

Materialism makes bad events even worse

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In addition to its already well-documented negative direct effects on a person's well-being, materialism also wields an indirect negative effect by making bad events even worse, according to a paper co-written by a University of Illinois expert in consumption values.

Business professor Aric Rindfleisch says not only is materialism antithetical to individual welfare, it also has a secondary effect of amplifying traumatic events – everything ranging from terrorism to car accidents and life-threatening illness – to make them seem that much worse.

"If you're a materialistic individual and life suddenly takes a wrong turn, you're going to have a tougher time recovering from that setback than someone who is less materialistic," said Rindfleisch, the John M. Jones Professor of Marketing in the College of Business. "The research is novel in that an event that's unrelated to materialism will have a stronger impact on someone because of their materialistic values. In other words, materialism has a multiplier effect. It's a finding that I think is especially interesting given our consumer-driven economy."

The research, conducted by Rindfleisch and co-authors Ayalla Ruvio, of Michigan State University, and Eli Somer, of the University of Haifa, studied the experience of traumatic stress and maladaptive consumption through an Israeli field study and a U.S. national survey.

When faced with a mortal threat from a terrorist attack, the researchers found that highly materialistic individuals in Israel reported higher levels

of post-traumatic stress, compulsive consumption and impulsive buying than their less-materialistic peers.

"Materialistic people cope with bad events through materialistic mechanisms," said Rindfleisch, who also is the head of the business administration department at Illinois. "When there's a terrorist attack in Israel, people who are materialistic suffer higher levels of distress and are more likely to compensate for that through [higher levels](#) of compulsive and impulsive purchasing."

The results of the U.S.-based portion of the study indicate that these effects are likely due to materialistic individuals exhibiting lower levels of self-esteem, which lessens an individual's ability to cope with [traumatic events](#), according to the paper.

"You can think of [terrorist attacks](#) as a mortal threat to your life," Rindfleisch said. "To replicate the study in the U.S., as a corollary, we asked people to tell us about their level of death anxiety. Those who had more anxiety toward death were very similar to the groups who were under terrorist attacks in Israel."

Both components of the study provide converging evidence that in times of extreme stress, highly materialistic individuals seek comfort in compulsive and impulsive consumption, Rindfleisch said.

"At its core, [materialism](#) is a value-based response to insecurity in one's life," he said. "Our research more broadly suggests that it's also about existential insecurity. This idea that we're all aware of our mortality and focusing on that can be almost debilitating."

And traumatic experiences need not only be confined to terrorism-related events, Rindfleisch said.

"It could be about a broad range of stressful life events, including serious illness, an automobile accident or a natural disaster," he said. "So the scope is broader than a terrorist attack. It's more like a traumatic event that leads to this insecure sense of self. Thus, our research uncovers a hidden yet potentially quite expansive domain of consequences that have largely gone unnoticed in prior research."

According to Rindfleisch, it's a cautionary tale before the holiday shopping season kicks into high gear.

"In times of stress, people often seek solace through shopping," he said. "The idea here is that we need some form of a cultural-based coping mechanism, because the research suggests that there is actually a short-term fix with retail therapy. Soon after purchasing something, there is a reduction of anxiety. But it doesn't last very long. It's fleeting. Materialists seek that as one of their coping mechanisms. And Black Friday and the holiday shopping season play into that."

The paper will appear in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

More information: The article, "When bad gets worse: The amplifying effect of materialism on traumatic stress and maladaptive consumption," is available online: link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11747-013-0345-6

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