Determinants of materialism among the youth in Romania

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Abstract: Materialism, a growing behavioral trend for over a century, has accelerated in recent decades. It is a major contributor to compulsive buying behavior, a surprisingly common yet under-recognized phenomenon. Despite existing research, few studies explore the combined influence of sociological, psychological, family and demographic factors. Additionally, research specific to Romania is scarce. This study examines the influence of media celebrity endorsement, TV advertisement and peer group communication on materialism and its link to compulsive buying behavior among young Romanians. Using a survey adapted from established literature, data was collected from 202 university students. A combination of statistical methods, including correlation and PLS-PM analysis, were used to analyze the data. The results reveal a significant prevalence of compulsive buying behavior among the youth and confirm the positive associations between materialism and its determinants. This study provides valuable insights into materialistic behavior and serves as a foundation for future studies, marketing strategies and consumer policy development.

Key words: Materialism, Compulsive Buying Behavior, Addiction, Celebrity Endorsement, Peer Group, Advertisement;

JEL: C02, C10, C12, C14, C15, C30, C83, C87, D12, D91, M31, M37

1. Introduction

Human behavior, once focused solely on survival, has evolved into a complex interplay of desires. Throughout history, people have adapted to challenges and constantly innovated to improve their lives. Identifying needs and overcoming obstacles led to inventions that transformed our living standards. With technological advancements and societal changes, we now live in an era of endless possibilities. Products and services satisfy desires we never knew existed. The growing clutter on desks, overflowing closets and perpetually stocked pantries paint a familiar picture. Moreover, for some, consumerism reaches higher levels, spiraling out of control into an addiction and a deterioration of well-being (Górnik-Durose, 2020). The reason why shopping habits tend to grow out of control is that people associate material possessions (both in quantity and quality) with success, happiness and self-fulfillment in life (Christopher, Saliba and Deadmarsh, 2009). All of these changes have contributed to an increase in materialistic tendencies.

Materialism is a growing problem in our society, and understanding its meaning and consequences is crucial to preventing problems in relationships and within ourselves. To grasp the complexity of the problem, it is important to note that roughly 8% of the world's population suffers from compulsive shopping behavior, putting them at risk for addiction during their teenage or young adult years. Notably, about 85% of young people affected by this addiction report a family history of mental health problems (Must-Know Shopping Addictions Statistics [Current Data] • Gitnux, 2023).

The rationale behind the choice of this research topic was the recognition of the effects that materialism plays in society. While materialism is a well-established concept within consumer psychology, its significant impact on human well-being is often underestimated in contemporary society. Despite its seemingly harmless nature, materialism can have far-reaching consequences that fundamentally reshape individual lifestyles and potentially strain interpersonal relationships.

In light of these considerations, this paper delves into the factors that influence materialism and its relationship with compulsive buying behavior. Specifically, this paper examines the effect of peer group communication, TV advertisement and celebrity endorsement on materialism. The aim of this research is to investigate the association between these factors and materialism, with age and media exposure as control variables.

This paper consists of five sections. The first section presents the introduction, the problem to be discussed, and the reason for choosing this topic. Next, the theoretical framework is explained in the literature review, followed by the research methodology and the analysis results. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion section.

2. Literature review

Materialism forms the core of this research, and understanding its definition is crucial. As Chan and Prendergast (2007, p. 214) define it, materialism is "a set of attitudes which regard possessions as symbols of success, where possessions occupy a central part of life, and which include holding the belief that more possessions lead to more happiness". Studies have shown that

materialism is often associated with negative personality traits, such as possessiveness, envy or a lack of generosity (Chan and Prendergast, 2007; Pradhan, Israel and Jena, 2018). These traits can lead to strained relationships with loved ones, as materialistic tendencies may cause individuals to prioritize acquiring possessions over fostering connections. Financial issues can also arise, with materialistic people feeling a greater need for a higher income than their non-materialistic counterparts to maintain a "normal" life (Christopher, Saliba and Deadmarsh, 2009). Interestingly, research suggests that materialistic behavior is more prevalent in industrialized capitalist cultures (Fromm, 2005). Additionally, societies that emphasize individual economic success may contribute to this trend, as people prioritize external goals for social recognition (Kasser and Ryan, 1993). These observations about the influence of social and cultural factors on materialism highlight the importance of investigating how social interactions, such as peer communication, celebrity endorsement and exposure to television advertisements, can impact young people's materialistic attitudes. In response to these concerns and the arguments presented above, this research delves further into the potential for a direct influence of materialism on compulsive buying behavior.

Peer group communication, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2024), refers to interactions within a group of individuals who share similar age and interests, acting as a reference point for one another. Previous research suggests that although parents influence individuals' rational consumption patterns, friends may be a more influential factor in shaping materialistic tendencies (Sulaiman, Ali and Khatoon, 2019). Moreover, studies have shown that individuals from families with neglectful, divorced, or disruptive experiences might be more inclined to turn to impulsive consumption (Benmoyal-Bouzaglo and Moschis, 2010). Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Young people who pay more attention to peer opinions are more likely to exhibit higher levels of materialism.

Each of us has at least one role model in our lives, whether from family, friends, teachers, or even celebrities. These models significantly shape our behavior, often unconsciously. This is why celebrity endorsement is thus a crucial determinant in our analysis. When facing challenging times, our vulnerability increases our susceptibility to external influences (Chan, 2008; Chan and Zhang, 2007). Chan et al. (2013) exemplify this with the case of Joey Yung, a Hong Kong singer who became famous after winning a major prize. This newfound fame led to a million-dollar endorsement contract. This significant sum, offered despite the potential lack of substantial profit for the company, highlights the immense power that celebrities hold over us. In this regard, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Young people who report a stronger desire to mimic the lifestyle choices of their favorite celebrities are more likely to exhibit higher levels of materialism compared to those with a weaker attachment to the lifestyle of their favorite celebrities.

Since the early days of materialism research, television advertising has been a constant factor under analysis. Behavioral scientists were the first to speculate on the influence of advertisements on consumer behavior (Wells and Gubar, 1966). Churchill and Moschis (1979) found that young people desired clothing worn by their favorite television personalities. A macro-level study by McCardle and Speck (2019) showed that exposure to television advertising can lead to

a disconnect between desired lifestyles portrayed and reality, potentially causing disappointment. In addition to establishing a link between TV advertisement and materialism, micro-level research suggests that the type of television programming people watch can influence their materialistic tendencies. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Young people with higher exposure to TV advertisements are more likely to exhibit higher levels of materialism.

Compulsive buying behavior is a chronic form of shopping distinguished by a persistent urge to buy. This urge is often uncontrollable and disregards long-term consequences (Islam et al., 2017). Some researchers even define it as a psychiatric disorder where individuals lose control over their buying decisions (Pradhan, Israel and Jena, 2018). A common trait of compulsive buyers is the belief that expensive possessions are essential for a fulfilling life, more so than for those who do not suffer from this addiction (Dittmar and Drury, 2000). Tarka (2020) suggests that rapid economic and social changes can lead to increased materialism, citing Polish people as an example. Due to lower levels of contentment and a focus on personal needs, such individuals may be more susceptible to developing a compulsive buying behavior. Ong, Lau and Zainudin (2021) examine the financial consequences of compulsive buying behavior, focusing on the Malaysian perspective where acquiring more possessions is seen as a way to gain social power. On the psychological side, Müller, Mitchell and de Zwaan (2015) present findings from previous psychiatric studies conducted in Germany and the United States and report that at least 59% of individuals suffering from compulsive buying behavior also exhibit personality disorders. In light of these considerations, the following hypothesis is postulated:

H4: Young people's level of materialism is positively related to their compulsive buying behavior.

The research model and the proposed hypotheses are presented in Figure 1. This conceptual framework is adapted from the study of Islam et al. (2017) and shows materialism as a function of peer group communication, TV advertisement and celebrity endorsement, with two control variables, namely age and media exposure. In its turn, materialism is the determinant of compulsive buying behavior.

Figure 1: The conceptual research model
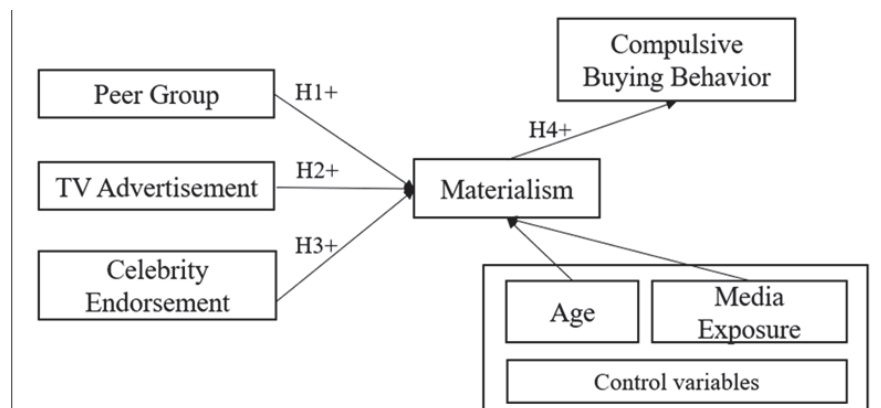
Source: Authors' own research

3. Research methodology

A survey was conducted to determine the level of materialism among individuals. Data was collected from N = 202 respondents using a Google Forms survey. The survey was open from October 2023 to April 2024 and was distributed through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and required the participant's consent. The questionnaire used in the survey was adapted from a previous study (Islam et al., 2017), and convenience sampling, where researchers had easier access to participants, was employed (Edgar and Manz, 2017). Snowball sampling was also used, with initial participants helping to recruit additional participants (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019).

The materialism value scale, derived from Richins and Dawson (1992), was used to analyze determinants of materialism. The scale consists of three domains: centrality, happiness, and success, measuring the importance of possessions, the belief that more possessions lead to happiness, and success based on possessions. Table 1 lists the variable dimensions and the corresponding scale items (Islam et al., 2017). We supplemented the scale with open-ended questions to find out how much time people spend watching news about their favorite celebrity and commonly used channels, referred to as media exposure. The items were translated into Romanian, and consistency was checked using the back-translation method. Respondents rated their level of agreement with the materialism scale questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement).

Table 1: The measurement items

Dimension	Items
Materialism dependent variables	
Materialism (M)	M1: Acquiring valuable things is important for my happiness.
	M2: Having luxury items is important to a happy life.
	M3: I feel good when I buy expensive things. People think of me as a success.
	M4: I would pay more for a product if people think of it as a sign of success.
	M5: I like to own expensive things than most people because this is a sign of success.
	M6: I love to buy new products that affect status and prestige.
Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB)	CBB1: When I have money, I cannot help but spend part or all of it.
	CBB2: I sometimes feel that something inside pushed me to go shopping.
	CBB3: There are times when I have a strong urge to buy.
	CBB4: I am often impulsive in my buying behavior.
	CBB5: I have often bought a product that I did not need, while knowing that I have very little money left.
Materialism independent variables	
Peer Group Communication (PGC)	PGC1: I always preferred my friends' opinion while shopping.
	PGC2: During shopping, I think whether my friends like this product or not.
	PGC3: My friends' opinion is very important for me about the products.
Media Celebrities Endorsement (MCD)	MCD1: I want to be as smart as movie idols.
	MCD2: I want to be as fashionable as celebrities looks like.
	MCD3: Media celebrities influenced me to good looking and attractive Appearance.
	MCD4: I want to look like media celebrity.
TV Advertisement (TVA)	TVA1: Advertisements to help me decide what things to buy.
	TVA2: Advertisements to know what I can buy to impress others.
	TVA3: I consume advertisements to know what brand has the product features I need.
	TVA4: Advertisements to have something to talk about with others.
Materialism control variables	
Media Exposure	ME1: On average, how many minutes do you spend during one day, informing yourselves about your favourite celebrities?
	ME2: Which are the sources you use to inform yourselves about your favourite celebrities?
	ME3: On average, how many minutes do you spend on the internet, during one day, informing yourselves about your favourite celebrities?
	ME4: On average, how many minutes do you spend watching TV, during one day, informing yourselves about your favourite celebrities?
	ME5: On average, how many minutes do you spend reading the newspaper, during one day, informing yourselves about your favourite celebrities?

Source: Authors' own research

The analysis was performed using RStudio and WarpPLS. The data was first imported into RStudio to analyze its summary and structure and to understand its descriptive aspects. The data was then standardized and analyzed using the partial least squares path modeling (PLS-PM) in WarpPLS 8.0. PLS-PM is a statistical technique that maximizes the explained variance in materialism using the proposed research model shown in Figure 1 and the control variables. The estimation algorithm includes two stages: the outer (measurement) model, which evaluates the relationships between the measurement items and their respective latent constructs, and the inner (structural) model, which estimates the structural relationships among latent constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

4. Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the demographic characteristics of the respondents. According to the sample description, participants were aged between 19 and 52 years, with a mean age of 23.35 years. Gender distribution is unbalanced, with 141 females (70.5%) and 59 males (29.5%). The majority of the respondents have graduate studies (117; 58.5%), followed by high school graduates (66; 33.0%). Most of the participants do not have a paid job (62; 31.0%), while 55 (27.5%) have an income above 4000 lei. The other income categories are relatively evenly distributed, representing between 7% and 12.5% of the respondents.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of sample demographics

Dimension	Category					Frequency
Age	Minimum	1st Quartile	Median	Mean	3rd Quartile	Maximum
	19	21	22	23.25	23	52
Gender	Female					141 (70.5%)
	Male					59 (29.5%)
Education	Highschool studies					66 (33.0%)
	Post-secondary studies					2 (1.0%)
	Graduate studies					117 (58.5%)
	Postgraduate studies					15 (7.5%)
Occupation	Employee					46 (23.0%)
	Unemployed					1 (0.5%)
	Student					153 (76.5%)
Income	I don't have any kind of paid activity					62 (31.0%)
	Less than 1000 lei					14 (7.0%)
	Between 1001 and 2000 lei					25 (12.5%)
	Between 2001 and 3000 lei					22 (11.0%)
	Between 3001 and 4000 lei					22 (11.0%)
	Over 4000 lei					55 (27.5%)

Source: Authors' own research

To optimize the model, the indicator loadings and cross-loadings were evaluated. The analysis revealed satisfactory results, except for the items M1, CBB1, ME2 and ME5. Consequently, these items were removed from the factors, resulting in an improvement. Although ME4 was slightly below the 0.7 threshold, the decision was to keep it in order to avoid excessively high loadings in the final model.

In the first part, we discuss three criteria in order to assess the outer (measurement) model: reliability of the internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). The composite reliability index and Cronbach's alpha index were used to assess the internal consistency. A good fit of these measures implies values above 0.7. In addition, average variance extracted (AVE) is another important indicator that assesses the construct variance in relation to measurement errors.

The reliability and convergent validity results of the measurement model are presented in Table 3. The composite reliability coefficients range from 0.854 to 0.911, exceeding the recommended value of 0.7. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha values are all greater than 0.7, ranging from 0.750 to 0.877, while the AVE values range from 0.595 to 0.722 and are all above the 0.5 threshold. Table 3 confirms the convergent validity of the variable constructs by examining the cross-loadings of our latent variables. Almost all loadings, ranging from 0.678 to 0.931, exceed the recommended threshold of 0.7, with one exception: ME4, which was still included in the analysis in order to avoid excessive values.

Table 3: Assessment of the measurement model and convergent validity of latent constructs

Construct	CR	CA	AVE	Item	Factor loading
Materialism (M)	0.911	0.877	0.672	M2	0.787
				M3	0.822
				M4	0.858
				M5	0.851
Peer Group Communication (PGC)	0.857	0.750	0.667	PGC1	0.798
				PGC2	0.807
				PGC3	0.845
Media Celebrity Endorsement (MCE)	0.874	0.808	0.636	MCD1	0.784
				MCD2	0.851
				MCD3	0.816
				MCD4	0.733
TV Advertisement (TVA)	0.854	0.772	0.595	TVA1	0.748
				TVA2	0.791
				TVA3	0.820
				TVA4	0.722
Compulsive Buying Behavior (CBB)	0.885	0.799	0.722	CBB2	0.852
				CBB3	0.787
				CBB4	0.843
				CBB5	0.754
Media Exposure (ME)	0.884	0.824	0.656	ME1	0.917
				ME3	0.931
				ME4	0.678

Source: Authors' own research

Table 4 demonstrates discriminant validity using AVE square roots. Diagonal scores exceed off-diagonal items in their respective row and column. Furthermore, all off-diagonal scores are below 0.8, confirming conceptual distinctiveness between constructs.

Table 4: Discriminant validity of latent constructs

Dimension	M	PGC	MCE	TVA	CBB	ME
M	**0.819**	0.285	0.464	0.559	0.348	0.117
PGC		**0.817**	0.404	0.363	0.214	0.202
MCE			**0.797**	0.536	0.230	0.297
TVA				**0.771**	0.332	0.244
CBB					**0.810**	0.205
ME						**0.850**

Source: Authors' own research

In the second part, we discuss the inner (structural) model outcomes, as presented in Table 5. These include the estimated path coefficients, significance levels and effect sizes for the latent constructs that influence the outcome variables, as well as goodness-of-fit indices, following Hair et al.'s (2019) structural model reporting procedure. Cohen's f2 equivalent is used to assess the associated effect sizes. The general results show R2 values of 0.42 and 0.13, indicating that 42% of the variation in materialism and 13% of the variation in compulsive buying behavior are explained by the model. The Tenenhaus GoF value is 0.410 and the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) is 0.08, below the acceptable threshold suggested by scholars (Hu and Bentler, 1999), indicating a good model fit. In addition, the Simpson's paradox ratio is 0.833, which is an acceptable value for assessing causality. The multicollinearity check shows that all VIF values are lower than 1.853, below the ideal recommended 3.3 threshold.

According to our analysis results, shown in Table 5, two out of the three determinants of materialism are statistically significant. Thus, media celebrity endorsement ($\beta = 0.227$, $p < 0.001$) and TV advertisement ($\beta = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$) both have a positive and statistically significant relationship with the degree of materialism, confirming H2 and H3. However, peer group communication ($\beta = 0.069$, $p = 0.161$) does not show a significant relationship with the level of materialism, suggesting that there is insufficient evidence to support H1. Furthermore, materialism ($\beta = 0.177$, $p = 0.005$) has a positive effect on compulsive buying behavior, thus confirming H4. Regarding the effect of control variables on materialism, age was found to be statistically insignificant ($\beta = 0.086$, $p = 0.109$), while media exposure shows a marginal statistical significance ($\beta = 0.100$, $p < 0.075$).

In terms of effect sizes, TV advertisement is the strongest predictor of materialism with a medium effect size of 0.244, followed by media celebrity endorsement with a small effect size of 0.106. Additionally, materialism has a small effect size of 0.063 on compulsive buying behavior. These effect sizes are strong enough to be considered from a practical point of view (Cohen, 1988). However, peer group communication has an effect size of 0.021, which, although meeting the recommended threshold of 0.02, is not significant for practical implications. The results indicate that the control variables, age and media exposure, have no significant effect on materialism, with values between 0.013 and 0.014, thus below the 0.02 threshold, suggesting a lack of practical relevance.

Table 5: The structural model results

Relationship	Path coefficients	Significance	Effect sizes
Peer Group Communication → Materialism	0.069	p = 0.161	0.021
Media Celebrity Endorsement → Materialism	0.227	p < 0.001	0.106
TV Advertisement → Materialism	0.392	p < 0.001	0.224
Materialism → Compulsive Buying Behavior	0.177	p = 0.005	0.063
Media Exposure → Materialism	0.100	p = 0.075	0.014
Age → Materialism	0.086	p = 0.109	0.013
Goodness of Fit Indices			
Model	Materialism	Compulsive Buying Behavior	
R^2 / Adjusted R^2	42% / 41%	13% / 12%	
Tenehaus GoF	0.410 (large)		

Notes: *** p-value < 0.001; ** p-value < 0.01; * p-value < 0.05
Tenehaus GoF: small >= 0.1, medium >= 0.25, large >= 0.36
Source: Authors' own research

5. Discussions and conclusions

This study adds to the existing literature on materialism and compulsive buying behavior, supporting the idea that multiple factors contribute to materialism and not just one category. Previous studies have shown that materialism is high in developing countries (Arthur et al., 2019), focusing on life satisfaction (Wiles et al., 2024), celebrities (Chan, 2011), and media channels (Agusiady, Saepudin and Aripin, 2024). Some studies examine sociological factors (Latif, Hasan and Khalid, 2021) or a combination of sociological and economic factors (Nairn and Opree, 2021), but few combine multiple factors. This study is important because it addresses these gaps in the literature.

The main findings confirm the importance of celebrity endorsement and TV advertisements in the development of materialism among youth in Romania. However, peer group communication does not play a significant role. Quantitatively, the analysis confirms previous findings on the influence of celebrity endorsement (Osei-Frimpong, Donkor and Owusu-Frimpong, 2019) and TV advertisements (Nairn and Opree, 2021). However, contrary to the existing literature (Chan, 2008), peer group communication does not have a strong influence on materialism.

In terms of compulsive buying behavior, some research supports a relationship between materialism and compulsive buying behavior (Ong, Lau and Zainudin, 2021), while others suggest that materialism is not a strong predictor (Tantawi, 2024). This study contributes to the understanding of this relationship and finds a statistically significant link between materialism and compulsive buying behavior.

In summary, this study confirms the influence of TV advertisements and celebrity endorsement on materialism and highlights the need for further investigation into the role of peer group communication, as shown in Table 6. Additionally, it provides insights into the relationship between materialism and compulsive buying behavior.

Table 6: Summary of the hypothesis testing

Hypotheses	Type	Relationship	Decision
H1	+	Peer Group Communication → Materialism	Not supported
H2	+	Media Celebrity Endorsement → Materialism	Supported
H3	+	TV Advertisement → Materialism	Supported
H4	+	Materialism → Compulsive Buying Behavior	Supported

Source: Author's own research

This study also aimed to understand why peer group communication was not significant in the proposed model. Although age initially seemed irrelevant, this analysis showed that it is not significant due to its lack of linearity. However, it can be treated separately based on two groups: those under 35 and those over 35. This is supported by existing literature suggesting a relationship between materialism and age, particularly in children (Nairn and Opree, 2021). Media exposure was also explored further, with the conclusion that newspapers are no longer of significant importance compared to the internet.

In terms of practical implications, the study provides crucial information for public institutions that regulate advertising placements. Countries can be classified into three categories: those minimally impacted by regulations, those with some restrictions (e.g., children's ads shown at night), and those banning certain ads to discourage materialism. This research informs future regulations and helps marketing departments tailor campaigns to current materialistic trends. Instead of widespread advertising, companies can focus on relevant media channels. Furthermore, there is a need for educational programs to improve understanding of materialism and reduce the consequences of compulsive buying behavior.

This study analyzed determinants of materialism, including peer group communication, TV advertisement, and celebrity endorsement. Control variables such as age and media exposure were also considered. The study found that in Romania, peer group communication was not significantly related to materialism, while TV advertisement and celebrity endorsement were. Age was not significant in a linear relationship, suggesting a need for further research with different age groups. Media exposure was found to be a significant control variable. The study also highlighted the limitations, such as a small and unbalanced sample size, and the need for a longitudinal study to capture changes in attitudes over time. Future research could focus on analyzing the two age groups identified and conducting the study at a national and international level, considering different advertising regulations.

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