same and were randomized twice (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016). The impact was investigated based on pre-mid-post-test observations of the materialism, loneliness, and happiness scores.

### Materials

Observations were made at the start of the experiment from all participants and then after the end of both the interventions, using the standard measurement scales. For materialism, the material value scale (MSV) (Richins & Dawson, 1992), for loneliness, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) loneliness scale (Russell et al., 1978) and for happiness the Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) (Hills & Argyle, 2002) were utilized. The experimental materials for the interventions were adapted from an established program called to *save, share, spend* (Kasser et al., 2014). The first 'materialism intervention' was designed to decrease the focus on spending and enhance emphasis on saving and sharing (Burroughs et al., 2013; Kasser et al., 2014). Then the 'loneliness intervention' was based on the *advisory technique* (Cacioppo et al., 2015) and encouraged the participant to be

more social, confident, and friendly, such that the loneliness potential was reduced, through positively enhancing self-perception (Hawley & Cacioppo, 2010).

### Procedure

A class of 50 students (bachelor's in marketing) participated in the experiment. Keeping in mind the ethical considerations related to consuming the in-class time, permission from the department was sought before the experiment. The consent forms were filled by all the participants and they were briefed about the phases of the experiment stretched over 12 weeks. The participants underwent a constant reminder of the purpose and benefits of planned consumption behaviors throughout the following weeks and were manipulated through advice and certain exercises. There was a moderate control and interference of the researcher. A list of a total of 50 students was obtained, and the participants were randomly assigned using random assignment into the experimental and control group.

The first intervention was conducted over seven weeks (5 class meeting sessions) followed by a second intervention conducted over the following weeks (3 class meeting sessions). After completing the first intervention, the experimental group was further divided into intervention/no intervention groups for the loneliness intervention. The sessions were designed to make the participants familiar and comfortable with talking about money in a large group, make a distinction between 'needs' and 'wants' and realize the importance of healthy money habits. Discussion, lecture, and video materials were used for this purpose. Participants were given homework assignments of tracking their spending behavior and reflect on their financial habits. The loneliness intervention called '*believe in yourself*' (Cacioppo et al., 2015), was based on three methods of improving non-verbal communication, improving verbal communication and practicing in the real world and a *self-help exercise* based on interferences that reduce loneliness, enhance self-image, and confidence. This is a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy.

The observations were made at *three points in time*. At t1 a pre-test was taken from both the control (12 participants) and experimental group (38 participants). The control group was asked to leave the class after the pretest. At t2, after the materialism intervention of seven weeks, an observation (mid-test) from group 1 was taken. The experimental group was again randomized and 16 participants were asked to leave the class. These participants were asked to ignore their friends in the remaining group making some excuse. This created the perception of loneliness. Then at t3, after the loneliness intervention, the last observation (post-test) was made from group 2 (remaining 22 students). The participants were debriefed at the end of the experiment. Most participants promised to keep referring to the healthy financial habits that they have learned during the experiment.

Before starting the interventions, the pretest was used for analyzing the reliability and validity of the measures used for materialism, loneliness, and happiness. Table 1 shows the reliability statistics and the correlation matrix. The three variables of interest are reliable according to their alpha values i.e. 0.68 for materialism, 0.73 for loneliness, and 0.74 for happiness (Table 1). This may be mentioned here that the alpha for overall materialism ranges from 0.61–0.73 (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012; Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001; Tsang et al., 2014; Watson, 2015), deeming it quite reliable according to the academic practice. The correlation values show that materialism and loneliness have a strong positive relationship (0.376) which is significant. Materialism and happiness have a significant

negative relationship (-0.409) and loneliness and happiness also have a significant negative relationship (-0.431). All relationships are in the proposed direction and are significant. It also shows that gender has a profound effect on all three variables

**Table 1**  
**Bi-variate Pearson Correlation Matrix.**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Alpha</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
1. Gender	-	-	1				
2. Economic Class	-	-	0.034	1			
3. Materialism	8	0.68	0.148**	0.161**	1		
4. Loneliness	8	0.73	0.094*	0.027	0.376**	1	
5. Happiness	5	0.74	-0.168**	-0.075	-0.409**	-0.431**	1

Note. \*  $P < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $P < 0.01$

Table 2 shows the validity statistics. It shows that there is reasonable discriminant and convergent validity of the measured variables. The composite reliability of 0.739, 0.797, and 0.776 for happiness, materialism, and loneliness respectively are also deemed acceptable. The group comparison between the control group and experimental groups showed that the difference between the characteristics of both groups was insignificant, implying that both groups were statistically the same before the manipulations were made (Table 3). This shows that any difference in the mean scores of the experimental group would be due to the interventions and experimental manipulations and was not inherent in the group.

**Table 2**  
**Validity Analysis of the MLH Trap Variables**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>	<i>MSV</i>	<i>ASV</i>
Materialism	0.797	0.574	0.491	0.469
Loneliness	0.776	0.634	0.446	0.438
Happiness	0.739	0.563	0.491	0.461

Note: CR= Composite Reliability; AVE= Average Variance Extracted; MSV= Maximum Shared Variance; ASV= Average Shared Squared Variance

**Table 3**  
**Group Comparisons before Intervention**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Materialism	Control	3.45	0.46	ns
	Experimental	3.58	0.38	
Loneliness	Control	2.93	0.42	ns
	Experimental	2.92	0.74	
Happiness	Control	4.10	0.73	ns
	Experimental	4.22	0.48	

Notes: SD= Standard Deviation; ns= Not significant

Table 4 shows the difference in the mean scores of the observed variables for the control and experimental group. In addition to the information provided by Table 3 for both groups being statistically similar before the start of the experiment, Table 4 further adds to the



successful culmination of the experiment. It shows that there has been a significant difference between mean scores of the control and experimental group after the start of the experiment and first intervention. The paired sample statistic for the experimental group 1 at t1 and t2 are shown in Table 5. The before and after intervention scores for all three variables i.e. materialism (CI = 0.735 to 1.048;  $p < 0.01$ ), loneliness (CI = 0.803 to 1.297;  $p < 0.01$ ) and happiness (CI = -0.893 to -0.520;  $p < 0.01$ ) show significant difference from t1 to t2 suggesting some change had taken place. After the loneliness intervention, the final post-test was taken from group 2 (t3). The comparison was made between pretest and posttest scores to check the total change that had taken place after both interventions.

**Table 4**  
**Paired Difference in Mean Scores in Control and Experimental Group**

Variables	Mode	Mean	SD	Paired Sample Statistics				
				LLCI	ULCI	df	T	Sig.
Materialism	Pair 1	-1.196	0.48	-1.376	-1.015	29	-13.586	**
Loneliness	Pair 2	-1.496	0.84	-1.809	-1.182	29	-9.756	**
Happiness	Pair 3	3.006	0.83	2.695	3.318	29	19.733	**

Note. UCI = Upper Class Interval, LCI=Lower Class Interval, df = degrees of freedom, \*\* $p < 0.01$ , SD = Standard Deviation

Table 5 also shows the paired sample statistic for the experimental Group 2 at t1 and t3. The before and after intervention scores for materialism (CI = 1.540 to 1.862;  $p < 0.01$ ), loneliness (CI = 1.185 to 1.825;  $p < 0.01$ ), happiness (CI = -0.893 to -0.520;  $p < 0.01$ ) show significant difference. It showed that the experimental manipulations had a significant impact on participants' consumption attitudes for the time being. The percentage changes in mean scores of each variable after the interventions reflect the probability of modifying the conscious consumption pattern of the consumer.

**Table 5**  
**Comparison of Experimental Groups after both Interventions**

Intervention	Variables	Time	Mean	SD	Paired Sample Statistics			
					LLCI	ULCI	df	Sig.
Group 1 After Materialism Intervention	Materialism	t1	3.43	0.37	0.7350	1.0484	14	**
		t2	2.53	0.41				
	Loneliness	t1	3.10	0.67	0.8034	1.2966	14	**
		t2	2.05	0.35				
	Happiness	t1	4.28	0.46	-0.8933	-0.5201	14	**
		t2	4.99	0.44				
Group 2 After Loneliness Intervention	Materialism	t1	3.68	0.37	1.5400	1.8622	22	**
		t3	1.98	0.31				
	Loneliness	t1	2.80	0.78	1.1854	1.8254	22	**
		t3	1.29	0.19				
	Happiness	t1	4.17	0.50	-1.3975	-0.9677	22	**
		t3	5.36	0.24				

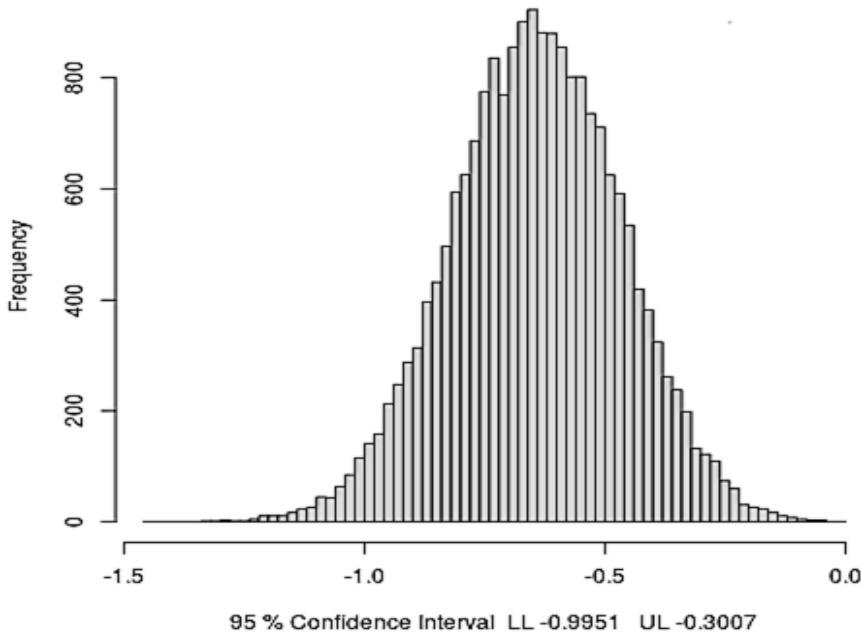
Note: UCI = Upper Class Interval, LCI=Lower Class Interval, df = degrees of freedom, \*\* $p < 0.01$ , SD = Standard Deviation

The bootstrapping mediation results in Table 6 show that loneliness mediates the relationship between materialism and happiness. The mediation is partially showing materialism to be impacting happiness even in absence of loneliness. However, the influence grows strong when loneliness sets in, giving it a characteristic of a trap. The indirect effects of loneliness in the bootstrapped mediation are shown in Figure 1.

**Table 6**  
**Bootstrapping Mediation Results of Experiment**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>	<i>R-Sq.</i>
Constant	8.875	0.434	20.438	0.000**	8.014	9.737	
Materialism	-0.544	0.112	-4.874	0.000**	-0.766	-0.323	
Loneliness	-1.042	0.071	-14.729	0.000**	-1.182	-0.901	0.122**
<i>Effects</i>							
Direct Effect (M on Y)	-0.544	0.112	-4.874	0.000**	-0.766	-0.323	
Indirect Effect (M on Y)	-0.575	0.156	-	-	-0.902	-0.284	
(Bootstrapped-5000)							

Note: se= standard error; t= t value; p= p-value, LCI= lower class interval;  
UCI= upper class interval; R-Sq. = Model R square, \*\* p <0.01



**Figure 1: Indirect effects of Loneliness (Bootstrapped)**

The percentage changes in mean scores (Table 7) also validate this aspect, as the happiness prospect greatly enhances after the loneliness intervention. Materialism is reduced by 28.7% after materialism intervention but further reduces another 21.7% after the loneliness intervention. Loneliness is reduced by 31.5% after the materialism intervention and by 37.1% after the second intervention. Similarly, happiness increased by 18.24% after the materialism intervention and by 7.4% after loneliness intervention. This reflects that loneliness mediates the relationship between materialism and happiness. Moreover, happiness is relatively a fused variable and is an outcome of several things. Reducing materialism alone does not impact it as much as when loneliness is also reduced. Even with both materialism and loneliness being reduced the happiness shows little increase. This is because other factors also impact happiness. The combined change in three variables among the experimental group is presented in the last columns of Table 7. This may be noted that the subjects (n=22) who received both interventions reported a decrease in their materialism by 44.2%. Similarly, these subjects reported a decrease of 56.3% in their perceived loneliness. Both of these results are very encouraging in the sense that there is a clear ray of light. Finally, the overall increase of happiness among this double randomized experimental group is 27%.

**Table 7**  
**Level of Percentage Change in Variables in Both Groups after Interventions**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>t1</i>	<i>t2</i>	<i>% change</i>	<i>t3</i>	<i>% change</i>	<i>Overall % Change</i>
Materialism	3.55	2.53	28.7 ↓	1.98	21.7 ↓	44.2 ↓
Loneliness	2.95	2.05	31.5 ↓	1.29	37.1 ↓	56.3 ↓
Happiness	4.22	4.99	18.2 ↑	5.36	07.4 ↑	27.0 ↑

Note: t = time; The scores in t1, t2, and t3 are an average of variables for the groups

## DISCUSSION

This study noted that materialism, loneliness, and happiness follow a recurrent relationship. Materialism deteriorates social relationships and the happiness potential and this finding of the study is academically recognized (Ahuvia, 2008; Burroughs et al., 2013; Goodman & Irmak, 2013; Hamilton, 2009; Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Millar & Thomas, 2009; Nicolao et al., 2009; Tsang et al., 2014; Van Boven, 2005).

This result corresponds to three theoretical perspectives in the existing literature. The *motivational theory* (Burroughs et al., 2013) renders materialism as an outgrowth of internally suppressed higher-order psychological needs. It is the inadequate self-concept that leads to difficulties in developing loving relationships and materialism takes its characteristic form by the pacification of such deficiencies through material goods. However *social comparison theory* views materialism as an outcome of social comparison. Consumers continuously indulge in comparison and contrast their social and material standing with others. So luxury consumption based on social activities may bring happiness for a limited period (Guillen-Royo, 2008; Howell & Hill, 2009; Tatzel, 2003). Consumers often try to blend in with others via the usage of material possessions and increase their desirability. However, such comparisons usually turn destructive when continued over a longer period. Interestingly, experiential purchases have been found to makes these comparisons positive. Nevertheless, *terror management theory* suggests that materialism

is stress and anxiety inducer in times of trouble and causes materialistic consumers to view difficult times more shoddier than objectively (Hui et al., 2014; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004; Ruvio et al., 2014).

The result that materialism and loneliness have a direct positive relationship is in line with the literature. The desire to get prestige and self-worth, through valued belongings upsets the social connections of the consumer leaving him lonely and depressed (Bauer et al., 2012; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; Pieters, 2013). The *attachment theory* describes this tendency as the substitution effect where, the basic needs of affection or affiliation (primary attachment) are substituted by material goods (secondary attachments) (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008). The mere consumption indulgence for getting material satisfaction leads to the void formation which explains the entrapment of materialistic consumers into loneliness (Pieters, 2013), as predicted. Such consumers would involve in extensive impulsive buying and conspicuous consumption in general and specifically when faced with threatening situations.

Similarly, loneliness leads to a decrease in happiness as predicted. When loneliness is high the consumer is faced with low self-esteem and fear of social rejection (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Kong & You, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Pieters, 2013; R. M. Ryan et al., 2009), leading to decrease in happiness. The fear of rejection hinders the consumer to reach out to others and the seclusion condition continues. Moreover, a reduction in chances to share the inner despair leads to greater unhappiness.

The cyclical entrapment between materialism and happiness is due to loneliness (Pieters, 2013). However, the mediation is partial because even without loneliness, materialism still has a significant negative relationship with happiness. Loneliness is the major factor that keeps the consumer locked in the material trap, or else materialism may have a positive relationship with happiness as well, which might not be long-lasting (Bauer et al., 2012; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Soscia, 2007; Tsang et al., 2014). It is the fear of rejection and low self-esteem that limits the consumer's capacity towards happiness prospects (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010; Kong & You, 2013; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2008; Pieters, 2013; R. M. Ryan et al., 2009). Thus, loneliness can deeply translate materialism into unhappiness, mediating the two.

### **Theoretical and Practical Contributions**

The study contributes significantly to the materialism literature by exhibiting for the first time that materialism can be curbed through conscious efforts of the consumer, advancing the theoretical knowledge on its mechanism. It also empirically established the breaking of the MLH trap through an extensive experiment. The study also contributes to happiness studies literature by identifying directions in which happiness could be enhanced, as the experimental materials are designed to train the consumer towards building better relationships and indulge in mindful consumption, which eventually leads to happiness.

Moreover, the study contributes to the various academic disciplines. Firstly, it contributes to the field of *consumer behavior*. It established that materialism could be curbed and manipulated through changes in consumption behavior rather than the impractical call of dematerializing the whole lifestyle (as emphasized by earlier research).

The purchase and consumption when aligned in a way that maximizes the payoffs to the consumer, it benefits the individual as well as those around him. Therefore, the consumer can accumulate happiness potential for himself and others, beyond the superficial material joy. The study also contributes to the discipline of *advertising* as it provides an experimental grounding on how the advertisements can be created for more meaningful and consumer-specific purposes. Advertisements based on greater social goodness and welfare, shun the idea for socio-material comparisons as discussed above. The experiment establishes that advertisements should promote social connectivity rather than personal gratification. The experiment highlights that by bringing conscious changes to the consumption pattern and through focused self-image training, any consumer can relish a sustained level of happiness such that they can be *better consumers and users* within the society.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The experimental data was carried out on students (late adolescents) from a university business school belonging to the middle class. The *sample* may not be truly representative regarding the economic and social class, as the changes after the interventions may be different for different groups of socio-economic class. The experiment was conducted in a classroom setting and attempts were made to keep it as natural as possible. However, there were certain factors outside the control of the experimenter such as the mood states. A more representative sample can be used for further experimental studies by making experimental groups of different socio-economic classes and certain priming activities control mood states.

The study assessed the impacts of materialistic values only at the *individual level*. There is a need for future experiments to check the manipulation effects on dyads and groups. This can be specifically useful in terms of understanding the *consumption behavior* and provide a deeper understanding of the mechanism. The experiment used the double randomization technique to check the intervention capacity to reduce materialism and loneliness. However, a *time-lag experimental series* can be further used to establish the cause and effect relationship between materialism, loneliness, and happiness. The experiment was designed to reflect materialism at one point in time and the resultant change because of consumer training. It does not offer any anticipatory notion on the *temporal changes in the materialism* level itself. Future research may focus upon the natural highs and lows in consumer's materialism along the course of life. *Multi-wave longitudinal experimental* research can play its role in exploring possible mediating mechanisms. This also points towards the need for future research based on *triangulation methods*. Moreover, the experiment did not *randomize participants* based on their materialism or loneliness levels. Therefore, future research may also attempt to conduct cluster analysis and use factorial designs for the purpose.

Materialism may be a cause of determining the consumption patterns, but this may not be the whole story. For example, researchers in our context noted that brand self-connection and brand prominence significantly motivates them to even perform difficult behaviors for purchasing (Sameeni et al., 2015). Another study confirms that awareness among consumers reflected through brand recall and brand recognition influences the actual purchase decisions (Khurram et al., 2018). The spillover effect of materialism to the

lack of happiness via loneliness may not be so straightforward as it looks apparently. There is also a plausibility that at the initial stage unhappiness emerges in response to materialistic purchases and then loneliness pops up. The changes in orientation towards happiness may also be due to self-congruity with a brand (Sheeraz et al., 2020). Therefore, the MLH trap mechanism is very much likely to be contingent on several boundary conditions, for example, individual differences among consumers, the type of products or brands being evaluated or used, the nature of the association with the brands, and so on. Further research is warranted to enhance our understanding of curbing the MLH trap and the moderators of this process.

## CONCLUSION

The consumer's self-drive is pertinent in breaking the MLH trap, as the most significant role in confronting this trap is to be played by the consumer himself. It is the conscious efforts of the consumer that can retain him from wasteful and unnecessary consumption and invest more in experiences and communal goods. He has to focus upon purchase discipline that can help him as well as others. If the participants can discipline themselves for an experiment and practice mindful consumption over an extended period, they can also practice the same in real life as well. Moreover, participants also showed that they can reduce the perception of loneliness by making conscious changes in how they approach it. Moreover, advertisers and marketers can develop longer-lasting bonds by focusing on experience-based social marketing, based on collective orientations and community benefits at large.

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