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Material World: The Effects of Meditation Content on Materialistic Values

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Material world: The effects of meditation content on materialistic values

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, Western cultures are highly materialistic and defined by consumeristic goals to garner as much “stuff” as possible (Berger, 2015). This constant pursuit has demonstrable adverse effects on personal and social well being (Bahl et al., 2016; Wang, et al., 2017), while overconsumption also has devastating impacts on the global environment. Previous studies found a negative relationship between levels of mindfulness and levels of materialism (Nagpaul & Pang, 2015; Watson, 2019), indicating the potential for mindfulness to combat otherwise materialistic behaviors. Furthermore, previous research demonstrated gratitude interventions led to lower scores on materialism (Chaplin, et al., 2018), indicating the significance of meditation content on one’s materialistic values. Following literature that meditation increased a person’s suggestibility (Gloede, et al., 2021), experiencing a ‘material abundance’ meditation may promote increased materialistic values. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between mindfulness meditation content and materialistic values through an experimental manipulation. We hypothesized participants who experienced a ‘material abundance’ meditation would show the highest materialistic values, followed by those who experienced a ‘body scan’ meditation, and lastly, those who experienced a ‘gratitude’ meditation would show the lowest materialistic values.

Material world: Effect of meditation content on materialistic values

In the twenty-first century, Western cultures are notably materialistic, with the United States defined by its consumer culture in which the goal is to garner as much “stuff” as possible throughout the lifetime. Consumerism promotes the idea that the more a person has, the more successful they are, which has led to an increasing ideation and lust for material things (Berger, 2015). This constant pursuit can have adverse effects on personal and social well being (Bahl et al., 2016; Wang, et al., 2017) and may lead to more mindless or conspicuous consumption, characterized by purchasing items without thought, in excess, or as a means of displaying one's social status. Overconsumption can also have a negative impact on the environment, demonstrated through the devastating impacts of fast fashion and fossil fuel industries. It is critical in the age of climate change to explore techniques to combat Western materialism.

Previous literature demonstrated mindfulness can be used to enhance critical thinking, self reflection, and external locus of control (Seramboonsang, et al., 2020). Therefore, it is conceptualized that mindfulness tactics are indispensable to managing behaviors and attitudes on a daily basis. Mindfulness has transformative potential for personal well-being and behaviors, particularly concerning consumption patterns. Previous research indicated that mindfulness was beneficial in mitigating materialism. Helm & Subramaniam (2019) found that mindfulness counterbalanced psychological drivers of overconsumption and materialism, such as the need for fulfillment and alienation or non-connectedness. Bharti, et al. (2022) found that dispositional mindfulness was negatively related to levels of conspicuous consumption or purchasing material things to appear wealthy and higher in status. In similar findings, mindfulness was negatively correlated with levels of materialism (Nagpaul & Pang, 2015; Watson, 2019). This negative relationship may be attributed to the emphasis on nonattachment for both thoughts and material

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objects in mindfulness, witnessed in a study conducted by Elphinstone and Whitehead (2019) which found higher levels of materialism were associated with lower levels of nonattachment.

An element often emphasized via mindfulness is gratitude due to its emphasis on appreciating the present moment. Chaplin, et al. (2018) found that gratitude created a greater appreciation for the things in one's life, and led to a sense of security. In relation to consumerism, previous research demonstrated higher levels of gratitude were associated with lower levels of materialism (Chaplin, et al., 2018; Nagpaul & Pang, 2015). While correlation does not imply causation, there is sufficient evidence for the relationship between higher levels of gratitude and lower levels of materialism, indicating potential for gratitude to be explored as an antidote to materialistic values via mindfulness.

In regards to motivating behavioral changes, mindfulness meditation can have similar effects as hypnosis; those who participated in mindfulness meditation and hypnosis scored similarly on tests for suggestibility (Gloede, et al., 2021). Moreover, a state of mindfulness was found to be similar to states of hypnosis (Farb, 2012), though research is still in preliminary stages. While there is a gap in literature regarding the significance of meditation content on values, research demonstrating the similar suggestibility of those who experience mindfulness meditation prompts exploration. Moreover, while in a relaxed state of meditation which may increase suggestibility, it is plausible those experiencing a meditation idolizing an abundant life could have higher materialistic values as a result.

Typical meditation content includes that of a body scan, wherein participants are prompted to nonjudgmentally focus on parts of the body (Sauer-Zavala, et al., 2013). This technique helps center attention on body sensations and focused breathing. The body plays a predominant role in meditation and mindfulness, all the while amplifying attentional processing

and control (Gibson, 2019). There is a plethora of other meditation contents which emerged in the landscape to address specific needs, such as compassion, sleep, anxiety, stress, or grief meditations. However, particularly among the guided meditations available online, there is a growing industry for “McMindfulness” which promotes materialism guised as ‘prosperity’ or ‘abundance’ meditations, in which mindfulness is used with intention or unwittingly for self-serving and ego-enhancing purposes that run counter to tenant teachings to let go of ego-attachment and instead as a means of self-regulation or manifesting materialistic lifestyles (Forbes, 2019). Despite the rise in ‘abundance’ meditations which idolize materialism in a mindfulness context traditionally associated with detachment as well as evidence linking mindfulness and gratitude as a means of lowering materialistic values, few have explored the impact of the mindfulness activity’s content on materialistic values.

In an exploration of the effect of meditation content on materialistic values, we hypothesized that participants who experience a ‘material abundance’ meditation will show the highest materialistic values, followed by those who experience a ‘body scan’ meditation, and lastly, those who experience a ‘gratitude’ meditation will show the lowest materialistic values.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from Introductory Psychology classes at Belmont University using SONA, an online recruiting platform. Participants were awarded course credit for their participation. The sample consisted of ___ students between ___ and ___ years of age ($M = __$, $SD = __$). ___ participants identified as female, ___ as male, and ___ as non-binary or gender fluid. The sample was ___ Caucasian, ___ Black/African American, ___ Asian, ___ American Native/Alaska Native, ___ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, ___ Hispanic and ___ Latino. Participants reported

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previously engaged in mindfulness practices __ times on average (SD=__), with __ as the most popular form of mindfulness practiced.

Materials

Materials utilized in this study included three guided meditations, the Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004), and demographic and participant information.

Guided Meditations

Participants were randomly assigned to experience one of three guided meditations via an audio recording. The first was a ‘material abundance’ meditation which prompted participants to imagine prosperous situations occurring in their lives, such as “money flowing into their bank accounts” (My Peace of Mindfulness, 2021). The second option was a ‘body scan’ meditation which asked participants to focus on various aspects of their physical bodies and sensations happening in these areas (Great Meditation, 2018). The third was a ‘gratitude’ meditation which prompted participants to think through things they appreciate, including body parts, circumstances, and loved ones (Great Meditation, 2020). All meditations were 10 minutes in length, narrated by a female voice backed by instrumental music, and emphasized the breath and present moment, traditional to mindfulness meditation practices.

Material Values Scale (MVS)

The Material Values Scale (MVS) measured beliefs about the importance to own material things consisting of three subscales: 'centrality,' 'success,' and 'happiness' (Richins, 2004). The MVS was a 18 item, 7-point Likert scale in which 1 indicated strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. The MVS included statements such as “*I like a lot of luxury in my life*” in which higher levels of agreement indicated higher materialistic values (alpha = __).

Demographic & Participant Information

We collected information on participants' demographic information, including age, gender, race, and school year through text box and dropdown menu options. Additionally, we asked participants to indicate previous experience with mindfulness or meditation activities by indicating frequency and type through a multiple choice option, such as "*How frequently have you experienced mindfulness meditations in the past?*" and "*What form(s) of mindfulness practices have you experienced in the past? (Guided Meditation, Sitting Vipassana, Other).*"

Procedure

Participants signed up for the study via SONA, an online recruiting platform. They were then directed to participate in the study online via a Qualtrics link, which took less than 30 minutes total to complete. Participants provided informed consent and were randomly assigned to experience one of three 10 minute mindfulness meditations ('material abundance,' 'body scan,' or 'gratitude') via an audio recording. Next, participants indicated their level of agreement with 18 statements via the Material Values Scale. Lastly, individuals provided demographic and participant information, including their age, race, academic year, gender identity, and amount of previous experience with various types of mindfulness practices. Once all components of the online study were completed, participants were debriefed concerning the purpose of the study. Then, participants were directed to a separate Qualtrics survey link to receive credit for participation and dismissed.

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