

Characteristics of the Materialist Self-Concept and Related Theories (Postprint)

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Abstract

Classic research on materialism has respectively defined and understood materialism-related phenomena from the perspectives of personality, values, goals, and needs. Self-concept has consistently served as a thread running through materialism research, but only recently have researchers attempted to use it as a theoretical foundation to synthesize and integrate existing studies. Related research indicates that materialists exhibit lower self-evaluations, manifested as low self-esteem and contingent self-esteem; their self-knowledge demonstrates inconsistency, manifested as unclear self-concept, dissociation between explicit and implicit self-esteem, and self-discrepancy (the gap between ideal self and actual self). Two recent integrative theories—the self-escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuit theory of materialism—propose that materialism represents the means by which individuals employ material possessions as a way to escape the self or to satisfy motives for self-identity. These two theories address the deficiency of lacking integrative theories in existing materialism research. Future research can make greater theoretical contributions by drawing on theories related to self-concept and transcending the simplistic notion of self-deficiency in materialists.

Full Text

The Features and Related Theories of Materialists' Self-Concept

Classical research on materialism has defined and understood related phenomena from the perspectives of personality traits, values, goals, and needs. While self-concept has always been a thread running through materialism research, only recently have scholars attempted to use it as a theoretical foundation to integrate existing studies. Relevant research indicates that materialists exhibit lower self-evaluation, manifested as low self-esteem and contingent self-esteem, and demonstrate inconsistent self-knowledge, reflected in unclear self-concept,

explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy, and self-discrepancy (the gap between ideal and actual self). Two recent comprehensive theories—the escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism—both attempt to integrate existing materialism research through the lens of self-concept, positing that materialists use material possessions either as a means to escape from self-awareness or as a tool to construct and pursue self-identity.

This paper summarizes existing research and finds that materialists exhibit both low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-knowledge. The former is characterized by low self-esteem and contingent self-esteem, while the latter manifests as unclear self-concept, explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy, and self-discrepancy (the gap between ideal and actual self). Two recently emerged comprehensive theories—the escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism—both attempt to integrate existing materialism research through self-concept, viewing materialism as either a means for individuals to escape from the self or as a strategy to achieve self-identity construction. The following sections elaborate on these points in sequence and conclude with commentary and future prospects for self-concept-based materialism research.

2. Low Self-Evaluation Among Materialists

Materialists' self-evaluation is characterized by low self-esteem, which may result from their tendency to base self-worth on external rather than internal domains (contingent self-esteem).

2.1 Low Self-Esteem

The relationship between self-esteem and materialism appears to be reciprocal. On one hand, individuals with low self-esteem may adopt materialism as a compensatory strategy, mistakenly believing that materialism can help enhance their self-worth. On the other hand, once individuals base their self-esteem on material possessions, it can only decrease rather than increase their self-esteem.

2.1.1 Low Self-Esteem Leads to Increased Materialism Low self-esteem can drive individuals toward materialistic pursuits. Therefore, if raising self-esteem reduces individuals' materialistic tendencies, this would demonstrate that decreased self-esteem leads to increased materialism. Chaplin and colleagues' research confirmed this proposition, showing that when participants' self-esteem was primed to be high, their pursuit of materialism significantly decreased (Chaplin & John, 2007). Their subsequent study also found that for low-income adolescents, low self-esteem was an important factor explaining their materialism (Chaplin, Hill, & John, 2014). Jiang, Zhang, Ke, Hawk, and Qiu (2015) further explored the influence of implicit self-esteem on materialism. The researchers first induced a decrease in participants' implicit self-esteem through peer rejection manipulation and observed a negative correlation between implicit self-esteem and materialism. They then manipulated implicit self-esteem

through a lexical decision task and found that participants in the experimental group with temporarily boosted implicit self-esteem showed significantly lower materialism levels than control group participants whose implicit self-esteem was not enhanced.

2.1.2 High Materialism Leads to Low Self-Esteem The pursuit of materialism can lead to decreased self-esteem. Kasser et al.'s (2014) longitudinal intervention study confirmed this point. They divided highly materialistic participants into two groups: the intervention group was asked to focus less on materialistic goals over a one-month period (e.g., reflecting on how advertisements they saw and heard influenced their purchasing decisions, learning from people who were good at sharing and saving), while the control group only received emails about research progress unrelated to materialistic goal setting. The results showed that after the 10-month intervention period, the control group's self-esteem decreased compared to 10 months earlier, whereas the experimental group's self-esteem increased. These findings not only demonstrate that pursuing materialism leads to lower self-esteem but also show that abandoning materialism can enhance self-esteem.

The experimental evidence from these two directions clearly reveals the reciprocal causal relationship between self-esteem and materialism, while numerous correlational studies support this conclusion by demonstrating a negative correlation between self-esteem and materialism. For instance, research has shown that self-esteem negatively correlates with materialism (Kim, Callan, Gheorghiu, & Matthews, 2017; Reeves, Baker, & Truluck, 2012; Ruvio, Somer, & Rindfleisch, 2014). Ruvio et al. (2014) conducted a field study in two Israeli towns—one that had experienced terrorist attacks and one that had not—and found that when facing existential security threats (terrorist attacks), materialists experienced greater stress and engaged in more maladaptive consumption behaviors to alleviate this stress, with low self-esteem serving as the underlying psychological mechanism mediating materialism's moderating effect. In summary, these findings indicate that materialists have low self-esteem, and materialism and low self-esteem are likely reciprocally causal.

2.2 Contingent Self-Esteem

Another manifestation of materialists' low self-evaluation is that their self-esteem is contingent. Contingent self-esteem refers to "the degree to which individuals' self-evaluation depends on or is contingent upon meeting certain excellence standards or fulfilling interpersonal or intrapsychic expectations" (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 32). Unlike true self-esteem, which is based on self-determination, intrinsic interest, and internal satisfaction, contingent self-esteem is fragile because individuals are constantly in the process of validating their self-worth. Roberts, Manolis, and Pullig (2014) found that contingent self-esteem positively correlates with compulsive buying, with this relationship mediated by fear of negative evaluation and social identity.

Depending on the domain of dependence, contingent self-esteem can be divided into extrinsic contingent self-esteem and intrinsic contingent self-esteem. The former depends on relatively external domains such as appearance, competition (whether one is better than others), and social approval, making it relatively unstable. The latter depends on relatively internal domains such as virtue and authenticity, making it relatively stable. Nagpaul and Pang (2017) found that three types of extrinsic contingent self-esteem—appearance, competition, and social approval—positively correlate with materialism, while intrinsic contingent self-esteem negatively correlates with materialism. Moreover, participants primed with extrinsic contingent self-esteem showed higher levels of implicit materialism than those primed with intrinsic contingent self-esteem, further confirming the negative impact of extrinsic contingent self-esteem on materialism and the positive impact of intrinsic contingent self-esteem.

Park, Ward, and Naragon-Gainey (2017) focused on financial contingent self-esteem within extrinsic contingent self-esteem. They argued that if individuals' self-worth derives from how much money they can earn or how successful they are financially, then clearly these individuals will have high levels of materialism—because materialism itself represents the value placed on material wealth. Correlational studies using both college student and general population samples demonstrated that financial contingent self-esteem significantly and positively correlates with materialism. They also found through priming wealth threat scenarios that individuals with high financial contingent self-esteem viewed wealth threats more negatively, were more likely to adopt negative coping strategies, and experienced less autonomy (while materialism is often used to compensate for low autonomy). These individuals with high financial contingent self-esteem were less willing to make luxury consumption decisions when facing wealth threats—because wealth was too important to them, and they felt insecure about a future without money.

The above research shows that extrinsic contingent self-esteem increases materialism. Conceptually, materialism can also lead to extrinsic contingent self-esteem, because the concept of materialism itself represents values that recognize material possessions can achieve important life goals. Teng et al. (2017) surveyed Chinese female college students' materialism and appearance contingent self-esteem through questionnaires. Structural equation modeling revealed that materialism not only enhanced women's appearance contingent self-esteem but also further led to self-objectification and body surveillance through appearance contingent self-esteem. These results suggest that materialism may also be a cause of contingent self-esteem. In summary, existing evidence indicates that materialists have high contingent self-esteem, and contingent self-esteem, especially extrinsic contingent self-esteem, promotes materialism. However, whether materialism can promote extrinsic contingent self-esteem remains to be tested experimentally.

3. Materialists' Inconsistent Self-Knowledge

Inconsistent self-knowledge is another characteristic of materialists' selves, manifested as a lack of clear, consistent, and stable understanding of self-concept (self-concept clarity), discrepancy between explicit and implicit self-esteem (explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy), and inconsistency between actual and ideal selves (self-discrepancy). Among these, self-concept clarity is a more comprehensive concept with strong generalizability. Explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy and self-discrepancy focus on different aspects of inconsistent self-knowledge: the former involves inconsistency between conscious and unconscious levels of self-evaluation, while the latter more reflects the role of sociocultural factors in shaping individuals' ideal selves.

3.1 Self-Concept Clarity

Self-concept clarity characterizes the degree to which individuals have a clear, consistent, and temporally stable understanding of their self-concept (Campbell, 1990). Reeves et al. (2012) and Watson (2014a) found that self-concept clarity significantly negatively correlates with materialism. Sharif and Khanekharab (2017) also found that identity confusion positively predicts materialism. Noguti and Bokeyar (2014) recruited non-student adult participants from Australia and the United States through online surveys, and results from both countries showed a significant negative correlation between self-concept clarity and materialism. Mittal (2015) similarly found that individuals with low self-concept clarity not only had higher levels of materialism but were also more likely to use shopping as a means of escaping reality. Gountas, Gountas, Reeves, and Moran (2012) found in their validation of The Desire for Fame Scale that reverse-scored self-concept clarity positively predicted both materialism and desire for fame—another external goal related to materialism (Kasser & Ryan, 1996)—indicating that individuals with unclear self-concepts had higher materialism levels and stronger desires for fame.

Koller, Floh, Zauner, and Rusch (2013) used a database of over 1,000 participants and applied finite mixture modeling to divide participants into two clusters with different characteristics. Results showed that participants in Cluster 2 had lower self-concept clarity than those in Cluster 1, while simultaneously exhibiting higher materialism levels, providing evidence that materialists have lower self-concept clarity. Morrison and Johnson (2011) experimentally examined the relationship between self-uncertainty and property-self expression among individualists (rather than collectivists). They found that when self-uncertainty was induced, European American participants were more likely to use their favorite jeans as self-expression. The more individualistic participants were, the more they tended to view their cars and favorite possessions as self-expression; conversely, thinking about possessions that expressed the self enhanced individualists' self-certainty.

In summary, these findings indicate that unclear self-concept is a character-

istic of materialists' selves. Unclear self-concept creates uncertainty, and the discomfort arising from this uncertainty has motivational effects, prompting individuals to seek concrete, tangible objects to alleviate the uncertainty, based on the empty self theory (e.g., Reeves et al., 2012; Sharif & Khanekharab, 2017). However, not all objects can alleviate this uncertainty; only specific items culturally approved for self-expression can provide a sense of certainty (e.g., Morrison & Johnson, 2012).

3.2 Explicit-Implicit Self-Esteem Discrepancy

The discrepancy between explicit and implicit self-esteem also reflects the clarity of self-knowledge. Individuals with high explicit but low implicit self-esteem appear confident on the surface but constantly doubt their self-worth at the unconscious level. Those with low explicit but high implicit self-esteem appear unconfident on the surface but may have previously held high self-evaluations that now operate at an unconscious level. Regardless of the type of explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy, both reflect fragmented and inconsistent self-knowledge and lead to maladjustment (Leeuwis, KootDaan, Creemers, & van Lier, 2015). Park and John (2011) systematically examined the effect of explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy on materialism. In Study 1, neither implicit nor explicit self-esteem showed significant main effects on materialism, but their interaction was significant, with explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy positively predicting individuals' materialism levels. In Study 2, researchers measured participants' explicit self-esteem and manipulated high implicit self-esteem through priming.

The results showed that for individuals with low explicit self-esteem, those primed with high implicit self-esteem (large explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy) exhibited higher materialism levels than control group participants (small explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy). Study 3 divided participants with high explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy into two groups. The experimental group underwent a cognitive load task to reduce resources available for evaluating explicit self-esteem, while the control group did not receive this manipulation. Results showed that the experimental group's materialism level was significantly lower than the control group's. This evidence clearly demonstrates that explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy or separation can drive individuals' pursuit of materialism.

3.3 Self-Discrepancy

Self-discrepancy refers to the degree of difference or inconsistency between an individual's actual self and ideal self (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017). Individuals with large self-discrepancies can perceive greater inconsistency between their actual and ideal selves. On one hand, self-discrepancy may lead individuals to adopt materialism as a compensatory strategy to bridge the gap between ideal and actual selves. On the other hand, materialism may also increase individuals' self-discrepancy.

In Carr and Vignoles' (2011) study, participants listed aspects of discrepancy between their ideal and actual selves by completing a series of "I am _____ now, but I want to be _____" sentences and rated the magnitude and importance of each discrepancy aspect. A weighted total score based on each discrepancy's magnitude and importance constituted the participant's ideal-actual self-discrepancy score. Results showed that individuals with larger self-discrepancies had higher materialism levels. Using a similar method, Yu, Jing, Su, Zhou, & Nguyen (2016) found that consumers with larger self-discrepancies were more likely than those with smaller self-discrepancies to derive happiness from purchasing status-representing material goods, an effect mediated by the motivational goal of reducing the gap between actual and ideal selves.

Self-discrepancy is also influenced by broader sociocultural factors. Dittmar (2008) noted that advertisements pervasive in contemporary consumer society, especially celebrity endorsements, make the "body perfect" and "material good life" ideal selves that everyone pursues, with material possessions serving as symbols to achieve these ideal selves. Dittmar and colleagues' research with female participants examined the relationship between materialism and body-related self-discrepancies (e.g., "My breasts are small, but I want them to be big" ; "I have stretch marks, but I want perfect skin"). They found that for young women, materialism positively correlated with the degree to which they held the perfect body as an ideal self. Moreover, after priming materialism through luxury advertisements, materialism not only enhanced female participants' body-related self-discrepancies, but this effect was also moderated by participants' pre-existing materialistic values. Compared to individuals with lower pre-existing materialism levels, for those with higher materialism levels, materialistic advertisement priming enhanced their body-related self-discrepancies (Ashikali & Dittmar, 2012).

In summary, research on the relationship between self-discrepancy and materialism shows that, on one hand, self-discrepancy leads individuals to exhibit stronger materialism and makes material consumption a means to resolve self-discrepancy. On the other hand, materialism as a sociocultural force exacerbates individuals' self-discrepancy by reinforcing ideal selves, particularly affecting those who already hold materialistic values and making them more susceptible to such sociocultural influences.

4. Self-Concept Perspectives on Materialism Theory

Although self-concept has always been a thread in materialism research and frequently serves as a focus of materialism theories (Dittmar, 2008; Watson, 2014b), two recently emerged theories—the escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism—differ from previous theories in that both attempt to integrate and synthesize existing materialism research through self-concept.

4.1 The Escape Theory of Materialism

The escape theory of materialism, based on escape theory (Baumeister, 1991), proposes that materialism represents individuals' pursuit of material goods to escape from self-awareness they find aversive. Since materialists exhibit more self-escape behavioral patterns than non-materialists, the six steps of escape theory can be used to predict materialists' corresponding cognitive, emotional, and behavioral characteristics (Donnelly, Ksendzova, Howell, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2016). This theory integrates existing materialism research according to the sequence of self-escape. This paper compares escape theory and the escape theory of materialism, summarizing them in Table 1 .

Table 1. Escape Theory and the Escape Theory of Materialism

Escape Theory	Escape Theory of Materialism (Materialists' Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior)
Feeling that one fails to meet standards. Because standards or expectations are set too high, the large gap between reality and standards makes individuals feel they have not met standards.	Materialists more frequently feel they fail to meet standards and experience more disappointment with their lives.

Escape Theory	Escape Theory of Materialism (Materialists' Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior)
Self-blame. Failure to meet standards or encountered setbacks are attributed to the self, producing feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.	Materialists are more likely to feel self-blame, inadequacy, and low self-esteem due to setbacks and disappointments.
Painful self-awareness. Self-blame from unmet standards further makes the self the focus of attention, leading to painful self-awareness.	Materialists experience more aversive self-awareness (e.g., larger self-discrepancies).

Escape Theory	Escape Theory of Materialism (Materialists' Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior)
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Negative emotional experiences. Accompanying strong and negative self-consciousness are individuals' unpleasant, aversive emotional experiences, such as persistent or frequent anxiety.	Materialists experience more negative emotions.
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Escape Theory	Escape Theory of Materialism (Materialists' Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior)
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Cognitive deconstruction.	Materialists exhibit more cognitive deconstruction, such as narrow, rigid, concrete, and present-focused thinking, because this helps them escape from negative emotional experiences.
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Cognitive deconstruction is a way of thinking that replaces abstract thought with concrete thought, focusing on the present without considering past or future. This represents a narrowing of attention and an escape from all meaning- and emotion-related problems. The purpose of this process is to minimize painful emotional experiences, because to some extent, understanding the meaning of

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current situation and comparing it with abstract standards is

Escape Theory	Escape Theory of Materialism (Materialists' Cognition, Emotion, and Behavior)
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Impulsive and irrational behavior. Concrete and low-level thinking removes internal controls that guide behavior (such as rational analysis and social norm inhibition), leading individuals to exhibit impulsive and irrational behavior. Because individuals cannot always maintain cognitive deconstruction, aversive emotional experiences re-emerge. To briefly escape aversive emotions, individuals restart impulsive	Materialists exhibit more impulsive, short-sighted, and irrational behavioral patterns. Accompanying this, materialists also attempt to find new, different identities for the self, thereby ultimately completing the process of escaping from their former self.
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impulsive

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irrational behaviors. Successful self-escape also involves acquiring a

To test the escape theory of materialism, Donnelly et al. (2016) searched psychology databases and English-language journals that frequently publish materialism research for articles on materialism published between January 1984 and August 2015, ultimately identifying 226 relevant studies. They then used these published studies to sequentially test the six theoretical predictions of the theory, finding substantial supporting evidence in existing research. For the theory's first step, research indeed found that materialists more frequently felt they failed to meet their ideal standards for wealth (Tang, Luna-Arocas, Pardo, & Tang, 2014), power (Lemrová et al., 2014), prestige (Durvasula & Lysonski, 2010), and other criteria. For the second step, as previously discussed, researchers found that materialists had lower self-evaluation, which further led to the third step—experiencing more aversive self-awareness and accompanying negative emotional experiences (fourth step). To escape this aversive self-awareness and associated negative emotions, materialists enter the fifth step, exhibiting cognitive deconstruction by replacing abstract thinking with concrete thinking and focusing only on the present without considering the future. At this point, materialists have cognitively escaped. Correspondingly, behavioral escape manifests as impulsive, short-sighted, and irrational behavioral patterns. To this end, materialists also attempt to find new, different identities for the self, thereby ultimately completing the process of escaping from their former self (sixth step).

4.2 The Identity Goal Pursuits Theory of Materialism

L. Shrum and colleagues proposed the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism by combining self-identity goal pursuit with symbolic consumption. This theory defines materialism as “the extent to which individuals attempt to construct and maintain their selves through the acquisition and use of products, services, experiences, or relationships that have idealized symbolic value” (Shrum et al., 2013, p. 1180). The theory's core is to explore the functions or roles of materialism in constructing and maintaining self-identity, and is therefore also called materialism as identity motives (Rustagi & Shrum, 2017) or the functional perspective theory of materialism (Zheng, Ruan, & Peng, 2017). This paper argues that the theory's key points and unique contributions are mainly reflected in three aspects:

(1) Situational nature. Previous definitions of materialism, whether as personality traits, values, goals, or psychological needs, all implied that materialism is a long-term and stable psychological quality. From a person versus situation perspective, previous theories emphasized the person, whereas the identity goal pursuits theory, while not denying individual differences, emphasizes the situational nature of materialism, viewing it as individuals' responses to specific situations that threaten self-identity. In fact, before the identity goal pursuits theory, numerous studies had already primed materialism in experimental settings (e.g., Ashikali & Dittmar, 2012; Roberts & Roberts, 2012; Wierzbicki & Zawadzka, 2016; Ku, Dittmar, & Banerjee, 2014), and some researchers had explicitly proposed concepts of state materialism (Giacomantonio, Mannetti, &

Pierro, 2013) or situational materialism (Kim, 2013), all indicating that materialism research should consider situational factors.

(2) Motivational nature. The situational nature of the identity goal pursuits theory is grounded in individuals' behavioral motivation, with materialism viewed as a response to specific situations that threaten self-identity. Vignoles, Gollidge, Regalia, Manzi, and Scabini (2006) proposed six identity motives: self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and meaning. The identity goal pursuits theory of materialism reasons that when individuals use consumption to satisfy these motives, they are considered materialistic. Therefore, for the same identity motive, individuals can use either materialistic or non-materialistic means (Table 2).

Table 2. Six Types of Identity Motives and Examples of More or Less Materialistic Behaviors to Satisfy These Motives

Identity Motive	Example: More Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction	Example: Less Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction
Self-esteem: Maintaining and enhancing positive self-concept	Achieving satisfactory appearance through surgery	Improving figure and appearance through exercise and diet

Identity Motive	Example: More Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction	Example: Less Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction
Continuity Main- taining individ- ual identity across time and sit- uations, includ- ing life course (mani- fested as change) and im- portant life transi- tions	Acquiring paintings by hometown native artists	Helping hometown renovate community activity centers through donations
Distinctive Estab- lishing and main- taining identity differ- ent from others	Customizing and modifying one's car with bright paint and personalized accessories	Taking Russian language and culture courses after discovering Russian ancestry

Identity Motive	Example: More Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction	Example: Less Materialistic Behavior in Seeking Motive Satisfaction
Belonging: Forming intimacy with others and feeling accepted by them	Buying and wearing local sports team apparel when moving to a new city	Joining local recreational sports teams when moving to a new city
Efficacy: Maintaining and enhancing sense of competence and control over life events	Framing academic diplomas and certificates and hanging them in the office	Training for and competing in triathlons
Meaning: Enhancing sense that personal life is purposeful and meaningful	Using part-time income to buy a larger “dream” home for one’ s family	Using part-time income to send one’ s son to a “dream” art academy

Note: Adapted from Shrum et al. (2013), p. 1181

(3) Symbolic nature. The uniqueness of materialism in satisfying self-identity

motives lies in using symbolic acquisition and use as a means or tool to achieve this goal, while purchasing or acquiring material objects is not the criterion for judging materialism. This is reflected in four aspects: First, materialism is only one of many means to achieve the goal of maintaining self-identity. As shown in Table 2, to achieve the same self-identity motive, individuals can adopt either materialistic or other approaches. Second, the objects of materialistic acquisition are not limited to products and services—personal experiences (e.g., mountain climbing) or interpersonal relationships (e.g., friendships) can also be materialistic, while acquiring material objects itself is not necessarily materialistic (e.g., buying running shoes purely for running needs). Third, acquisition is not limited to purchasing behavior; the use of products, services, experiences, and interpersonal relationships can also be materialistic (e.g., displaying gifts from celebrities in prominent office locations). Finally, the essence of symbols is signaling, including both signaling to others and signaling to oneself. In the examples shown in Table 2, to enhance self-esteem, an individual achieves more satisfactory appearance through surgery. Whether to display oneself to others or merely for self-admiration, this is considered materialistic.

Regarding research evidence, although no studies have directly tested the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism, the previously summarized research on materialism and self-esteem, self-concept clarity, and ideal-actual self differences all demonstrate the relationship between materialism and self-identity construction to some extent. However, unlike previous research, this theory does not view low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-evaluation as manifestations of materialists but rather as motivations for individuals to pursue materialism. Only when individuals use symbolic consumption to pursue these identity motives are they considered materialistic. Therefore, the theory consistently emphasizes that materialism should be viewed as neutral rather than negative, because materialism is merely a tool to satisfy identity motives. Meanwhile, unlike previous researchers who viewed materialism as a coping strategy to compensate for insecurity (e.g., economic, emotional, existential insecurity; see Li & Li, 2012; Burroughs et al., 2013) or threat (Kasser, 2016), the unique contribution of the identity goal pursuits theory lies in integrating these research findings through the concept of self-identity, thereby providing a unified theoretical explanatory framework for different research results.

4.3 Commentary

Both the escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuits theory attempt to synthesize existing materialism research with self-concept at the core. Both theories are highly generalizable and integrative, compensating for the lack of integrative theories in materialism research. The escape theory better explains the negative experiences of materialists and thus better integrates research showing that materialism leads to low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-knowledge. The identity goal pursuits theory focuses on the opposite side—that when individuals experience low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-knowledge,

they adopt materialistic or non-materialistic strategies to construct new identities. The two theories emphasize two sequential psychological processes and thus show connectivity: when materialists turn their consciousness toward the self, they experience aversive self-awareness and negative emotional experiences due to low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-knowledge, and consequently want to “escape” from these negative experiences. But where can materialists escape to? The endpoint of escape theory (the sixth step is seeking new identity) is precisely the starting point of identity theory—pursuing identity goals through various means. In short, escape theory highlights the “destructive” aspect of materialism, while goal pursuit theory highlights its “constructive” aspect.

Although the two theories show coherence in psychological processes, identity theory differs fundamentally from escape theory in that there are no negative materialists in identity theory, only neutral individuals. Whether an individual is materialistic depends on their actions. If, in the process of pursuing new identity, individuals use materialistic methods, then this behavior is materialistic; conversely, if individuals use other methods to pursue new identity, then this behavior is non-materialistic (as contrasted in columns 3 and 4 of Table 2). However, identity theory does not consider either approach negative. Identity theory aims to break stereotypes about materialists (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010), examine materialism from a functional perspective, and return responsibility for actions to the actors themselves, which has a humanistic-existential psychology flavor.

Further examining the reasons why these two theories could emerge, this paper attributes them to two factors. First, the vast accumulation of empirical evidence and research phenomena in materialism requires integration and theoretical advancement. Since Belk (1985) explicitly defined materialism as a personality trait and developed the first widely used materialism scale, the field has accumulated extensive research over the past three decades. In some sense, Dittmar et al.’s (2014) meta-analysis on materialism published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and Kasser’s (2016) review article on materialism research in the *Annual Review of Psychology* both signify the maturation of materialism research. However, existing research often originates from different theoretical perspectives, primarily from materialism’s four classical approaches: personality, values, goals, and needs. Within each approach, there is no complete, unified theoretical explanation. Without sufficient theoretical generalization and abstraction, these research findings appear fragmented. The escape theory and identity goal pursuits theory of materialism emerged precisely to meet this urgent need in the field. Notably, Richins (2017) has also attempted to integrate existing materialism research using developmental and reinforcement models to explain how materialism develops in childhood and is reinforced in adulthood, suggesting that multiple researchers recognize the need for integrative theories.

Second, although the escape theory and identity goal pursuits theory of materialism differ in content, both view materialism as a coping or compensatory

strategy resulting from some deficiency in the self. This idea is not recent but has always run through materialism research (e.g., Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Chang & Arkin, 2002; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009; Dittmar & Kapur, 2011; Morrison & Johnson, 2011; Richins, 2013; Wang, Li, & Guo, 2016). More importantly, this idea does not originate from materialism research; its source can be traced back at least to Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, with newer developments being the meaning maintenance model (Proulx, Inzlicht, & Harmon-Jones, 2012; Zuo, Huang, Wang, & Cai, 2016). In fact, both the escape theory and identity goal pursuits theory of materialism can be seen as extensions of the self-deficiency-coping/compensation idea and related theories to the domain of materialism. The continuous maturation of relevant ideas, theories, and empirical evidence has driven the emergence of these two theories.

However, both integrative theories have limitations. Although both can explain existing research evidence, they have difficulty effectively generating new research hypotheses and predicting new phenomena. In the escape theory of materialism, researchers found supporting evidence for the six steps by searching for evidence separately according to escape theory's (Baumeister, 1991) six steps, and indeed found that existing research supports these six different aspects. However, the six steps of self-escape constitute a continuous process, and only when research evidence can show that the six steps occur sequentially can the theory be fully supported. In other words, current evidence is only a necessary condition for the theory's validity, not a sufficient condition. Therefore, future research should propose specific hypotheses based on the theory's six steps, test them step by step, and emphasize comparison with escape theory. For example, do materialists begin to feel self-blame only after feeling they have not met standards? Where do materialists and non-materialists differ in the psychological process of unmet standards leading to self-blame? Is it easier to feel self-blame when goals are materialistic, or when goals are self-interested? For instance, materialists might set standards for achieving "financial freedom" by a certain age and feel self-blame for not meeting them. But if they set standards for donating a certain amount to poor families by a certain age, would materialists still feel self-blame for not meeting them? That is, does materialists' pain stem from strict self-requirements or from excessive focus on self-interest? This can help clarify the difference between escape theory and the escape theory of materialism and also aid our understanding of escape theory—excessive focus on self-interest may increase the likelihood of self-escape, and materialists are a vulnerable population for self-escape.

Similarly, for the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism, its foundation is Vignoles et al.'s (2006) self-identity motives theory. The theory explicitly includes non-material object acquisition (e.g., interpersonal relationships) and non-purchasing behaviors (e.g., using gifts) as subjects of materialism research. While this benefits materialism research by expanding its scope, it simultaneously makes materialism less easily understood. If any behavior that constructs and maintains the self through symbolic consumption can be considered materialistic, does it become identity goal pursuit theory rather than the identity

goal pursuits theory of materialism? For example, to maintain and enhance positive self-concept, achieving beauty through surgery is more materialistic, while dieting and exercising are less materialistic. But what if after dieting and exercising, one posts photos and videos of oneself on social networking sites? Is this materialistic or non-materialistic? The pursuit of identity goals is a common phenomenon, and with the rise of materialistic culture, using materialistic means to pursue identity goals may become increasingly common. Future research should combine these specific materialistic phenomena to explore in detail which characteristics of the self and which situational factors prompt people to adopt materialistic approaches to pursue self-identity.

5. Summary and Outlook

“The self is the center of an individual’s psychological universe.”—William James

This paper argues that self-concept is a thread running through materialism research, and scholars’ thinking about materialism has always been closely connected to thinking about materialists’ self-concepts. By reviewing extensive research, this paper demonstrates that materialists’ self-concepts exhibit low self-evaluation (low self-esteem, high contingent self-esteem) and inconsistent self-knowledge (low self-concept clarity, high explicit-implicit self-esteem discrepancy, high self-discrepancy). Two recently emerged theories—the escape theory of materialism and the identity goal pursuits theory of materialism—take self-concept as the theoretical core and attempt to integrate existing materialism research. This paper argues that the self is not only a very basic but also a very central topic in psychology. It can be said that few topics in social psychology are not connected to the self in one way or another. The self field has accumulated numerous concepts, theories, methods, and studies that can all be borrowed for materialism research.

However, both existing research evidence and the two newly emerged integrative theories basically adopt the theoretical narrative of “self-deficiency → discomfort → materialism → self-deficiency.” That is, some deficiency in self-concept, whether low self-evaluation or inconsistent self-knowledge, creates individual discomfort, which then prompts individuals to adopt materialism; on the other hand, after adopting materialism, individuals not only fail to eliminate the discomfort caused by self-deficiency but actually worsen the situation, further lowering self-evaluation and creating more inconsistent self-knowledge. Therefore, in the literature reviewed in this paper, researchers repeatedly verify three relationships: (1) the positive correlation between self-deficiency and materialism, (2) self-deficiency causing materialism, and (3) materialism causing self-deficiency. The problem with this approach is that although different self-concepts of materialists all cause discomfort, this line of thinking is too general. Future research should deeply analyze the specific effects of these different self-concepts and the possible connections between them. Specifically, future research can develop in the following directions.

5.1 Distinctions Between Different Self-Concepts of Materialists

The developmental trend in self-concept research is that scholars first focused on content attributes and later began to focus on structural attributes (Sun, Qiu, & Wu, 2007). Borrowing theoretical resources related to self-concept structure could undoubtedly bring great innovative value to research on materialists' self-concepts. For example, structural attributes of the self include both diversity and unity. Existing research has mainly focused on unity aspects such as self-concept clarity and self-discrepancy, but unity also includes the concept of self-concept differentiation. Among structural aspects expressing self-concept diversity, self-concept compartmentalization and self-complexity have rarely been studied. Self-complexity theory posits that individuals differ in the complexity of their self-concept representations. Individuals with high self-complexity have self-concepts that include many different aspects, while those with low self-complexity have self-concepts that contain only a few highly interconnected aspects (Pilarska & Suchańska, 2015). For instance, low self-complexity is often associated with vulnerable self-concepts, which is precisely characteristic of materialists. Can we therefore infer that materialists have low self-complexity? Or, does self-complexity moderate the relationship between materialism and low self-esteem? That is, although materialism generally leads to low self-esteem, if self-complexity and self-esteem are independent, can self-complexity buffer the damaging effect of materialism on individuals' self-esteem? Introducing self-complexity and other self-structure-related theories into materialism research is likely to yield many exciting discoveries.

Another example concerns research on materialists' self-discrepancy, which has only examined the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves. However, according to Higgins' s (1998) classic distinction, self-discrepancy also includes the discrepancy between actual self and ought self. The ideal self is who individuals hope and want to become, representing their hopes, goals, and demands for themselves; the ought self is who individuals feel they should and must become, representing their views of their obligations, duties, and responsibilities. Although both are self-discrepancies, they are qualitatively different and lead to different psychological and behavioral tendencies. Actual-ideal self discrepancy makes individuals feel depressed and leads them to adopt promotion-focused self-regulation strategies; actual-ought self discrepancy makes individuals feel anxious and leads them to adopt prevention-focused self-regulation strategies. Integrating these with materialism, we can predict that the former self-discrepancy will lead materialists to adopt more positive coping strategies, such as expecting shopping to bring more happiness; the latter self-discrepancy will lead materialists to adopt more negative coping strategies, such as expecting shopping to reduce more pain. Moreover, because the former appears more frequently in horizontal individualistic cultures and the latter more frequently in vertical collectivistic cultures (Kurman, Liem, Ivancovsky, Morio, & Lee, 2015), we can further examine how culture moderates the emotions experienced and strategies used for these two types of self-discrepancy. We can expect that

in horizontal individualistic cultures (e.g., Switzerland), materialists will focus more on actual-ideal self discrepancy, which will make them experience more depression, and they will be more likely to use shopping (e.g., luxury consumption, compulsive buying, compensatory buying) as a means to obtain happiness. In contrast, in vertical collectivistic cultures (e.g., China), materialists will focus on actual-ought self discrepancy, which will make them experience more anxiety, and they will be more likely to view shopping as a way to avoid pain.

5.2 Connections Between Different Self-Concepts of Materialists

What is the relationship between different aspects of materialists' self-concepts? Existing research shows that materialists have low self-evaluation and inconsistent self-knowledge. Studies have also shown that self-esteem and self-concept clarity may be reciprocally causal, with low self-esteem individuals having less clear self-concepts than high self-esteem individuals (Wu, Watkins, & Hattie, 2010; DeMarree & Rios, 2014). However, existing materialism research has examined materialists' self-evaluation and clarity of self-evaluation independently. Future research can build on these studies to explore the causal chain between materialism and these two factors. For example, does materialists' unclear self-concept lead to low self-esteem, which in turn leads to materialistic pursuit? Or are self-concept clarity and low self-esteem two independent pathways to materialism? Examining these questions has important practical significance for materialism intervention, because only by identifying which factor is primary and more fundamental can we more effectively intervene in materialism and ultimately reduce individuals' materialism levels.

In conclusion, self-concept is an extremely valuable theoretical "goldmine" for understanding materialism research. The self-concept perspective also has the potential to become a new focus and theoretical growth point for materialism research, following classical perspectives such as personality, values, goals, and needs. Future research should continue to borrow existing self theories to promote understanding of materialists, while also enriching and developing existing self theories through the numerous phenomena of materialism. It should not only serve as a phenomenon field for testing self theories but should also develop materialism-specific self theories with domain characteristics. Particularly, if research can transcend the existing "self-deficiency" approach, self-based materialism research is expected to bring a new theoretical climax to the field of materialism.

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