

Buying less is better than buying 'green'—for the planet and your happiness

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Humans' overconsumption of resources—from the food and clothes we buy to the methods of transportation we choose—is a leading contributor to global climate change, says University of Arizona researcher Sabrina Helm. Therefore, it's increasingly important to understand the choices consumers make and how those decisions affect the health of a planet

with limited resources.

In a new study, published in the journal *Young Consumers*, Helm and her collaborators explore how culturally entrenched materialistic values influence pro-environmental behaviors in millennials, who are now the nation's most influential group of consumers.

The researchers focused on two main categories of pro-environmental behaviors: 1) reduced consumption, which includes actions like repairing instead of replacing older items, avoiding impulse purchases and not buying unnecessary items; and 2) "green buying," or purchasing products designed to limit environmental impacts, such as goods made from recycled materials.

The researchers also looked at how engaging in pro-environmental behaviors affects consumer well-being.

More materialistic participants, the researchers found, were unlikely to engage in reduced consumption. However, materialism did not seem to have an effect on their likelihood of practicing "green buying." That's probably because "green buying," unlike reduced consumption, still offers a way for materialists to fulfill their desire to accumulate new items, Helm said.

"There is evidence that there are 'green materialists,'" said Helm, an associate professor in the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "If you are able to buy environmentally friendly products, you can still live your materialist values. You're acquiring new things, and that fits into our mainstream consumption pattern in our consumer culture, whereas reduced consumption is more novel and probably more important from a sustainability perspective."

Study participants who reported having fewer materialistic values were much more likely to engage in reduced consumption. Consuming less was, in turn, linked to higher personal well-being and lower psychological distress.

Green buying—which may have some positive environmental implications, although to a lesser degree than reduced consumption—was not found to improve consumer well-being, Helm said.

"We thought it might satisfy people that they participated in being more environmentally conscious through green buying patterns, but it doesn't seem to be that way," Helm said. "Reduced consumption has effects on increased well-being and decreased psychological distress, but we don't see that with green consumption."

The take-home message for consumers: "The key is to reduce [consumption](#) and not just buy green stuff. Having less and buying less can actually make us more satisfied and happier," Helm said.

"If you have a lot of stuff, you have a lot on your mind," she said.

"Maybe you have a lot of debt because you bought all that stuff, and now you have to manage all that stuff. It requires maintenance and being organized. It's not like you buy it and you're done with it. There's a lot of burdens of ownership, and if you relieve yourself of that burden of ownership, most people report feeling a lot better and freer."

Financial habits and well-being

Helm and her colleagues additionally looked at how materialism affects millennial consumers' proactive financial behaviors, such as budgeting and saving. Examining financial behaviors alongside pro-environmental behaviors provides a picture of how young adults proactively cope with

resource limitations in two contexts: environmental and financial, Helm said.

As expected, Helm and her collaborators found that those who reported having more materialistic values engaged in fewer proactive financial behaviors than their less materialistic counterparts. The researchers also found that, consistent with previous studies, proactive financial behaviors were associated with better personal well-being, life satisfaction and financial satisfaction, as well as lower psychological distress.

"For very obvious reasons, if you have a proactive financial strategy and put money to the side and live within your means, it has positive well-being effects," Helm said.

The researchers' findings are based on data from a longitudinal study that followed 968 young adults from their first year of college, when they were between the ages of 18 and 21, to two years post-college, when they were ages 23-26. The participants responded to online survey questions designed to measure materialism, proactive financial behaviors, pro-environmental behaviors, personal well-being, [life satisfaction](#), financial satisfaction and psychological distress.

Understanding how materialistic values impact consumer behaviors, and how those behaviors in turn affect personal and environmental well-being, is important, Helm said. However, she acknowledges that for many [consumers](#), shifting behaviors to be more financially proactive and consume less will be challenging.

"We've been told since childhood that there's a product for everything and it's OK to buy, and it's a good thing because that's how the economy works," she said. "We're brought up this way, so changing behaviors is very difficult."

More information: Sabrina Helm et al, Materialist values, financial and pro-environmental behaviors, and well-being, *Young Consumers* (2019). [DOI: 10.1108/YC-10-2018-0867](https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-10-2018-0867)

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