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Understanding Individual Materialism: Position of Materialistic Aspirations in the Internal Structure of the Aspiration Index

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Abstract

Materialistic aspirations, which are individual life goals for happiness based on financial success, fame, and self-image, have seen an increasing trend in our society. This rise in materialistic aspirations negatively impacts individual well-being, the external environment, and social harmony. This study aimed to understand materialistic aspirations in relation to other life aspirations; affiliation, community feeling, conformity, hedonism, physical health, self-acceptance, safety, and spirituality. Data were collected from 413 college students, who were selected using convenience sampling. Data was analyzed using multidimensional scaling. Results showed that hedonism is the aspiration closest to materialistic aspirations and opposite to intrinsic aspirations. Additionally, life aspirations based on the Aspiration Index are categorized into two dimensions and four quadrants. The results of this study provide a perspective on materialism in Indonesia and can have practical benefits, such as creating educational programs on consumer literacy and developing policies related to consumer protection that prioritize some of the Aspiration Index's domains.

In psychology, aspiration is categorized as one of motivational constructs, which are mental-cognitive factors within individuals that drive them to do something (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Aspiration is closely related to other motivational constructs, e.g., goals or objectives (Kasser, 2016; Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996), needs (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and values (Kasser, 2016; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Therefore, there are plenty of psychological constructs that are functionally related to materialistic aspirations.

Research on individual materialistic aspirations is important for several reasons. Firstly, materialism, both as values and aspirations, is increasingly prevalent in our society (Handa & Khare, 2013). Several factors may contribute to this trend, e.g., the constant advertising of commercial products on television, media content that promotes materialism, and the influence of social media (Kasser, 2002b). This trend is observed in various countries, including Indonesia (Fransisca & Erdiansyah, 2020; Walenta et al., 2022).

Secondly, materialism has both positive and negative effects. The positive effects of materialism include its impact on life satisfaction, as it increases economic motivation and future satisfaction with the standard of living (Sirgy et al., 2013, 2021). However, materialism can have a negative impact on individual well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014). It also has negative effects on the external environment, such as environmental damage (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Hurst et al., 2013; Sheldon & McGregor, 2000), and disruption in social harmony (Carroll et al., 2011; Solberg et al., 2004).

Thirdly, increasing materialistic aspirations can lead to a decrease in other aspirations. For instance, a person with high materialistic aspirations may have low spiritual or social aspirations. However, the negative role of materialistic aspirations on spiritual aspirations remains speculative. A dedicated study is needed to explore the position and relationship of materialistic aspirations with other life aspirations.

Many studies on materialism have been conducted in developed countries, with most being done in the domain of consumer psychology. In general, these studies can be grouped into three approaches: personality (Belk, 1985), values (Richins & Dawson, 1992), and aspiration (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996).

The study of materialism as a personality was pioneered by Belk (1985). In this context, materialism is a personality characteristic that differs due to culture and individual differences. Materialistic individuals typically showcase miserliness and possessiveness toward personal goods and envy of other people's belongings, which are seen as better (Belk, 1985). As a result, people will tend to hoard or store goods; dislike giving, sharing, or charity; and, because of envy, tend to dislike, and even have bad intentions toward their targets of envy (Husna, 2016).

The study of materialism as a value was pioneered by Kasser (2016) and Richins and Dawson (1992), who found that materialistic individuals prioritize the acquisition of possessions as a life goal, a criterion for success, and a source of happiness. For these individuals, consumption is centered solely on the acquisition of goods and property, with little consideration for the importance of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, these individuals usually judge their personal success and social status based on the quantity and quality of their possessions, rather than on personal relationships or other achievements (Husna, 2016).

The study of materialism as a personality and value has yet to fully describe the position of materialistic aspirations in relation to other motivational constructs and how they are interrelated. One study that measured materialistic aspirations, specifically the aspiration for financial success, focused on the organization of individual goals (Grouzet et al., 2005). Materialistic aspirations are often associated with a desire for financial success, in which individuals tend to accumulate wealth and gain power based on financial freedom (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). In their study of life goals, Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) described financial success as being rich and materially successful. It is important to note that the study classified objectives based on their content into extrinsic goals (e.g., financial success), which depend on reactions from others, and intrinsic goals (e.g., self-acceptance), which are in harmony with personal growth and natural tendencies. Kasser (2002b) added that, in addition to aspirations for financial success, materialistic aspirations are also related to aspirations for fame and a positive self-image.

The materialism as an aspiration approach begins with a concern for the tendency of capitalist society to define happiness and success solely in a financial sense. In fact, placing financial success as an aspiration is a risky choice. This is based on humanistic theory, which posits that healthy individuals are ones whose life goal is to actualize themselves (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). Kasser and Ryan (1993, 1996) posited that the purpose of an individual's life is related to their basic psychological needs.

The relationship between life goals and basic psychological needs is examined in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2001), where aspirations reflect individual wants and needs, awareness of these needs, and the consequences of choices and behaviors that are in accordance with them. Therefore, individuals behave autonomously and freely to achieve their aspirations.

Aspirations, based on self-determination theory, are categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Intrinsic aspirations are related to the natural tendency to pursue self-interest and overcome challenges, e.g., self-acceptance, affiliation, a sense of community, and physical health. Extrinsic aspirations are related to obtaining social rewards or approval, e.g., praise from others, financial success, a positive self-image, and popularity.

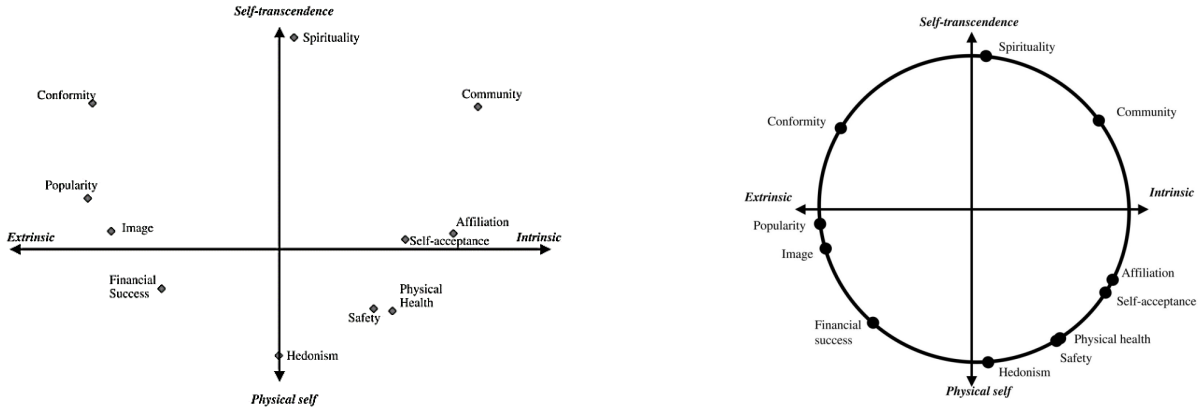
Materialistic aspirations are measured using the Aspiration Index (AI). The AI was initially developed by Kasser and Ryan (1993) to measure four different domains: self-acceptance, affiliation, community feeling, and financial success, and to determine how important and likely it is for someone to achieve each domain. In 1996, Kasser and Ryan added three new domains: physical health, popularity, and image, and explicitly grouped the seven domains into intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations. Grouzet et al. (2005) further developed the AI by adding four new domains: conformity, safety, hedonism, and spirituality, keeping the same seven domains from Kasser and Ryan (1996) (see Figure 1).

The definitions of each AI domain, as explained by Grouzet et al. (2005), are as follows: affiliation (having satisfying relationships with family and friends), community feeling (improving the world through activism or generativity), conformity (going along with others), financial success (becoming rich and materially successful), hedonism (experiencing many sensory pleasures), image (being attractive in terms of body and clothing), physical health (feeling healthy and being free from illness or disease), popularity (being famous and admired), safety (in a state of the integrity and physical safety), self-acceptance (feeling competent and independent), and spirituality (seeking spiritual or religious understanding).

Grouzet et al. (2005) presented a two-dimensional scheme of an individual's life goals, but it is important to note some limitations of the study. Firstly, the study focused on the organization of individual goals instead of materialism. As a result, no specific analysis was conducted to investigate the positive and negative associations of materialistic aspirations. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a cultural context different from Indonesia. Although the study included samples from various countries, including several Asian countries (i.e., India, China, and South Korea), no specific analysis was performed to determine the characteristics of materialistic aspirations in Asian cultures.

The present study aimed to enhance our understanding of materialistic aspirations and their relationship with other life aspirations. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following questions: How do materialistic aspirations relate to other aspirations? Which aspirations align with or conflict with materialistic aspirations?

Figure 1
Dimensions and Domain of Aspiration Index



Note. Adapted from Grouzet et al. (2005).

Methods

This study used data from previous research conducted by Puri and Hidayat (2020) and Saffana and Hidayat (2020). The respondents comprise 413 students (308 [74.58%] female; 105 [25.42%] male) aged 17–24 years old (M = 19.05 years; SD = 1.19), who were selected using convenience sampling. This nonprobability sampling method was used to select respondents based on their accessibility, availability, and willingness to participate in the study.

Materialistic aspirations refer to an individual's life goal of achieving happiness through financial success, popularity, and image. To measure materialistic aspirations and other life aspirations, the Aspiration Index (AI), specifically the version developed by Grouzet et al. (2005), was used. The AI used in this study was adapted into the Indonesian language and localized by Hidayat and Husna (2019).

The AI, which consists of 47 items with 11 domains, has 10 response options from 'not at all important' to 'very important'. The estimated reliability, namely Cronbach's α and 95% CI, for each domain are presented in Table 1. This shows that each domain has an adequate reliability estimate.

Table 1
Reliability Estimates for AI Domains

Domain	Cronbach's α [95% CI]
Affiliation	.83 [.78, .87]
Community Feeling	.70 [.63, .76]
Conformity	.66 [.59, .70]
Financial Success	.85 [.82, .88]
Hedonism	.72 [.65, .77]
Image	.82 [.78, .85]
Physical Health	.71 [.63, .77]
Popularity	.77 [.72, .81]
Self-acceptance	.80 [.74, .85]
Safety	.74 [.68, .79]
Spirituality	.86 [.84, .89]

In this study, the factor scores for each AI domain were analyzed using multidimensional scaling with R software (R Core Team, 2024) and the Smacof package (De Leeuw & Mair, 2009; Mair et al., 2024). Factor scores for each AI domain were obtained through a confirmatory factor analysis using the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012; Rosseel et al., 2023).

Results

The categorization of each domain and the quadrant of the Aspiration Index (AI) is presented in Table 2. The data revealed that the percentage of respondents in the high category is greater in quadrant 1 (82.32%) and quadrant 2 (86.68%), compared to quadrant 3 (60.05%) and quadrant 4 (58.11%). The same trend can be observed in each AI domain, where the percentage of high category respondents is higher in quadrants 1 and 2 than in the other two quadrants.

The results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the MLM estimator on 47 AI items indicated that two items had factor loading below .40. These two items were not included in the second CFA analysis, which showed that the model fit (Table 3) and that no item had factor loading below .40. The determinant factors (Wang & Wang, 2020) for each AI domain are .94 (affiliation), .92 (community feeling), .95 (conformity), .94 (financial success), .92 (hedonism), .95 (image), .95 (physical health), .94 (popularity), .95 (self-acceptance), .93 (safety), and .98 (spirituality).

The factor scores obtained from the CFA results with 45 items were then analyzed using multidimensional scaling (MDS) to map the relative position of each AI domain. The goodness-of-fit of the symmetric MDS analysis was assessed using stress norms, permutation tests, and stability of the solution with 1000 bootstrap resampling (Mair et al., 2016, 2022). The stress norms and permutation tests produce a stress-1 value of .12 ($p <$ .05), while the stability of solution using bootstrap resampling resulted in a stability coefficient value of .95 with a mean bootstrap stress value of .13 (95% CI = .10, .17).

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Quadrants and AI Domains

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Categories		
					Low	Medium	High
Quadrant 1	.00	.93	-3.87	.88	2.91%	14.77%	82.32%
Spirituality	.00	1.45	-6.49	1.03	3.15%	9.93%	86.92%
Community Feeling	.00	.73	-3.13	.74	2.42%	20.58%	77%
Quadrant 2	.00	.75	-3.76	.73	1.94%	11.38%	86.68%
Affiliation	.00	1.03	-4.83	.85	2.18%	12.35%	85.47%
Self-acceptance	.00	.80	-5.08	.81	.24%	7.99%	91.77%
Physical Health	.00	.95	-8.23	.56	.48%	1.94%	97.58%
Safety	.00	.85	-4.10	.71	1.45%	13.56%	84.99%
Quadrant 3	.00	1.17	-4.26	1.88	4.84%	35.11%	60.05%
Hedonism	.00	1.27	-4.63	1.71	4.36%	30.02%	65.62%
Financial Success	.00	1.35	-5.96	2.06	2.42%	26.15%	71.43%
Quadrant 4	.00	1.35	-5.17	2.36	3.87%	38.01%	58.11%
Image	.00	1.71	-6.61	2.72	3.15%	33.17%	63.68%
Popularity	.00	1.78	-6.28	2.61	5.08%	33.41%	61.5%
Conformity	.00	1.14	-3.79	1.74	7.02%	34.62%	58.35%

Table 3
Model Fit of Aspiration Index

Model	χ^2	df	*p*-value	RMSEA (90% CI)	*p* RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	BIC
47 items	1857.948	979	$< .001$	.047 (.044, .049)	.986	.853	.837	.082	61699.888
45 items	1584.759	890	$< .001$	.043 (.041, .046)	1.000	.877	.864	.065	58328.258

The goodness-of-fit of the spherical MDS analysis was assessed using stress norms and permutation tests with a thousand replications, which produces a stress-1 value of .29 ($p < .05$). Based on these results, we can conclude that the MDS analysis is a good fit for the data.

The symmetric MDS analysis revealed the location of each AI domain as a point in a two-dimensional space, where the distance between the domains reflects their relationship with each other. The closer the position of a domain to another, the more consistent or compatible the two domains are, and vice versa. Based on the observations shown in Figure 2 and the distance values between the domains presented in Table 4, it can be inferred that materialistic aspirations are more compatible with hedonistic aspirations than with other life aspirations. Among the domains of materialistic aspirations, financial success is the most compatible with hedonism.

The symmetric MDS analysis also revealed other important findings. The observations on the vertical axis divide the AI domain into self-transcendent vs. physical self, while the observations on the horizontal axis divide the AI domain into intrinsic vs. extrinsic, as was in the study of Grouzet et al. (2005). Additionally, the observations divide the AI into four quadrants.

The first quadrant comprises the spirituality and community feeling, which have intrinsic and self-transcendent characteristics. The second quadrant includes the domains of affiliation, self-acceptance, physical health, and safety, which have intrinsic characteristics and are related to the physical self. The third quadrant encompasses hedonism and financial success, which have extrinsic characteristics and are related to the physical self. Finally, the fourth quadrant includes image, popularity, and conformity, which have extrinsic and self-transcendent characteristics.

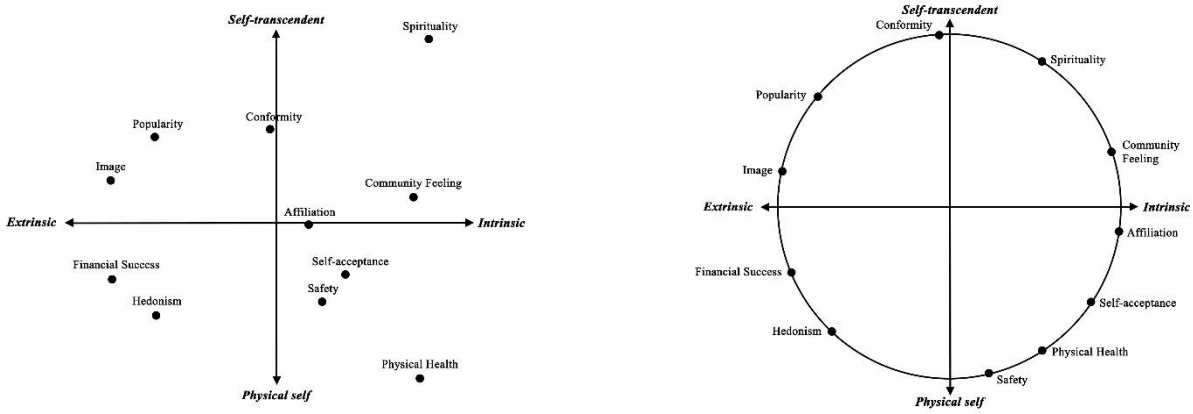
The spherical MDS analysis confirmed the division into four quadrants and suggests that the relationship between the AI domains can be described as a sequence around the circle.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between materialistic aspirations and other life aspirations in the Aspiration Index (AI); i.e., affiliation, community feeling, conformity, hedonism, physical health, self-acceptance, safety, and spirituality. The analysis revealed that materialistic aspirations have a closer association with hedonism and are contrary to intrinsic aspirations. Additionally, the analysis found that the 11 AI domains can be grouped into two dimensions and four quadrants, which aligns with earlier research (Grouzet et al., 2005; Martela et al., 2019).

The classification of the 11 AI domains into two dimensions and four quadrants leads to an interesting way to categorize and understand different types of life goals and individual motivations. This categorization shows that an individual's understanding of the purpose of life

Figure 2
Results of Multidimensional Scaling Analysis



Note. Note. Left = Symmetric MDS; Right = Spherical MDS.

Table 4
Distance Between Domains on Symmetric MDS

	AF	CF	CN	FS	HD	IM	PH	PO	SA	SF
CF	.48	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
CN	.45	.70	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
FS	.91	1.39	.97	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
HD	.79	1.26	.96	.25	–	–	–	–	–	–
IM	.90	1.35	.75	.43	.63	–	–	–	–	–
PH	.84	.80	1.28	1.44	1.20	1.63	–	–	–	–
PO	.78	1.18	.51	.66	.79	.28	1.59	–	–	–
SA	.28	.46	.72	1.04	.86	1.12	.57	1.04	–	–
SF	.35	.61	.79	.94	.74	1.08	.55	1.04	.16	–
SP	.97	.70	.81	1.76	1.72	1.55	1.50	1.29	1.10	1.25

Note. Smaller value indicate closer distance. AF = Affiliation; CF = Community Feeling; CN = Conformity; FS = Financial Success; HD = Hedonism; IM = Image; PH = Physical Health; PO = Popularity; SA = Self-Acceptance; SF = Safety; SP = Spirituality.

they strive for can be based on the extent to which their focus on basic psychological needs and appreciation or praise from others, as well as their focus on pleasure or self-sustainability, and their orientation toward self-transcendence, based on social and spiritual factors.

The contrast between materialistic and intrinsic aspirations can be explained by Fromm's humanistic theory of "having" versus "being" orientation (Fromm, 1976). According to Fromm, "having" orientation is reflective of alienation from the tendency toward self-actualization, while "being" orientation emphasizes the experience of life. When materialistic aspirations are prioritized over the intrinsic ones, the individual can experience lower well-being and greater distress (Dittmar et al., 2014).

The relationship between materialistic aspirations and hedonism suggests that individuals with higher levels of materialism tend to pursue hedonistic experiences more often. A financially successful person is likely to have an attractive appearance, both in terms of physique and clothing, and enjoy great popularity. The fulfillment of these three domains makes it easy for these individuals to derive pleasure from various aspects of life. However, the pursuit of hedonism and materialistic aspirations can often reflect avoidance toward anxiety-provoking situations (Grouzet et al., 2005), and these behaviors may ultimately lead to reduced well-being (Kasser, 2016). Hedonism and financial success are characterized by extrinsic and physical self, indicating that individuals pursue awards and social status from others to fulfill their own pleasure (Grouzet et al., 2005).

The domains in the intrinsic and self-transcendent quadrants are spirituality and community feeling. Individuals with these life goals strive to find meaning and purpose in religion to meet their intrinsic needs. They also care about societal welfare and future generations because it helps them fulfill their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. This is consistent with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The domains in the next quadrant, which is characterized by intrinsic and physical self, are affiliation, self-acceptance, physical health, and safety. Affiliation and self-acceptance are life goals that are closely related to the satisfaction of psychological needs because individuals need relationships (e.g., with family and friends) and feel competent and independent (Kasser, 2002a). These

two domains lie between the dimensions of physical self and self-transcendence because they involve the personal realm, which can be explained by Freud's ego (Freud, 1960) and James' material-social me (James, 1892). Physical health and safety are in this quadrant because individuals aspire to have a sense of security and good health in life (Bowlby, 1988; Pyszczynski et al., 2003), and they have a psychological need to fulfill these two domains (Maslow, 1954).

The final quadrant is characterized by extrinsic and self-transcendence. This quadrant includes image, popularity, and conformity. These domains fall within the self-transcendent dimension, which involves having a relationship with others and transcending self-interest (Grouzet et al., 2005), as well as extrinsic life goals that derive from social appreciation or praise from others (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, it is appropriate that these three domains are grouped together in this quadrant.

Prioritizing materialistic aspirations in life harms well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014). This can be explained through self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Kasser, 2002b). When individuals prioritize materialistic aspirations, they have challenges in fulfilling the needs for autonomy (feeling free), competence (feeling successful), and relatedness (feeling connected). This low level of satisfaction with these needs leads to lower well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

The previous explanations shed new light on the nature of materialistic aspirations and their relationship with other life goals within the context of Indonesian culture. People who prioritize materialistic aspirations tend to pursue hedonistic goals that emphasize personal pleasure. However, individuals who overly focus on hedonism tend to feel insecure (Kasser, 2002b). To overcome this, they can shift their focus towards intrinsic aspirations, e.g., affiliation and spirituality.

In pursuing life goals, individuals consider their psychological needs (intrinsic), desire for recognition and approval (extrinsic), survival and physical pleasures (physical self), and the quest for a meaningful place in the universe (self-transcendent). However, the pursuit of these four types of goals may sometimes conflict with one another in daily life. Some individuals may prioritize one type of goal over others, such as those who seek to solve the world's problems through spirituality, those who prioritize their own pleasures, those who pursue wealth and social status, or those who aim for a simpler life centered on family and personal growth. Furthermore, people can prioritize intrinsic aspirations over materialistic aspirations because this way of life can increase well-being, both in hedonic and eudaimonic senses (Dittmar et al., 2014).

The limitation of this study lies in the sampling method used, which was convenience sampling. This sampling technique can cause bias in the results because the selected sample does not represent the population (Christensen et al., 2015). It increases the risk of selection bias, where participants who are available and willing to participate may have certain characteristics that differ from the wider population. As a result, the generalizability of the findings is limited, so the results of this study need to be interpreted with caution. It cannot be directly generalized to other groups without further research using more representative sampling techniques.

Conclusion

Materialistic aspirations are related to hedonistic aspirations and are opposite to intrinsic aspirations. In addition, life aspirations are categorized into two dimensions: self-transcendent vs. physical self and intrinsic vs. extrinsic, and are further split into four quadrants with their respective characteristics. It has been shown that prioritizing materialistic aspirations has a negative impact on one's well-being. This study provides an understanding of materialistic aspirations and their relation to other life aspirations. With this understanding, individuals can consider various characteristics when setting life goals.

Recommendation

The study's findings offer a new perspective and can have practical benefits, such as creating educational programs on consumer literacy and developing policies related to consumer protection that prioritize domains in quadrants 1 and 2, given the higher percentage of high categories in these domains. Developing educational programs based on these domains can have a positive impact on consumer well-being, particularly for consumers with similar characteristics, namely students aged 17 to 24 years old. For example, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness policy focuses more on intrinsic life goals.

Materialism is closely linked to consumer behavior, and unconscious consumption based on materialistic values can negatively impact other values, such as prosocial, ecological, and religious values.

Additionally, this understanding can inform policies related to consumer protection. Large corporations may utilize their financial and technological resources to manipulate consumers through advertising and marketing promotion programs, often using materialism as an entry point. Policies designed to protect consumers would be more effective if based on a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between materialism and life values.

To further investigate the relationship between materialistic aspirations and other life aspirations, we suggest examining the relative positions of these aspirations among respondents who have fixed income or work experience, as well as those with families.

Declaration

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Authors' Contribution

J contributed to the literature review, analysis, report of findings, and development of the manuscript. RH, as the supervisor, provided instrument, data, guidance, and advice related to the research method, analysis process, and writing process. Both authors contributed to the study design, as well as read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest in this study.

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