

Materialism in America:  
The Repercussions of Materialism on Individuals and Society

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An obstacle challenging the American idea of equality since the early days of the nation is the gap between the affluent and the impoverished. The issue continues to persist in modern America as a consequence of materialistic ideals. The essence of materialism is that it constitutes living for the sole purpose of obtaining comfort from material goods and wealth (Dictionary.com unabridged, N.D, Def. 1). Materialism is inevitably on the rise, becoming an accepted belief for most American college students (Teicher, 2004, ¶ 11). But what are the ramifications of materialistic ideals on both individual lives and society as a whole? This paper will argue that the rise in materialism is a threat to modern American society, disrupting the education of children, significantly increasing the debt levels of college students, and creating avarice that separates the affluent and the impoverished in society as the rich pursue their materialistic goals. It is argued that materialism improves the economy, yet dangerous and significant side effects are ignored in these arguments. Materialism is a promise of contentment that very briefly fulfills its purpose (Landau, 2009, ¶ 3). After its limited use diminishes, citizens consume again, creating an endless cycle of buying that endangers the budgets of college students and adults (Teicher, 2004, ¶ 4). These values, taught to children by the media and their own peers, cause children to value objects more than personality and experience, stopping them from developing themselves for their future. Aside from individual lives, materialism harms society, as corporate leaders defy ethics and steal money in order to fulfill their own greed (Hartoonian, 2002, ¶ 6;23). By arguing the dangers of a materialistic society, this study hopes to initiate a solution to the problems created by such a society and attempt to put an end to greed, and thus an end to the separation between the rich and the poor.

Materialism is a threat to the next generation of Americans; every aspect of child education is being invaded by these values. Along with defocus on school work, children form relationships based on material objectives, and are excessively pressured to succeed financially in their future.

It is becoming increasingly easy for a child or an adolescent to become obsessed with material goods and wealth. Some companies now hire psychologists to discover effective ways to lure children into buying their products (Wolf, 1998, ¶ 2). The average child will have watched about one million television commercials by the time they turn 20 (Ibid , ¶ 22). More than 30,000 advertisements aimed towards children are sent out each day (Ibid, ¶ 5). Moreover, schools are now advertising products in order to gain funding from large corporations (Ibid). And those statistics are from 1998; with the rapidly increasing popularity of technology, it is becoming even easier today for companies to advertise to children. In fact, 98.5 percent of children in the United States watch television daily, almost guaranteeing that advertisement viewing has increased (Herrick KA, et. al, 2014, ¶ 1).

Obsessing over countless different products changes students' priorities from their schoolwork to finding ways to obtain these items. In most school societies, a majority of children are materialistic, and children from poor families cannot afford to buy the things needed to "fit in" socially. As a result, they could face bullying and social rejection for not having been able to catch up with the latest trends (Kopkowski, 2006, ¶ 5). Children become jealous and self-pitying when others display expensive possessions that they cannot afford. As a result, some students spend up to thirty hours a week working to earn enough money to purchase these products ( Ibid, ¶ 3). This results in a lack of time to do ,and, for those who do care about their school performance, a tremendous amount of stress schoolwork (Kalenkoski, 2011, p. 17). A Miamisburg Ohio school teacher , Janet Joseph, also notes the behaviors of students in her class

when they are using their devices during lessons" "The iPods, the MP3s--always plugged in and always entertained is hard to compete with, 'says Janet Joseph, a Miamisburg, Ohio, high school teacher" ( Ibid, ¶ 4). During class times, obsession with phones distracts students from the lesson in progress. This new habit is becoming a sign that their constant need for a phone or electronic device is overcoming respect for the people around them. Students are prizing their hard earned possessions during important lessons, and have no study time due to hours of work every day, which can factor into lower school performance; it means that children value their phones and other material objects more than their education.

Obsession over money could drop you into a relationship where the “ love” that you give to your partner is derived only from the brands of clothes that he or she wears, or whether or not they have affluent parents. Some relationships are made for the sole purpose of obtaining gifts and money. The most probable outcome of this is a discovery of an undesirable personality trait, causing separation and then emotional turmoil.

The girl is the queen bee at school--she's beautiful, bright, and sets the trends among peers. To her great surprise and chagrin, she's just been dumped by her third boyfriend. She doesn't understand that the reason none of her boyfriends hang around for long is because she is so exhaustingly self-centered. As she cries in my office, her mom wraps an arm around her and says, "Don't worry, honey, we'll go shopping, you'll feel better." That's a parent who means well but who is not doing well for her child.

( Levine, 2007, ¶ 17)

A situation like a breakup is part of the learning experience of maturing; by the time children are old enough to be wed, they are expected to understand how to deal with relationship problems and how to be a good partner. Now that shopping has become a quick and easy remedy for all kinds of issues, children are not learning how to deal with their own problems, and they will make these same mistakes again even in marriage (Ibid, ¶ 18); which may be a factor in the 20% likelihood that a marriage will end in divorce in before 6 years (NCHS/CDC Public Affairs, 2010, ¶ 4). Instead, when a parent "fixes" a problem with shopping, they just push the problem away to be dealt with later, possibly at a more significant time. For example, these same traits of self-centeredness exhibited by the girl in the example above could be an even larger problem in marriage, and without dealing with the problem, it may persist until then. It also instills the idea that comfort comes from material goods into children. While materialism may seem like an easy way out of a problem, it hurts children in their future.

Twenty- two percent of adolescent girls that come from wealthy families are clinically depressed (Levine, 2007, ¶ 4); this may have to do with the pressure put on them to achieve wealth and "happiness" in their future. The ultimate goal in life for many children and their parents is to succeed financially, especially wealthy parents, who have experience with it themselves. Many American citizens believe that getting into a good school and getting good grades will lead to success and then happiness, and they believe that it is worth it to pressure our students now because of the benefit it might bring later. However, "Research has consistently shown that the college one attends has no relationship to how happy one will be in life, nor for that matter does it correlate with how much money one will make"(Ibid ,¶ 10). In fact, increasing pressure on students to

accomplish materialistic goals is actually negatively affecting children. Parental love is becoming conditional on performance in school and is becoming based on giving gifts as a reward (Ibid, ¶ 8). When children fail in school, their parents do not give them the expensive gifts, as a motivation for them to do better. Children, who become obsessed with these gifts, are afraid of doing poorly and making mistakes, desperately wanting to maintain the approval of their parents (Ibid, ¶ 14). This can lead them to cheat on exams; threatening their future integrity, and robbing them of the opportunity to learn from their mistakes (Ibid, ¶ 21). Competition with other students increases, and the school environment becomes less cooperative, as everyone is trying to perform better than each other. “But kids who are encouraged to adopt an ‘every man for himself’ attitude, come to see others, not as people like themselves, but as obstacles to be overcome. The ultimate form of materialism is when even people become objects”(Ibid.). These children will defy ethics and morals to overcome another person in school because they want to gain gifts promised to them, or even just love from their parents. Pressuring students to do better in school to succeed financially in life may seem like a good motivation for academic success, but in reality, it threatens their happiness and their morals, making materialism harmful to society when these children grow up.

Childhood is a time to learn from mistakes and become educated, preparing one for their adulthood. But materialism threatens the importance of this preparation; shopping has become a way to push away a problem and not learn from it. Students lose a sense of community with their peers when they are constantly challenged to overcome each other, and even love between people is being replaced by a love for money. Children are the future of society, and when they are corrupted by materialism, the future of our society is threatened. Yet this is only the

beginning; the problems grow to a tremendous size when these ideals are carried on to adulthood.

Many Americans believe that obsession over money and products is an ordinary phase for children that will vanish when they mature. Unfortunately, the corruption of materialistic ideals persists even into the college and the careers of most Americans (Teicher, 2004, ¶11). As materialistic children transition into adulthood, they face serious issues due to their ideals, including substantial amounts of debt that can cause worry and pressure and financial problems for students.

Materialism among college students is inevitably on the rise (Ibid). The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles suggested this increase when, in 2005, they found that seven out of ten college students think that it is “essential” to be “well off materially”, up from four out of ten in 1966 (Ibid). The author of the book Prodigal Sons & Material Girls: How Not to Be Your Child's ATM , Nathan Dungan, says, "Living within your means today is countercultural, especially for young people. It takes some real fortitude to be able to withstand the constant barrage of the marketing and the cultural pressure"(Ibid, ¶ 10). It is becoming normal to have these lifestyles; college students see all of their peers and people in advertisements being materialistic, so they assume that there is no harm in following their lead. Therefore, American society has developed a “consumer culture,” a culture in which reckless and wasteful spending is important, supplemented by strategic marketing, that keeps Materialism from diminishing after childhood.

Materialism can lead to college debt. More than two thirds of college students have credit cards, and one out of seven twenty one year olds has more than \$7,000 dollars in debt (Ibid, ¶ 12). A study sample of 299 students from a New Zealand University reveals some typical

behaviors involving the relationship between debt and materialism (Watson, 1998, ¶ 24). There is a tendency for people who are materialistic, according to the Richins and Dawson scale, to have a more positive attitude about debt (Ibid). Also, people with high levels of materialism have greater spending tendencies (Ibid, ¶ 23). Another study, comparing the financial knowledge of 1000 college students to that of 200 accounting professionals, concluded that materialistic people “are more likely to spend compulsively; are less likely to set and achieve ‘functional’ financial goals; and are more likely to spend, rather than save, a financial windfall”(Stone, 2008, ¶ 11). Also, products suitable for a college student are often expensive, and because they have a more positive attitude towards debt, they will disregard the high cost. Students do not know how to manage their money or budgets, and so they might buy things that they know they cannot afford. Even though there is no proof that debt is a direct effect of Materialism, due to the fact that materialistic people have negative behaviors that could lead to debt, it can be concluded that materialistic college students will have more debt.

More debt can cause problems for students. An increased amount of debt means little control over their money. They may not be able to afford another year of college, or required textbooks if all of their money goes towards paying back debt. Again, the issue of work intervening with studies arises as students try to pay back their debts. Because materialistic people are more optimistic about debt, they may not even worry about it until they are faced with their fees, and are subsequently forced out of college with the burden of debt, so much so that it could take 4 to 5 years of work revenue to pay off (Teicher, 2004, ¶ 15). They might never learn from their mistakes, continue to be materialistic and even spend their whole lives paying off the debt; as a result, they may not be able to save for retirement. A 25 year old, Kimberly Halbach is already advised to save for retirement, even though she struggles with \$30,000 dollars in debt;



she tries to save a little each month, but there are still 40 percent of students who do not contribute to any savings account (Fetterman, 2006, ¶ 20-22). Students who have everything paid for by their parents, and are materialistic, have it even worse, because by the time they get out of school, they will not have learned that reckless spending has these negative effects. In other words, they may face these consequences later on, meaning that their materialistic values could translate into buying lavish houses and expensive cars, with little worry about the resulting debt. Due to their ignorant and reckless spending caused by materialistic ideals, many college students face these desperate and hopeless situations once they get out of school.

Debt can also pressure and reprimand students, distracting them from their school work. When students realize the ramifications of their increasing debt, they worry about how they could ever pay it off, putting them under extreme stress. 30 percent of these students say that they constantly worry about their debt, including 29 year old Heather Schopp, who says "I have nightmares. I dream I'm on a hot-air balloon, hanging on for dear life" (Ibid, ¶ 6-7). This constant anxiety can distract students from their school work, make it even more difficult to get past college and successfully pursue a career in the future, and make it harder to pay off debts. Students can feel very threatened and even lose hope or motivation to continue their education, fearing that its tuition will only make their debt increase. As a result, debt can potentially ruin the education, career, and lives of many Americans.

The "consumerist culture" that materialism creates is a serious threat to the lives of college students. The debt that it makes prevents the survival and success of many students. Even worse, this materialism does not just affect individual lives, but as more and more people fall into this type of lifestyle, the status of the rich and the poor of American society as a whole is affected.

Materialism can destroy the lives of many Americans, but other Americans live without the direct influence of it. Still, the individual ideals of materialistic people disrupt society as a whole. Materialism is a significant root to the separation between the rich and the poor in society, due to greedy corporations bypassing ethics in an effort to gain more money.

A different kind of materialism is obsession over money. These people can end up being more wealthy than others because they do not waste their money on products and are careful not to fall into debt. Business owners who obsess over money often use many different strategies to get as much money as possible from their customers. They could also attack the free market system if they destroy other fair and honest companies by outperforming them with the help of their unfair practices. They could end up valuing money more than they value people and other corporation owners (Hartoonian, 2002, ¶23). This could lead them to see people as objects to overcome and obtain money from, and worst of all, it can allow them to develop immense amounts of greed (Ibid). Companies owned by people like these could use unethical methods to obtain money (Ibid). They will not care about their employees and they will treat them however they want to, even if it is unfair, just to make more money. As said by Ken Silverstein of Forbes when talking about Enron, a company that went bankrupt due to a lack of ethics, “‘Honesty’ and ‘decency’ have typically been applied in interpersonal communications. But such characteristics can get lost during business dealings” ( Silverstein, 2013,¶16). The materialistic desire for power and wealth that comes with defying ethics was enough to compel even the most honest executives to make unethical decisions. Therefore, unethical business practices and greed could be a result of materialism.

Over the past few decades, there have been many examples of business scandals. For example, companies like Enron drove most of its profits towards its CEOs, while it lowered employee

wages and laid off workers with little compensation (Ibid, ¶6). Right before its bankruptcy, executives of the corporation raised their bonuses to fifty-five million dollars ( Weinberg, 2001,¶1) . On the other hand, more than 4,000 employees were fired and given only \$4,500 in compensation ( Ibid, ¶6). These workers may have not been materialistic, yet they still faced the consequences of materialism because of the greed of the company. Modern day corporations are also displaying this level of materialistic greed. “Wage theft” is becoming increasingly popular, as about 89 percent of workers in fast- food chains have experienced it ( Gebreselassie , 2014, ¶ 2). It includes actions like “. . . forcing employees to work through required rest breaks or before punching in and after punching out, not paying time and a half for overtime, deducting from wages for mandatory job-related expenses”( Ibid,¶ 7) This removes about \$2,600 dollars a year from the average fast-food worker’s already low pay ( Ibid, ¶ 6) The worst part is, in chains like McDonald's and Burger King, these have all become accepted “business strategies” (Ibid). Therefore, companies have been cutting from payments and their workforce so that they could obtain more money and satisfy their materialistic greed.

The greed of companies could negatively affect our entire society. When more companies make cuts and steal from employees and when they do this in greater magnitudes, it will be much more difficult to maintain a middle class status, because of how easy it is becoming to get unemployed or receive wage cuts that could make it hard for many Americans to support themselves and their family. These individual people might be the ones suffering, but the remaining members of the middle class have to pay the public assistance tax, making them lose even more money. At the same time, the rich owners of companies will just become richer. There will be less people in the middle class, and the rich will have more money, meaning that there will be a wider gap between the rich and the rest of the population. Not only that, but the

ability of large companies to undermine the law through these treatments of workers proves that more terrible scandals are possible if a business has enough greed and enough power. Rising poverty levels have other negative effects on society and even the economy. For one, children coming from families in poverty who happen to have been able to make a positive impact on society will have their abilities wasted ( Brown, 2011, ¶ 6) . In fact, only six percent of children from poor families make it into the upper class, and because of the risky middle class, the other 94 percent might end up in poverty again ( Ibid, ¶ 9). It also weakens our democracy because the poor can often be uneducated , and so they could easily be influenced by media or other sources about how to vote ( Ibid, ¶ 14). Finally, it costs the economy more than 500 billion dollars annually in lost productivity, increased health care costs, and higher criminal justice funds for child poverty alone, meaning that the few million extra dollars in the pockets of CEOs could cost the economy billions ( Ibid, ¶ 10) Therefore, the widening income gap has some potentially dangerous effects on society.

It is thought that Materialism only negatively affects the people who act on these negative ideals. However, people who are obsessed with money implement their greed into stealing money from others. The hard working middle class citizens grow poorer as the rich put their hard earned money into their own pockets, creating a separation between the wealthy and the impoverished in society and thus creating economic inequality in America.

Materialism has many effects that are harmful to society and the people living society, no matter what age they are. Students miss out on valuable education because they have to work and are excessively pressured, preventing children from learning from mistakes and becoming ready for their adulthood. College students are pushed towards dropping out due to financial pressure, ruining the future of these hard working achievers. A materialistic society as a whole is in danger

because the rich ignore ethics and create more impoverished people with their policies. Others argue that materialism and consumerism “helps the economy” and that it gives money to companies who will use their money to benefit society. This would be true if the materialism was not excessive and obsessive. However, materialism is widely regarded as essential by college students and adults, and thus its impact on raising debt amounts could harm the entire economy. Also, the lack of education that can result from child materialism can affect how many people have good jobs and success, and further harm the economy. Materialistic CEOs will channel profits to themselves instead of using them to benefit society. By realizing that materialism has negative effects on society, this study hopes to encourage more reform and limitation on advertising and other ways that children adopt materialism. It also hopes to inspire the creation of education programs that will teach children that true love, experiences and benefitting society is more fulfilling and will give them true happiness. Hopefully, these efforts will be able to put an end to financial pressures in students, an end to greed, and abolish poverty.

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