Using Motivation Theory to Develop a Transformative Consumer Research Agenda for Reducing Materialism in Society

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Materialism represents a pervasive value in contemporary society and one that is associated with multiple negative consequences. Although a considerable amount of research has documented these consequences, little research has examined how materialism levels might be reduced. This article presents a research agenda for reducing materialism. The authors begin with an overview of the motivation theory of materialism, a humanistic perspective that holds that materialism is often an outward manifestation of deeper unmet psychological needs and insecurities. Thus, research that contributes to reducing materialism should do so by addressing these more fundamental inadequacies. To this end, the authors outline three emergent research areas that have potential to reduce materialism by enhancing self-esteem—namely, experiential consumption, prosocial giving, and healthy social development in children. The authors review research in each area, consider its relevance to the materialism question, and propose future research directions. They also present the public policy implications of these discussions.

Keywords: transformative consumer research, materialism, well-being, happiness, consumer welfare

Materialism is one of the central features and most challenging issues of modern social life. A great portion of people's time and energy is dedicated to acquiring, possessing, and thinking about material things (Cross 2000; Kasser 2002; Roberts 2011; Sheldon and Kasser 2008). Although many people acknowledge that such material preoccupations are unhealthy, they find them difficult to resist all the same (Mick 1996). As a result, materialism touches all levels of society, from diminished personal happiness (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002, 2011; Richins and Dawson 1992), to diminished empathy for others (Levine 2006), to diminished concern about the environment (Good 2007; Kasser and Sheldon 2000). Although a considerable body of research has documented the negative aspects of materialism, research on specific ways to reduce it is almost nonexistent. Similarly, when public policies and other initiatives have been devised to try to combat materialism (e.g., antimaterialism media campaigns), the results have been lackluster.

The purpose of this article is to develop an agenda for research on reducing materialism. We adopt the position that materialism, defined as the centrality of material objects and possessions in one's life, is fundamentally an outward manifestation of deeper unmet needs and psychological insecurities (see Kasser 2002; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009). Thus, any attempt to reduce materialism that fails to consider these deeper causes is likely to

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meet limited success. Part of the reason public policies and other initiatives intended to reduce materialism have not been effective is that they tend to be directed at surface aspects of the issue (e.g., leveling consumption taxes, increasing media literacy) and do little to address the underlying insecurities that drive materialism in the first place. Only by focusing on the deeper motivational bases of materialism can researchers hope to achieve a lasting reduction of its prevalence in society. To this end, this article examines three emergent areas of consumer research that hold promise to strengthen core aspects of the self and reduce people's need to rely on material objects. The three areas are experiential consumption, prosocial spending behaviors, and healthy social development in children. Each of these areas has the potential to strengthen core aspects of the individual, reduce insecurity, and, we posit, reduce materialism as well. At the same time, each area has its own challenges, and their relevance to materialism research has not been extensively considered. Thus, one objective of this article is to integrate these three research areas into the materialism literature. However, because all three areas pertain to the underlying motives believed to give rise to materialism, we begin with an overview of the motivational perspective.

Motivation Theory of Materialism

Although multiple theories of materialism have been developed over the years, a major perspective is that materialism is the product of a failure to meet higher-order psychological needs, such as the development of a healthy self-concept and the formation of close loving relationships with others (see Kasser 2002; Kasser and Ryan 1993; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009; Wong, Rindfleisch, and Burroughs 2003). When one or more of these core needs go unfulfilled, a sense of insecurity develops, which, according to this perspective, some people then try to placate with material objects. Unfortunately, because inanimate objects tend to make poor surrogates for meeting higher-order needs (e.g., they cannot reciprocate love and affection), their allure is often falsely placed. Thus, although materialistic people believe possessions will make them happier (Hudders and Pandelaere 2011), the opposite often turns out to be true.

The causal direction of the relationship and even the theory itself is sometimes questioned, owing in part to the difficulty of establishing causal evidence for a construct that develops over such a long period. Nonetheless, the motivational perspective is among the most influential accounts of materialism. It offers an extremely compelling (and contemporary) extension of the humanistic explanations of behavior that dominated psychology for more than half a century. Also more than any other explanation of materialism, the empirical evidence consistently points to this essential relationship. As with any useful theory, the motivation theory of materialism explains disparate pieces of data by bringing findings together in a succinct and elegant way. Thus, when taken individually, prior findings might be discounted as "only correlational" or "too narrow"; taken together, the data offer a compelling account of materialism's underlying impetus. It also happens to be an issue that dominates much of modern social life. Other perspectives of materialism, such as media influence theories, tend to be of a more limited scope and may even be subsumed within the motivational perspective. For example, many researchers contend that television and the Internet promote materialism. However, implicit in these accounts is an acknowledgment that media content promotes comparative insecurity (not attractive enough, not successful enough) that advertised products and brands can then redress (i.e., materialism). Given this, it is important to consider the historical roots of the motivational perspective.

Materialism's Humanistic Roots

Psychologists have long sought to uncover the universal needs that motivate human desires and behaviors (i.e., the seminal needs from which all others stem). The three most relevant needs theories to materialism research are self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985; Ryan and Deci 2000), acquired needs theory (McClelland 1987), and Maslow's needs hierarchy (Maslow 1970). Though somewhat different in their exact specification and structure, all three theories coalesce around the idea that there is a limited set of core needs that transcend individuals, and when one or more of these core needs go unmet, a state of psychological discomfort and insecurity ensues. When bringing these theories together, the needs most commonly described in conjunction with materialism are (1) tangible needs (physical and economic security), (2) self needs (assurance of a meaningful and valuable life; related to notions of autonomy, efficacy and creativity), and (3) social needs (the need to form close personal relationships with others). Recently, research in terror management theory (Arndt et al. 2004; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2004) has added a fourth focus: existential needs (a person's need to believe that his or her existence transcends the physical world, related to notions of spirituality and a higher reality). Again, according to the humanistic view, when one or more of these fundamental needs goes unmet, the person feels insecure and motivated to reduce this psychological angst.

In contemporary society, a common route to try to assuage this insecurity is through material objects. For example, people who feel inadequate in terms of their personal and professional competencies may try to compensate by purchasing a high-status automobile or a power business suit (Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Sivanathan and Pettit 2010; Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). Unfortunately, although such reactions may be common, they are usually not effective. Inanimate objects are incapable of providing emotional support, empathy, affection, and any number of other requisites of human flourishing (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Kasser 2002). Nonetheless, materialistic people genuinely believe that fulfillment is for sale. As a result, they often find themselves isolated, disillusioned, and unhappy (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Kasser 2002; Richins and Dawson 1992).

For the reasons we outlined previously, most researchers consider materialism part of the dark side of consumer behavior. Nonetheless, questions remain as to how much materialism is the product of insecurity versus other factors, whether materialism is always maladaptive, and, again, in which direction the relationship primarily flows. It is probably fair to say that not all insecurity leads to materialism, and materialism is almost certainly a product of factors other than insecurity. Thus, we do not wish to imply in the following discussion that our view provides a panacea for materialism, but rather to point out that our approach holds potential for addressing at least a major component of it.

Evidence Linking Insecurity to Materialism

Evidence for a relationship between insecurity and materialism comes from several sources depending on the type of insecurity considered. Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (2009) identify four principal types of insecurity that have been discussed in the literature: developmental insecurity, personal insecurity, social insecurity, and existential insecurity. Though related, each of these forms of insecurity seems to contribute somewhat differently to materialism.

Developmental Insecurity

As the term implies, developmental insecurity stems from early childhood experiences. All children exhibit a certain level of insecurity because their self-concept is formative, and many children form temporary object attachments in response. However, for some children this attachment becomes much more chronic, often in reaction to a lack of parental involvement. Because children lack the ability to function independently, they are highly reliant on their adult caregivers for protection and nurturance; when this base is shattered, it is intensely distressing to the child involved. The nature of this dynamic is outlined in attachment theory (Bowlby 1983), one of the most influential theories in the area of child development.

According to attachment theory, children require a secure parental base from which to explore and grow. When this base is missing or disrupted, the consequences can be profound and permanent. In these instances, children encounter a world that is hostile and menacing, and their natural response is to become withdrawn, at which point important aspects of self-development become arrested (Collins and Read 1990; Hazan and Shaver 1990). This represents an important precursor of materialism because children may turn to object relations as a replacement for human relations.

Although only a handful of studies have examined the connection between developmental insecurity and materialism, the findings generally support such a relationship. For example, Kasser et al. (1995) found that children raised by a cold and emotionally distal mother were more likely to exhibit materialistic values in adolescence. More recently, two studies by Chaplin and John have further reinforced this link. They first traced the natural development of self-esteem in children and found that materialism levels moved inversely with this esteem trajectory (Chaplin and John 2007). Although they initially focused on normal changes in children, they also found that experimentally bolstering self-esteem reduced the exhibition of material values (to the point that it eliminated any age-related differences). This experimental work is among the first to provide evidence that insecurity and materialism are causally related. Later, Chaplin and John (2010) found that self-esteem was a key mediating link in the relationship between parental support and childhood materialism as well as peer support and childhood materialism.

Finally, in a natural experiment, Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton (1997) found that children who experienced the divorce of their parents while growing up were more likely to exhibit heightened materialism levels as young adults. They further found that this relationship was mediated by a decline in developmental resources such as love, emotional support, and parental guidance. This decline in intangible resources is perhaps not surprising given the high rates of parental absenteeism by at least one spouse following the divorce. In interpreting these findings, Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton offered that many parents feel extremely guilty about the divorce and may try to placate their children with gifts and treats, a practice that only serves to further reinforce the equation of love with things.

Personal Insecurity

As with younger children, adults are not immune to the materialistic effects of insecurity. In one of the earliest studies to implicate a connection between these constructs, Richins (1994) found that materialistic people were significantly more likely to look to material possessions to enhance their appearance and project a more confident self-image. They were also more likely to use material objects as a means of asserting control. Given that vanity and control are frequently implicated in connection with insecurity, it could be reasonably surmised that materialistic people try to fill gaps in their sense of self with things. Although Richins did not specifically offer any hypotheses along these lines, other research supports this interpretation. For example, Netemeyer, Burton, and Lichtenstein (1995) found a significant correlation between vanity and the success dimension of materialism, and Deci and Ryan (1991) found that people who fail to meet their core psychological needs are more likely to seek out extrinsic reinforcement such as fame and money.

Two studies show further empirical evidence of an adult link between personal insecurity and materialism. Troisi, Christopher, and Marek (2006) documented a significant link between personal insecurity (i.e., feelings of incompetence and self-doubt) and materialism ($r = .28$, $p < .01$). Although this study was correlational, work by Chang and Arkin (2002) provided experimental evidence of this connection. These latter authors first measured chronic levels of self-doubt and split study participants into two groups (high and low). They then randomly assigned half the participants to a self-doubt manipulation, having them memorize a word list containing insecurity concepts such as "uncertain," "insecure," and "doubtful." The dependent variable in the study was participants' state level of materialism. Although the manipulation did not produce an overall increase in materialism, it did significantly elevate materialism levels among those who were already chronically high in self-doubt. It seems that priming self-doubt activated existing feelings of personal inadequacy, which then produced the materialistic response.

Social Insecurity

While some people experience insecurity related to the self, others experience insecurity related to those around them. Social insecurity is a discomfort with social interaction and being in public spaces. This form of insecurity has received far less attention in the materialism literature than personal insecurity but seems to follow a similar trajectory. Among the few studies to examine this relationship, Schroeder and Dugal (1995) found a correlation of .34 ($p < .01$) between social insecurity and materialism, and Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (2009) found a correlation of .49 ($p < .01$). These correlations are actually somewhat higher than the correlations found for personal insecurity. This is perhaps not surprising considering that materialistic people tend to be heavily self-focused rather than other-focused. However, this is also an area in which additional research is needed. Does social anxiety lead people to become withdrawn and more materialistic, or do highly materialistic people neglect social interaction and eventually become uncomfortable around others? The answer is probably a bit of both, but the primary direction of the relationship remains to be clarified by future research.

Existential Insecurity

A final area of research that has begun investigating the link between insecurity and materialism is that of existential insecurity (Arndt et al. 2004). Existential insecurity reflects one's fear of mortality. Prior research has argued that death is the penultimate fear, as there are few more unsettling notions than the possibility that one's entire existence may be moot. For some, this thought is utterly terrifying (Rindfleisch and Burroughs 2004; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski 2004). Humans are uniquely capable of contemplating the existential aspects of their existence and constructing elaborate defense mechanisms in response. In contemporary society, one such response is materialism, as some people apparently use material objects in an attempt to achieve a form of secular immortality (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009).

One of the first research projects to propose and test this premise was provided by Kasser and Sheldon (2000). They experimentally manipulated mortality salience and then examined its effect on a host of materialism-related variables, including greed, financial strivings, conservation behaviors, and a desire to make indulgent purchases. As expected, those with heightened fears about their own mortality exhibited an increase in materialistic inclinations, such as a desire to make large purchases, while also exhibiting diminished concern about the environment.

Subsequent research has continued to expand on Kasser and Sheldon's (2000) initial findings. For example, Mandel and Smeesters (2008) found that mortality salience stimulates overconsumption, but only among people with low self-esteem. Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (2009) found that materialistic people were more likely to form close connections with brands in response to existential insecurity. This latter finding is noteworthy in that the effect was significant even after the authors controlled for the other forms of insecurity previously described.

In summary, across a variety of forms (e.g., developmental, personal, social, existential) and approaches (e.g., correlational, experimental), research has consistently found a connection between insecurity and materialism. The robustness of this connection suggests that researchers interested in reducing materialism would do well to begin by focusing on the insecurities underlying this response. In light of the evidence, it is somewhat surprising that previous efforts to reduce materialism have not focused more heavily on this connection.

Previous Efforts to Reduce Materialism

Many attempts have been made to try to combat materialism levels in society, mainly through media campaigns and governmental interventions. Some of the more popular media campaigns include "Buy Nothing Day," "Turn Off Your TV Week," and "International Downshifting Week." In addition to these campaigns, myriad credit counseling and financial literacy programs have been developed to help consumers avoid overspending. Finally, governments have become involved, passing laws and regulations intended to counter the effects of materialism. The best known of these include legislation designed to limit children's exposure to advertising and other forms of marketing promotion (though the effectiveness of these programs is questionable). Some governments have also begun to levy special taxes, such as excess consumption taxes, intended to reduce the use of resources, and luxury taxes, intended to help redistribute wealth in society (Bagwell and Bernheim 1996).

Unfortunately, despite these many and varied efforts, materialism is spreading in society, not receding. It is our contention that these programs largely fail because they do not address the underlying insecurities that give rise to excess consumption behaviors in the first place. Consumers can be educated about the dangers of purchasing on credit and laws can be passed that penalize consumption behaviors, but unless the underlying insecurities that motivate materialism in the first place are removed, it is inevitable that these desires will simply manifest in other ways. As a case in point, while excess consumption taxes undoubtedly make consumption more expensive for those at the top of the economic ladder, an unanticipated consequence of such taxes is that they also give increased moral license to engage in the behavior, as the people believe they have paid for the privilege of consuming more than their rightful share (Levitt and Dubner 2005). Note also that given that status goods require a certain degree of scarcity, limiting their prevalence through taxes or other artificial means may actually increase their appeal, an outcome that would be exactly the opposite of the law's intent.

A similar observation can be made for luxury taxes. While such taxes may contribute to the equalization of wealth across society, they do nothing to reduce material desires, and they may actually promote them. Recently, Ordabayeva and Chandon (2011) found that narrowing the wealth gap may actually increase materialistic motivations because of what they termed the "leapfrog" effect. They argued (and showed) that if the band of wealth is narrowed in society, the incentives to behave materialistically and engage in acts of conspicuous consumption actually increase. This is because one leapfrogs over a larger portion of the population for the same spend. Such behaviors require that people define their self-worth in terms of what they possess compared with others. Remove the comparison, and the behavior stops. Unfortunately, it is unclear how any tax would accomplish this. Although it would be unfair to suggest that the efforts just described have made no positive difference, it is clear that some new thinking is needed. Fortunately, several recent areas of consumer research inquiry offer novel approaches to the materialism question.

Refocus on Materialism's Underlying Motives

If materialism is predominately a product of insecurity, activities that bolster one's self-confidence and self-esteem should reduce materialism. In other words, if people feel good about themselves, they should feel less inclined to rely on external objects for reassurance and validation. Thus, activities and behaviors that encourage intrinsic growth and promote a greater self-awareness should reduce materialism. Three recent focuses in consumer research hold promise to address materialism at this level: experiential consumption, prosocial giving, and the development of self-esteem in children.

At first glance, this seems a rather disparate set of topics. However, what make them interesting are the different levels of analysis they evoke. While experiential consumption and prosocial behaviors tend to engender a more individual-level focus, questions related to the development of children raise a more societal-based approach, including public policy considerations. Because reducing materialism will ultimately require change at both the individual and societal levels, these topics provide a broad canvas from which to approach the materialism question. They can also be viewed as three different types of "investments" that can be made in strengthening personal and social welfare.

Investing in Experiences

Recent research has begun investigating the superiority of experiential purchases over tangible goods when it comes to promoting psychological health and well-being (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011; Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Experiential goods may be superior to tangible goods in this regard for many reasons. While material purchases tend to be static in nature, experiences can facilitate discovery, mastery, and interpersonal connection, all of which are essential to personal growth. Experiential purchases are also more resistant to hedonic adaptation than tangible purchases (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2006). In other words, while the value and benefits of material purchases tend to fade rather quickly, the benefits of experiential purchases are more lasting because the experience can be anticipated and then later relived many times over in memory. Finally, but not inconsequentially, consuming experiences is often more ecologically sustainable than consuming tangible goods.

However, the question remains whether experiences are universally superior. The efficacy and benefits of experiences are likely to vary widely from one instance to the next, depending on the orientation of the person and aspects of the experience itself. For example, Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) found that most people report greater happiness from relaxing than from working. Yet some people clearly derive great satisfaction from their work, and few people would be content to be idle all the time. Moreover, just because an activity is enjoyable does not necessarily mean it is beneficial. Some of the most valuable experiences are wrought in difficulty and struggle. Thus, it is not always easy to know when experiences are going to benefit the person and when they will not. Finally, the line between products and experiences is not always clear. Is a boat a status object or a conduit of family experience (Carter and Gilovich 2010; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003)? The often subjective distinction between the tangible and experiential aspects of consumption further complicates separating the beneficial aspects of one from the other.

Fortunately, research demonstrates that people can consistently differentiate between these two forms of consumption. They can also differentiate among different types of experiences and appreciate that there is a fundamental distinction between watching television and hiking a mountain trail (Carter and Gilovich 2010). It is this extreme variance in experiences that provides opportunity for research to explore when experiential consumption will be beneficial, particularly in relation to tangible goods. To better identify areas in which further research might be directed on this question, we first review the limited research in this area.

Prior Research on Experiential Purchases

In one of the early studies of experiential consumption, Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) observed that a chief difference between experiential purchases and material purchases is that experiential purchases are made with the primary intention of acquiring life experiences and understandings. In other words, experiences are something people live "through" rather than "with." In this respect, they may be naturally amenable to personal growth. In support of this view, Van Boven and Gilovich found that the majority of participants in a study viewed experiential purchases as more wholesome and self-defining than material purchases. Given that a person's experiences are a gateway between the outer world and the inner self, this recognition is probably not surprising. Although engaging in different experiences does not automatically ensure personal growth and healthy development, it is difficult to imagine this growth coming without them. Thus, spending money on experiences instead of things may provide a partial antidote to the insecurities that form the basis of materialism (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011).

Another way experiential goods seem superior to tangible goods is that experiential purchases tend to be more resistant to hedonic adaptation (i.e., the natural loss in positive affect with time) than tangible goods (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Sheldon and Lyubomirsky 2006). Any purchase (tangible or intangible) eventually loses its ability to provide pleasure and enjoyment as the person adapts to the stimulus (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999). The rate of adaptation is important because, to recapture the pleasurable aspects of consumption, new purchases are eventually required. Because tangible goods tend to lose their appeal relatively quickly, materialistic people may become trapped on a hedonic treadmill, constantly searching for the next thing to buy in an attempt to attain an inner satisfaction that is always just out of reach. Conversely, because experiences can be anticipated, savored, and mentally relived, they can provide enjoyment and psychological sustenance well outside the bounds of immediate consumption (Dunn, Gilbert, and Wilson 2011).

Finally, experiences are meant to be shared. A long history of research documents the essential role of social interaction with human flourishing. Although experiences can be consumed in isolation (and tangible goods can be consumed jointly), the interactive nature of experiences lends itself to social exchange. This is true in terms of both the actual consumption of the experience and its subsequent recollection (Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich 2010). In short, people can vicariously relive experiences with others. Thus, it is not surprising that Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich (2010) found that people enjoyed interacting with a social partner more if the discussion centered on experiential purchases than material ones. They also found that during social exchanges, people who were perceived as materialistic were less socially desirable than those perceived as focused on other areas of their lives. Thus, both interpersonal attraction and the quality of social interaction may depend in part on whether one favors an experiential orientation.

However, as we previously intimated, the quality and value of experiences is likely to vary widely. Thus, while Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman (2009) found that consuming experiences was often more beneficial than material consumption, they also found that experiential purchases had greater potential to cause harm. In other experiential purchases is the proverbial "sword that cuts both ways"; when they turn out well, they can be extremely beneficial, but when they turn out badly, they can be quite damaging. Given this duality, it is important to identify the conditions that favor positive outcomes over negative ones. Unfortunately, research to date has not ventured far into this question. This is an opportunity for further research.

Further Research on Experiential Purchases

Motivations for Experiential Purchases

As we previously noted, experiential purchases are often made with the primary intent to acquire new understandings and sometimes even life transformations. However, not all experiences reflect such intrinsic motives. People can also engage in experiences for extrinsic reasons. For example, a trip to the Amazon would certainly be an extraordinary opportunity for enrichment and growth for almost anyone, particularly those seeking self-knowledge and greater connection with the natural environment. However, such a trip is also likely to be expensive and out of reach for all but the most dedicated (or affluent) of travelers. This creates the possibility that such a trip might be undertaken for intrinsic reasons, or "materialistic" ones, such as boasting to friends and neighbors about the expensive vacations they can afford. Thus, even experiences can be materialistically consumed, depending on one's underlying motives.

Nowhere is this distinction more compellingly portrayed than in Jon Krakauer's (1997) bestselling book *Into Thin Air*, which documents the exploits of a wealthy (and largely unqualified) clientele's attempt to climb to the summit of Mt. Everest. In the book, he describes one New York socialite as having to literally be carried up the final stages of the mountain all while live blogging to friends and followers back home about her supposed "conquest." Some in the expedition would pay the ultimate price for this self-centeredness. Thus, while there is little doubt that experiences can play an important role in self-growth, they also have the potential to do just the opposite. Yet current research takes a rather simplistic view of experiences, tending to presume that they innately have value when this may not always be the case.

Research on Different Forms of Experience

Although the motivations for entering into an experience may be important, this is not to say that some types of experiences are not naturally more amenable to growth than others. Research has not ventured far into this issue, but there seems to be several defining characteristics that render experiences more (or less) beneficial.

Perhaps the foremost thing that differentiates one experience from another (and many tangible purchases as well) is the level of engagement required. Attending the theater may provide a valuable cultural experience, but it is probably not as transformative as actually participating in a play. Thus, when researchers describe the beneficial aspects of experiences, they tend to evoke experiences that are highly active in nature (e.g., travel, outdoor activities) while often neglecting more passive experiences (e.g., watching television, sitting at a computer). Yet it may be this engagement that really differentiates experiences, both from each other and from more tangible purchases. It is quite possible to purchase a tangible good and then leave it on the shelf virtually untouched. It is generally not possible to "shelve" experiences in this way—one either consumes an experience in full or does not consume it at all. Moreover, many experiences require intense focus on the part of the consumer, further ensuring a heightened level of engagement. These varied observations all suggest that situating experiences on a continuum of engagement may be a way for further research to better distinguish when experiences are likely to be beneficial, as well as understand their relative value in comparison with tangible goods, though the definition of engagement may need to include both mental and physical forms.

Suggesting that passive activities, such as watching television, are not beneficial is hardly revelatory, but research could also extend the notion of engagement to include challenge. Research in humanistic psychology has long known the importance of challenge (and mastery) to promoting personal growth and heightened self-awareness (e.g., Deci and Ryan 1985). Tangible products may initially present challenges, but when they are mastered, the interactions tend to become rote. In contrast, experiences are more likely to offer varied outcomes that lead to new challenges. For example, as proficient as one might become in mountaineering, there will always be new technical obstacles to overcome and new mountains to discover. In this regard, experiences that involve difficulties and even setbacks (within reason) may prove more beneficial in the long run than challenges that are relatively easily overcome. We raise this point to emphasize how little research has tried to differentiate among different types of experiences and the underlying dimensions that contribute to growth. Finally, the varied nature of experiences creates the potential for the experiential area to expand with the person, fitting into long-term life projects and life goals (be it travel, the arts, or a hobby). Tangible goods do not tend to be nearly so malleable or transcendent in this regard, though some of the most timeless physical products, such as Legos, do present variety in outcomes, opportunities for mastery, and creative expression. One author who is a parent actually finds it somewhat disheartening that Legos are now marketed heavily as kits, with complete instructions and prefabricated parts. In the early days, Legos came as sets, and it was left to the child's imagination to decide what to build and how.

Research on the Social Dimension of Experiences

Another characteristic that is likely to differentiate experiences from tangible purchases is along social lines. Research has long known the importance of social relationships to healthy development and psychological well-being. Experiences can connect people in ways that tangible goods usually cannot. The only way tangible goods can connect people is through communal consumption, which translates into a form of shared experience.

However, although experiences may be amenable to social interaction, some experiences clearly lend themselves to such exchange more than others. Experiences that require some form of cooperation and interpersonal trust may represent better growth opportunities than those that can be accomplished in isolation. Here, again, the lack of research presents difficulties in making such claims at anything more than an anecdotal level. Perhaps it is a balance of social interaction and personal responsibility that is needed for optimal personal growth. It is difficult to say considering that there is almost no research on these types of issues. What we do know is that materialism is a self-focused value, and relationships with things make poor substitutes for relationships with others.

Finally, there is little research on how to increase exposure to experiences. Engagement in experiences will result from a complex amalgam of individual motivations and environmental conditions, yet all the research in the world on the benefits of experiences will be for naught if it does not concurrently find ways to increase participation. This stream of research would seem particularly relevant to programs and policies aimed at children (described in more detail in a subsequent section). In summary, it is simplistic to suggest that experiences are superior to tangible goods without qualifying when and how. However, there are enough upsides to experiences to make such research well worth the effort.

Investing in Others

If materialism is about possessiveness and nongenerosity (Belk 1985), then in many respects, giving (both of oneself and what one has) is the antithesis of materialism. By giving, one not only benefits the recipient but also builds the self. However, giving behaviors are complex, driven by a variety of motivations and producing a multitude of outcomes, not all positive.

Prior Research on Prosocial Spending

In examining the effects of giving behaviors on well-being, recent research has found that compared with spending on oneself, giving money to others produces a greater sense of fulfillment and stronger and more lasting positive emotions (Andreoni 1990; Liu and Aaker 2008). Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) surveyed people on their income levels, including how much money they typically spent on themselves and how much they gave away to charity each month. They also measured how happy these people were. They found that while spending on oneself led to no demonstrable increase in happiness, spending on others was positively related to happiness in the giver, and this effect was independent of the amount of money the person made. Importantly, the effects on happiness were causal. In a follow-up study, these same researchers gave money to people on the street around a Canadian university. Half the students were randomly told to spend the money on themselves, and half were told to spend it on someone else. When contacted about how they were feeling later in the day, those who had given the money away reported feeling happier than those who kept the money, despite their windfall. It might be argued that the benefits of prosocial spending are a phenomenon unique to wealthy countries, but this is not what these researchers found. When Aknin et al. (2011) moved their study from Canada to Uganda, a relatively poor country, the effect was essentially the same.

The exact reasons for this giving bonus are unclear, but a possible explanation may stem from the "ceiling effect" on happiness that exists for personal spending. Research shows that when essential needs have been addressed, increases in income and personal spending do little to enhance happiness and well-being because, again, higher-order needs cannot easily be addressed through material acquisitions (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2008; Myers 2008). In other words, because spending a little on oneself produces a small increase in happiness, people may be led to believe that a large increase in spending will produce an even larger boost in happiness, which is not the case. Prosocial spending seems not to be subject to this same cap, perhaps because spending on others promotes fulfillment at a higher level, such as increased social connection or a greater sense of efficacy. Further research is needed to clarify this effect.

Further Research on Prosocial Spending

Motivations for Giving

To this point, little research has tried to differentiate among the various motives for giving, yet these would seem to affect how beneficial such behaviors are (at least for the donor). Recent research has documented that even charitable giving can be "materialistic" if it is motivated by status gains or sexual prospects or simply represents a modern form of (reverse) conspicuous consumption (Griskevicius et al. 2007). Although such conspicuous giving may benefit others, it is unclear what it confers to the donor. On the one hand, we could make the argument that giving universally helps others and therefore makes one feel better about oneself, regardless of whether it is egoistically motivated. On the other hand, giving for extrinsic reasons, such as to gain social adoration, would only perpetuate, not resolve, whatever underlying insecurities the person has.

Impact on the Recipient

Research makes a fairly general presumption that giving behaviors are beneficial to others. It is unclear whether this is always true, at least psychologically speaking. After all, if being a donor makes a person feel more capable and connected, would not being a recipient make a person feel inadequate and alienated, or at least have the potential to do so? In support of this argument, research on nursing home patients finds that nurses' attempts at benevolence can actually backfire by producing dependence and a loss of efficacy on the part of the patient (Von Bergen et al. 1999). Moreover, given that negative emotions tend to be experienced more acutely than positive ones (Baumeister et al. 2001), it is possible that the net effect of these exchanges is unfavorable, or at least more negative than research tends to acknowledge. We, of course, are not advocating the abolishment of charity and giving. Giving is critical to facilitating social bonds, and charity can be critical to helping people deal with their immediate circumstances. Besides, there will always be those in society who genuinely require the compassion of others. We raise the concerns with giving simply to point out that research has made a rather uncritical generalization that giving is good, without really considering the conditions under which it is beneficial, or for whom.

In developing a more refined view of prosocial spending, research might do more to examine the relationship of the donor with the recipient in such exchanges. For example, Weinstein and Ryan (2010) recently found that attributions regarding the nature of the giving act (i.e., freely given versus coerced) affected the well-being of the recipient. If the recipient perceived the donor as giving of his or her own volition, he or she felt closer to the donor and derived greater psychological comfort than when perceiving the donation as motivated by some type of external influence, such as social pressure. Thus, finding ways to personally connect donors and recipients (as opposed to anonymous or stranger giving) may help ameliorate the sense of alienation. Surely, many other facets of the donor–recipient dyad affect the quality of the exchange for both members.

Finally, it is worth noting that recent research has found that donating time provides an even larger psychological boost than donating money (Liu and Aaker 2008), and because time is less tangible than money (Okada and Hoch 2004), it may also be less psychologically demoralizing for the recipient. It is also more difficult to turn a time donation into a materialistic display in the same way as a monetary donation. Thus, additional research on the different types of giving (time, money, and expertise) is also needed.

Investing in Children

Prior research has argued that children today are the most materialistic of any generation in American history (Schor 2004). While such a claim is difficult to substantiate, there is no doubt that children grow up exposed to materialistic messages and images at a rate difficult to comprehend even 50 years ago. For many, the key question is, What can be done to reduce materialism among children and adolescents?

The ideas receiving the most attention are those centered on placing constraints on media and marketing exposure, particularly bans on advertising to children and bans on corporate-sponsored curricula in public schools, because young children lack the cognitive resources to filter marketing messages (John 1999, 2008). Along these lines, some school systems have banned corporate donations of educational materials that feature branded advertising out of concern that they promote materialism in school (Seyfer 1999). Unfortunately, restrictions placed on advertising targeted to children have proved extremely difficult to monitor and regulate, and there is little evidence that they are effective.

The best way to reduce materialism in children is to preempt its formation from the start. Thus, developing healthy, emotionally secure children is likely to prove one of materialism's strongest antidotes. Moreover, if completely shielding children from commercial messages is not practical, arming them with the resources to cope with such messages may be necessary. This means better guidance from parents and educators on how to interpret commercial messages, an area in which further research is urgently needed. Finally, the issue of childhood materialism is the one area in which public policies have a real opportunity to make a difference. Although it is difficult to impose policies and laws that restrict adults' freedom to consume, society has a very different responsibility to children. To better understand how research might proceed in this area, we outline research on childhood materialism and then offer some ideas for future research. We also include a section on public policy considerations.

Prior Research on Materialism in Children

Over the past several decades, community activists and social scientists have expressed increasing alarm about the rising level of materialism among adolescents. In addition to running counter to the values that most parents want to instill in their children, research has documented several negative consequences associated with childhood materialism. Research has found that materialism disrupts children's development into happy, healthy, and balanced adults (see Kasser 2002; Linn 2004; Schor 2004). Moreover, materialism is associated with a variety of mental health problems, including anxiety and depression (Cohen and Cohen 1996; Schor 2004); the use of illicit substances, such as alcohol and drugs (Williams et al. 2000); and generalized selfish attitudes and behaviors (Kasser 2005).

What are the antecedents of childhood materialism? If the motivational perspective is correct, it is rooted in early childhood insecurities. However, to our knowledge, only one study has experimentally pinpointed a cause for materialism in children. In a study with children and adolescents aged 8–18, Chaplin and John (2007) found that materialism is tied to changes in self-esteem. In interpreting their findings, these researchers suggested that material values in children are at least partially a product of insecurities and unmet needs caused by socialization agents, a position they later supported. In a follow-up study, Chaplin and John (2010) found that having less supportive parents and peers leads children to feel more insecure, which results in their need to attach themselves to material possessions to boost their self-esteem.

Although Chaplin and John's (2007) research was among the first to experimentally establish a causal connection, theirs is actually part of a long tradition of research implicating insecurity as a key factor in the formation of early material values. For example, some of the first studies of children's materialism found it to be comorbid with ineffective family communication patterns and unsupervised television viewing (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moore and Moschis 1981; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and

Moore 1979). Research has also found that materialistic children are more likely to come from disrupted families, particularly those afflicted by divorce (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997; Roberts, Tanner, and Manolis 2005). Finally, research has found that children who come from less economically secure households are more likely to exhibit heightened material values (Goldberg et al. 2003). This latter finding is particularly troubling considering that poorer areas have more difficulty controlling marketing messages coming into their communities and fewer resources to equip children to deal with these messages when they arrive.

In summary, the emerging research has begun painting a picture of how vulnerable children are to material culture and influence (see Cohen and Cohen 1996; Kasser 2002; Linn 2004). It is clear that children's notions of self are fragile, and as a result, they are particularly susceptible to developing materialistic responses to external threats and unmet needs (Chaplin and John 2007, 2010). Given that this neglect is likely to carry forward, materialistic parents are likely to produce materialistic children, meaning that the cycle is likely to perpetuate and be difficult to break with external interventions (Chaplin and John 2010; Goldberg et al. 2003).

Unfortunately, children are more exposed than ever to the types of threats and conditions that are conducive to the development of material values (e.g., unstable household environments, supplanting of parental communication with media messages, exhibition of material values in adult social role models). Given all this, we might expect researchers to have mobilized to combat the growth of materialism. In actuality, little research has assessed the strategies or interventions for reducing materialism among the youngest members of society. In the next section, we discuss several important research issues that warrant more attention from scholars, including the need for more studies that test policies and intervention strategies for reducing materialism in children.

Further Research on Materialism in Children

Specific topics related to children's materialism meriting further research are plentiful. However, rather than providing a cursory glance at all possible topics (some of which would simply be an extension of the adult literature using a children's sample), we focus on a subset of the more provocative issues and gaps in the hope of shining a spotlight on the research opportunities in this area.

Need for More Diverse Samples

Most of what is known about children's materialism comes from studies based on primarily white, middle-class participants in the United States. As we alluded to previously, the resources for both combating commercial incursions and investing in children's emotional development are likely to be concentrated in relatively affluent, educated communities. Thus, while poor children and ethnic minorities experience the same insecurities and apprehensions that come with normal social development, they may face additional stressors and commercial influences that are exacerbated by poverty and racism (Hambrick-Dixon and LaPoint 1999). It is not difficult to envision how a child, feeling marginalized or even dehumanized, would subconsciously "fight back" through material displays. In one study of underprivileged youth, Pugh (2009) examined the "economy of dignity" in children and found how important it is for children to fit in and feel included. In fitting in, she found it was less an issue of absolute resources than relative resources. The venue of her study was a special charter school that deliberately included a mix of affluent children with children from impoverished backgrounds. When some children do not have the material possessions their peers have, they experience this deficit acutely and painfully. Ironically, well-intended attempts to give children greater educational opportunities (and exposure to others of varying backgrounds) may have unintended consequences when it comes to materialism. Then again, it may not matter. In a digital age, the divide between the haves and the have-nots may be measured in milliseconds, not miles.

Studying children from different cultural backgrounds, such as from more collectivist cultures, could also reveal differences in how material values are formed. At present, the role of collectivism in the exhibition of material values in children is unclear. On the one hand, given that people from collectivist cultures have a more interdependent self-construal, children from these cultures may be even more vulnerable to peer pressure than their more individualist counterparts. Thus, they may be more inclined to rely on material goods as a means to fit in with others. On the other hand, interpersonal connections may run more deeply in the fabric of collectivist cultures, which would bolster these children's sense of security and reduce their reliance on material possessions. Finally, it is possible that both types of cultural orientations can lead to materialism, but for different reasons. For individualist cultures, using things may be more for status and differentiation, while in collectivist cultures, things may be used more for the establishment of in-groups and out-groups. If so, the effects of materialism and the strategies for reducing it would likely differ. Again, the lack of cross-cultural research on materialism in children prevents us from pushing very far into this area, and additional research is definitely required.

Need for Wider Age Ranges

Most of what is known about childhood material values comes from studying older children (i.e., aged 9–14). Yet values are known to develop much earlier than this, and material values are most certainly shaped by very early social exchanges and consumption experiences. By the time a child reaches young adolescence or what is often referred to as the "tween" years, many of the values they will carry into adulthood are either already in place or at least in advanced development.

Moreover, the processing capabilities of very young children (compared with those of adolescents) are very different, so findings based on an older child population may not be applicable to very young children (John 1999, 2008). For example, research in perceptual psychology has shown that the information-processing strategies of older children are subject to the semantic filter of existing beliefs and knowledge structures. In other words, any incoming information, such as advertising, will be buffered by existing beliefs and understandings. Although this can bias incoming information (i.e., selective perception), it also requires that any incoming messages withstand a certain degree of cognitive scrutiny before being assimilated. Because very young children lack these developed structures, they may also lack an important defense against market persuasion attempts (Bousch, Friestad, and Wright 2009; John 1999, 2008). In other words, they may more directly assimilate marketing and other materialistic messages into their belief system.

However, while this lack of knowledge structures would suggest that influence can be attained more easily by very young children, it would also suggest that such influence processes can be more easily reversed. Unfortunately, research on exactly when persuasion knowledge structures become solidified has been equivocal. As Bousch, Friestad, and Wright (2009, p. 147) point out,

> Children learn important things about advertisers' goals and tactics between their toddler years and the time they graduate from high school. But at a more specific level, the findings are not obviously cumulative. There are frustrating differences from study to study in the ways in which children's advertising knowledge has been conceived as well as in the measurement methodologies used.

In addition, any linking of material objects to children's self-esteem requires an understanding of the symbolic meanings of material goods and how they contribute to the notion of an extended self (Chaplin and John 2005). If younger children have few experiences with products and brands and have less developed social-cognitive structures that are used to comprehend consumption symbolism, we must question whether materialism manifests differently at very young ages. For very young children, such as preschoolers, it may be less a question of value formation as one of simple stimulus–response, in which they see a fun product manipulated in a commercial, determine they want it, but then quickly forget that the product even exists and move on. The residual effect of this process on the long-term development of material values in children is unknown but would be a useful issue to investigate.

Finally, the development of self-esteem in children follows a natural trajectory, with insecurity being higher in some stages of childhood development than others (Harter 1985). For example, early adolescence is a time of particularly heightened insecurity because the child is becoming sensitive to his or her social surroundings while also being hypercritical of the self. Is this a period when materialistic responses to insecurity are likely to be particularly acute? Further research is necessary before a final determination can be made.

In addition to research on very young children, further research is needed on the development of material values in *older* adolescents (i.e., aged 17–19). Late adolescence brings many more brands and possessions into one's sphere, and these interactions become much more cognitively and socially complex. Thus, while on the one hand, the self is likely to be much more developed (reducing the need to rely on material objects), on the other hand, social pressures and an increased understanding of the role of material objects in navigating them (e.g., signal group membership; impress employers, teachers, and other important adults; attract romantic interests) could increase reliance on material objects. As these competing arguments demonstrate, the role of materialism during the transition to late adolescence remains unclear. Given that psychologists are now finding that important developmental milestones may continue well into the 20s, this lack of research is all the more glaring.

Need for New Assessment Methods More Amenable to Children

In a previous section, we made a case for why further research is needed with very young children. However, children require special considerations (both ethically and methodologically), and this has almost certainly discouraged many researchers from entering the area. For example, experimental protocols involving deception or even mild manipulation of self-esteem or other aspects of psychological well-being may not be appropriate for use with young children because of the potential for long-term harm. Similarly, surveys and traditional consumer behavior scales require a level of processing comprehension that makes them unsuitable for use with young children.

Fortunately, Chaplin and John (2007) found that projective techniques can be both effective and easily administered to child samples. They introduced a collage technique that was used to successfully ascertain materialism levels in children as young as eight and has now been used with children as young as five (Chaplin and Lowrey 2010). The collage technique is a simple, concrete, and engaging task that requires children to pick pictures to answer a question, such as "What makes you happy?" In general, projective techniques such as collages are highly engaging and therefore might allow researchers to gain insight into a complex and abstract construct such as materialism while circumventing the need for research participants to have advanced cognitive and verbalization skills (Solely and Smith 2008). However, this technique has not been extensively validated in materialism research, and new techniques would also be welcomed. Again, a major impediment to research on materialism and consumer behavior in children is a lack of validated assessment techniques.

Need for Studying Developmental Influences

Socialization influences—such as parents, peers, and media—should be acknowledged as important to the process of the development of materialism. Although we cautioned previously about an overfocus on these areas as a means to reduce materialism, they should not be overlooked. Children turn to socialization agents for information about norms and confirmation about who they are. Too often, they learn that people form impressions of who they are based on what they have (Chaplin and Lowrey 2010). Peers play an increasingly important role in this process as children move from childhood to adolescence (Stipek and MacIver 1989). Thus, a fuller understanding of how materialism develops throughout childhood could be gained by examining how peers exhibit their influence at different age points and across genders.

With the explosion of social media, such as interactive gaming sites and online communities, it would be fruitful to ask how and why different forms of social media affect children's insecurities and, in turn, their materialism. We believe that this may be a particularly important issue considering that avatar status often equates to cyber affluence (e.g., accumulation of treasure, territory, valuable objects) in the online world of children.

Public Policy Considerations Related to Materialism and Children

In addition to more basic research on the development of materialism in children, further research needs to be directed to public policies aimed to protect children. We suggest this policy research proceed on two fronts.

The first front pertains to testing policies designed to increase parental time and interaction with children. Prior research has shown that parental guidance can ameliorate the effects of television viewing on children's materialism (Moschis and Moore 1979). Parental involvement is likely to benefit children in many other ways; it is difficult to overstate the importance of loving parents in the healthy development of a child (Bowlby 1983). Unfortunately, parents cannot spend time with their children if they are working or otherwise absent, a situation that describes many couples in modern society.

Social policies in Scandinavia may provide the basis for some interesting comparative research. For example, Danish companies have some of the most family-friendly work policies in the world. The amount of guaranteed paid vacation and holiday leave in Denmark is 34 days per year, whereas U.S. workers are guaranteed only 10 days (www.mercer.com). Similarly, in Denmark, parental leave averages 52 weeks (20 mandated with pay) versus the United States with 24 weeks (no mandated pay) (http://www.cepr.net). In short, Denmark has enacted numerous policies that emphasize family over work priorities.

According to the most recent World Values Survey conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org), Denmark ranks the highest in the world in terms of the happiness of its population. It also seems to have lower levels of materialism than other developed economies, such as the United States; Griffin, Babin, and Christensen (2004) report lower average levels of materialism in a Danish sample than those typically found in U.S. samples (using Richins and Dawson's [1992] Material Values Scale).

Despite placing a relatively high public priority on family time, Denmark still has some of the world's most productive workers (with a 2010 per capita gross domestic product of $52,700 versus $45,254 for the United States, according to the International Monetary Fund [2010]). The International Monetary Fund also reports that unemployment in Denmark in 2010 was just 4.5%, compared with more than 10% in the United States. Finally, Gupta, Smith, and Verner (2006) note that Denmark is among one of the world's most progressive economies when it comes to professional opportunities for women. According to these authors, Denmark has some of the highest female labor participation in the world, with women regularly assuming positions of high responsibility in industry. Given this evidence, an argument could be made that these policies are not only profamily but also probusiness.

Policy makers must be careful, however, not to overreach in this interpretation, and policies should certainly not be universally adapted in other countries without first obtaining much stronger evidence. Denmark is a small homogeneous country, and it is unclear whether these policies can be scaled and implemented in larger countries with very different values and sociopolitical structures. Nonetheless, as countries enact different social policies, this could provide an opportunity to conduct natural experiments on policy questions related to materialism. Although such macrolevel studies are commonplace in other fields, such as sociology and economics, they are rare in marketing and consumer research.

The second front that public policy can shape pertains to children's exposure to commercial messages. As we have emphasized, while it may not be realistic to completely eliminate exposure to advertising and commercial messages, it would still be imprudent to let such exposure go unregulated. Several innovative policies are currently being debated in federal and state legislatures for addressing children's commercial exposure. For example, the Product Placement Disclosure Act would require companies to disclose, up front, the presence of any paid product placements in children's television programming, movies, or video games. Such an act would be intended to help parents monitor advertising to children that may be covert. It is also probably not well known that the U.S. Federal government currently provides tax write-offs and other incentives for companies that develop marketing materials aimed at children. The Children's Advertising Subsidy Revocation Act would eliminate all federal subsidies, deductions, and preferences for advertising aimed at children under age 12. Finally, there has been a great deal of concern recently about the infiltration of marketers into schools. The Commercial-Free Schools Act would prohibit corporations from using primary schools as a route to compulsory exposure to promotional messages aimed at children. These and future policies will need to be vigorously debated, and their effectiveness tested using nonbiased academic research. It is our position that marketing and consumer researchers are not doing nearly enough to fill this important role.

Conclusion

Materialism continues to be one of the most complex challenges of modern society. This article has tried to reassert a theoretical basis for the core causes of materialism and to suggest new priority areas for research in response. To this end, we have tried to summarize what is known in burgeoning research areas, such as experiential consumption, prosocial spending, and children's materialism, and to identify opportunities for future research in each. We have also tried to address the policy implications of these varied considerations, particularly as they relate to children. Our hope is that marketing and consumer researchers will do more to take up the mantle of research on reducing materialism, both by extending these topics and by identifying new ones. Research on reducing materialism represents an ambitious agenda, and we cannot begin to do it justice in a single article. In identifying new research topics, we encourage researchers to ask a simple question: How would major issues of societal interest look different if people were less materialistic? For example, how would environmental degradation, human health, or global poverty look different in a less materialistic world? As traditionally trained researchers, most academics are not adept at developing applied research programs, but this does not mean that they cannot make a difference. Through basic research, academics stand to contribute a sound basis for future programs and policies aimed to reduce materialism in society. When considering the stakes, we believe the benefits of these efforts could be immense.

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