



## A Cross-Cultural Examination of Materialism and Happiness in Six Countries

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### Abstract

*Perceptions of materialism and happiness are not well understood globally as the constructs are multifaceted and operationalized differently in studies. This study examined the perceptions of materialism and happiness among samples of adults from six countries to examine how these constructs are understood in independent and collectivist cultures. While much research on materialism and happiness has been conducted in individualistic Western cultures, cross-cultural research has been less common. Measures of materialism, happiness, demographics, and open-ended questions (about what participants valued most in life and what really mattered in their current and future life situation) were administered to participants (N = 865) from Malaysia, India, Japan, Nigeria, Austria, and the United States. In addition to finding a negative relationship between materialism and happiness for the entire sample ( $r = -.15, p < .001$ ), results highlighted several country and demographic similarities and differences for the major measures. Conclusions and implications address the relationship between materialism and happiness as well as how social, cultural, and historical factors relate to perceptions of happiness and materialism.*

**KEYWORDS:** MATERIALISM, SUBJECTIVE HAPPINESS, PERSONAL VALUES, LIFE VALUES, CROSS-CULTURAL

## A Cross-Cultural Examination of Materialism and Happiness in Six Countries

Over the past several decades, researchers have devoted a great deal of attention to the concept of materialism, how it develops, and what other variables relate to it (e.g., Atanasova & Eckhardt, 2021). Kasser's (2016) conceptualization of materialism included two major factors. People's materialism can be increased or decreased through the influence of their parents and friends, society, or the media. In addition, materialistic values can arise when people feel threatened or insecure or are concerned about rejection, economic fears, or thoughts about mortality. Much interest has also been devoted to exploring the relationship between materialism and people's feelings about themselves. One of the most consistent findings has been a negative correlation between materialistic values and happiness and subjective well-being (e.g., Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Dittmar et al., 2014; Górnik-Durose, 2020; Van Boven, 2005). Recent research (Isham et al., 2022) also shows that materialism is negatively associated with mindfulness, flow experiences, and sustainable lifestyle choices.

Some researchers have been interested in cross-cultural differences in materialism. Whereas there are good reasons to use standardized measures of materialism and happiness when conducting this kind of research, there are also fundamental limitations to their use. For example, people's responses to standardized measures may not be an accurate reflection of their "core" values. Both constructs are likely to be malleable perceptions, subject to social, environmental, cultural, and historical events and changes (e.g., Li et al., 2015; Trzcińska & Sekścińska, 2021).

Research on materialism across different countries shows mixed results. For example, Ger and Belk (1996) compared college students from several countries on materialism scores as well as whether they viewed a variety of products and services as important or unimportant to own and as luxuries or necessities. They found minimal differences across the cultures they used (which were primarily Western industrialized nations). However, they did not examine how materialism related to subjective happiness across those cultures. Individuals whose self-views are based primarily on feedback from others tend to report higher materialism scores, and this tendency appears to be consistent across some cultures (e.g., Zhang et al., 2020).

### Life Values and Meaning

Researchers have long been interested in what people value in their lives and the things that matter to them. For example, The World Values Survey (WVS) (<https://worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>) is a well-known measure of what people value most in life. This international survey, in use since 1981, focuses on changes in people's beliefs, values, and motivations across multiple domains. Among the dimensions identified through the WVS are the importance of family, friends, leisure, politics, work, and religion to people's lives. Using databases such as the WVS, researchers (e.g., Lu et al., 2019) have found that work plays a central role in people's lives across many cultures. Kornaszewska-Polak (2021) and Wan et al. (2022) found that family can play a similar central role in people's lives.

Research on "meaning of life" tends to focus on big-picture facets of living, such as significance, purpose, and coherence (e.g., Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Hauskeller, 2022; Martela & Steger, 2022). In addition, meaning of life researchers focus on the perception of meaningfulness and the search for meaning (e.g., Schnell, 2009, 2020; Vail & Routledge, 2020). Research shows that meaningfulness promotes social and community engagement, well-being, and happiness (e.g., Routledge & FioRito, 2021; Trzebiński et al., 2020). Other research highlights the ways that people in different cultures find meaning and value in their lives. For example, Kok et al. (2015) studied Malaysian young adults and found that happiness, relationships with friends and family, and being goal-oriented were the most important contributors to finding meaning in life.

In a recent study of U.S. college students, Poirier et al. (2020) attempted to expand research on life values, things that matter, materialism, and happiness. In that project, participants received standardized measures of these constructs as well as open-ended questions about what they value most in life and what really matters to them in their current life situation and in the future. People who reported deriving their happiness from materialistic values tended to be less happy overall. In addition, people who mentioned valuing God/religion reported lower levels of materialistic happiness, whereas participants who reported family as a life value showed higher levels of happiness than those who did not include family.

These results were promising, particularly with respect to possible cross-cultural differences. In the current study, we decided to expand data collection to five other countries in addition to the U.S. data. We expected to find a negative relationship between happiness and materialism across all cultures, as well as differences in what people value most and what they indicate really matters based on the characteristics of their culture (e.g., individualism and collectivism).

## Method

### Participants & Data Sources

Participants were 865 adults drawn from Nigeria ( $n = 86$ ), Austria ( $n = 257$ ), Malaysia ( $n = 90$ ), India ( $n = 100$ ), Japan ( $n = 132$ ), and the United States of America ( $n = 200$ ). Participants from all of the countries were college students, with the exception of Nigeria; data from Nigeria came from staff and students at a national conference. We desired participants from a variety of individualistic and collectivist cultures and per capita GDP levels. Table 1 provides gender and age data for each sample. The majority of the participants reported being unemployed (38%) or having part-time employment (18%), with 45% of the sample reporting either some college or a college degree.

Table 1 Demographics: Age and Gender by Country

Country	Age <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Gender (F/M)	% Female
United States ( $n = 200$ )	20.16 (3.53)	132/68	66%
Austria ( $n = 257$ )	23.54 (5.13)	181/76	70%
Japan ( $n = 132$ )	20.31 (4.18)	50/81	38%
India ( $n = 100$ )	22.42 (4.18)	42/58	42%
Malaysia ( $n = 90$ )	23.94 (3.05)	74/15	83%
Nigeria ( $n = 86$ )	37.50 (14.76)	25/60	29%

Note. Gender totals may differ from sample sizes due to missing data.

### Measures

Participants completed standardized measures of materialism and subjective happiness. The short form of the *Material Values Scale* (MVS; Richins, 2004) consists of 15 items pertaining to materialism subscales of success (e.g., “I like to own things that impress people”), centrality (e.g., “buying things gives me a lot of pleasure”) and happiness (e.g., “I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things”). Higher “success” scores indicate people who see the acquisition of material goods as establishing or determining their social status and personal achievements. People with high “centrality” scores see material possessions as essential to their sense of self and overall life. And people whose enjoyment in life is dependent on material goods and their acquisition tend to score higher on “happiness.” Participants rated the items using a 5-point

Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating greater materialistic values. Richins (2004) and Lipocvan et al. (2015) provide evidence supporting the reliability and validity of the MVS. For the current study's entire sample, internal consistency values were acceptable for total MVS (.83) and subscale (success = .77; centrality = .52; happiness = .78) scores. Total MVS scale internal consistency values by country were as follows: USA = .81; Austria = .86; Japan = .68; India = .76; Malaysia = .77; and Nigeria = .75.

The *Subjective Happiness Scale* (SHS, Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) is a brief (4-item) measure of global happiness. Researchers have used the SHS to gather brief assessments of how happy people are overall and compared to their peers. Participants rate the items (e.g., "In general, I consider myself...") using 7-point scales (1 = *not a very happy person*, 7 = *a very happy person*). Higher scores on the SHS reflect greater happiness. The SHS is a popular and well-validated measure of happiness used in many cultures (e.g., O'Connor, Crawford, & Holder, 2015). In the current study, internal consistency values for the SHS were acceptable for the entire sample (.72), with individual country values as follows: USA = .78; Austria = .82; Japan = .38; India = .71; Malaysia = .51; and Nigeria = .60.

Participants also completed two open-ended questions, by describing "the three things you value the most in life" and "what it is that really matters to you in your current life situation and in the future." For each country sample, we followed the same content coding procedure. First, we provided a coding guide that described the different response categories to a set of three independent coders. The coders assigned the responses from a subset of the data to one of six categories (God/religion, family, material goods, friends, physical and mental health, and education). We then examined interrater reliability using the Cohen's Kappa coefficient. If reliability was suboptimal or additional training was needed, we asked the coders to rate another set of items. Once acceptable levels of interrater reliability were obtained (e.g., .80 or higher), one of the coders rated the entire data set.

Participants completed several demographic items, including age, gender, level of education, and employment status. They also rated three general items: "I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own," "My overall physical health is good," and "I have enough resources and/or income to meet my needs" using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Due to an oversight, the Japanese sample did not rate the "don't pay attention" item.

### Procedure

The survey was completed either online with a commercial survey program (Austria, India, Japan, US) or in person with paper surveys (Nigeria, Malaysia). For non-English speaking participants/countries, we translated the survey into the home language and then checked its accuracy through a back-translation process. All data were collected prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

We received approval from the Institutional Review Board as well as site authorization from each university. Following these approvals, faculty recruited students and staff to participate in the study and provided informed consent documents to them.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

We first examined overall trends reflected by the entire sample. Table 2 shows the scores for materialism (total and subscale) and subjective happiness scores. As the table indicates, Japan and Malaysia reported the highest levels of materialism, with the Austrian and US samples showing the lowest materialism scores. Nigeria, Malaysia, and the US participants reported the highest levels of happiness, with Japan showing the lowest happiness score.

Examining the entire sample, we also found a significant gender difference on the materialism centrality subscale,  $t(960) = 3.94, p < .001$ . On this measure, women ( $M = 14.82, SD = 2.76$ ) reported that materialism was more central to their sense of self and overall life than did men ( $M = 14.07, SD = 3.01$ ). There was also a significant gender difference on the materialism happiness subscale,  $t(960) = 4.08, p < .001$ . For this subscale, men ( $M = 15.23, SD = 3.88$ ) reported that their enjoyment in life is more dependent on material goods and their acquisition compared to what women reported ( $M = 14.17, SD = 3.96$ ).

Table 2 Materialism and Happiness Scores by Country

Country	Materialism			Subjective	
	Total	Success	Centrality	Happiness	Happiness
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
United States ( $n = 200$ )	41.10 (7.69)	12.73 (3.12)	14.15 (2.95)	13.91 (3.57)	5.23 (1.05)
Austria ( $n = 257$ )	37.68 (8.69)	11.46 (3.88)	14.84 (2.81)	11.52 (3.80)	4.97 (1.07)
Japan ( $n = 132$ )	48.13 (6.16)	16.09 (2.79)	15.50 (2.60)	16.53 (2.80)	4.50 (0.80)
India ( $n = 100$ )	45.52 (7.69)	15.17 (3.79)	14.65 (2.86)	15.73 (2.98)	4.94 (1.14)
Malaysia ( $n = 90$ )	48.13 (7.12)	16.92 (3.36)	14.42 (2.40)	16.79 (3.13)	5.24 (0.72)
Nigeria ( $n = 86$ )	45.06 (7.95)	14.35 (4.21)	12.65 (2.90)	18.06 (3.58)	5.66 (1.10)
Total Sample ( $N = 865$ )	42.86 (8.71)	13.75 (4.04)	14.57 (2.87)	14.54 (4.11)	5.05 (1.05)

Note. Higher scores indicate higher levels of materialism and happiness.

Although the age variable was skewed toward younger, college-aged participants, we found small but significant relationships of age with the major measures. In particular, age was positively associated with overall physical health ( $r(837) = .15, p < .001$ ) and negatively associated with having enough resources ( $r(836) = -.10, p < .001$ ). Younger participants reported higher levels of materialism success ( $r(838) = -.10, p = .003$ ), materialism centrality ( $r(838) = -.27, p < .001$ ), and total materialism ( $r(838) = -.12, p < .001$ ). Finally, older participants reported higher levels of subjective happiness ( $r(822) = .18, p < .001$ ).

### Test of Hypotheses

Table 3 provides the correlations between subjective happiness and materialism scores by country. As the table indicates, and as we expected, there was a small but significant negative correlation between overall materialism and happiness scores. In addition, Malaysia, India, and Austria showed the strongest negative relationships between materialism and happiness. The other countries showed small or weak relationships. The other point of interest is that the happiness facet of the MVS is most strongly related to the subjective happiness scores across 4 of the 7 countries. This is not that surprising given that the happiness MVS facet refers to how much people's happiness is derived from material goods. This finding indicates that the more people view their happiness as contingent on material goods, the lower their subjective happiness tends to be (at least for those 4 countries). Thus, there was good support for our primary hypothesis.

Table 3 Correlations between Subjective Happiness and Materialism Scores by Country

Country	Materialism			
	Total	Success	Centrality	Happiness
United States ( <i>n</i> = 200)	-0.03	0.07	0.09	-.21 **
Austria ( <i>n</i> = 257)	-.28 ***	-.17 **	-.15 *	-.36 ***
Japan ( <i>n</i> = 132)	0.06	.21 *	-0.01	-0.07
India ( <i>n</i> = 100)	-.20 *	-0.16	-0.04	-.27 **
Malaysia ( <i>n</i> = 90)	-.22 *	-0.15	-0.15	-.23 **
Nigeria ( <i>n</i> = 86)	-0.07	0.07	-0.19	-0.08
Total sample ( <i>N</i> = 865)	-.15 ***	-.07 *	-.12 **	-.15 ***

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Tables 4 and 5 provide the data for the “value most” and “really matters” open-ended responses. Table 4 shows that, except for the US and Nigeria, there were very few mentions of God/religion. The US and Austria samples mentioned family much more often than the other countries. The material goods category was most frequently mentioned by Malaysia. Finally, education was not particularly valued by the samples (except for Nigeria - which likely reflects the older sample).

Table 4 Percentage of Open-Ended Category Responses to the “the Three Things you Value the Most in Life” Question by Country

	God/ Religion	Family	Material Goods	Friends	Health	Education
United States ( <i>n</i> = 196)	27	81	23	57	35	17
Austria ( <i>n</i> = 227)	2	85	27	58	60	6
Japan ( <i>n</i> = 121)	1	56	53	50	71	11
India ( <i>n</i> = 81)	4	45	36	29	50	11
Malaysia ( <i>n</i> = 78)	3	29	71	10	36	10
Nigeria ( <i>n</i> = 62)	30	43	50	14	47	36

Note. Values refer to the percentage of participants who mentioned the category. Samples sizes reflect only participants who answered the open-ended question.

Table 5 shows that, once again, God/religion was not often mentioned as something that really matters to the participants. The education category was more often mentioned for most of the countries (compared to what is valued most), with the exception of the Nigerian sample. The family and health categories were most often mentioned by US and Austria participants compared to other categories. Finally, the Malaysian sample most often mentioned material goods compared to the other categories.

Table 5 Percentage of Open-Ended Category Responses to the “What it is that Really Matters to you in your Current Life Situation and in the Future” Question by Country

	God/ Religion	Family	Material Goods	Friends	Health	Education
United States (n = 196)	7	36	22	17	24	33
Austria (n = 227)	1	60	29	39	63	18
Japan (n = 121)	8	20	40	20	47	15
India (n = 81)	2	19	30	13	36	21
Malaysia (n = 78)	9	57	65	20	54	14
Nigeria (n = 62)	27	29	36	3	36	32

Note. Values refer to the percentage of participants who mentioned the category. Samples sizes reflect only participants who answered the open-ended question.

**Supplementary Analyses on Entire Sample and Individual Countries**

Table 6 shows how materialism and subjective happiness scores for entire sample related to the general items about not paying attention to other’s material objects, physical health, and having enough resources/income. Not surprisingly, people who were more likely to not pay attention to the material objects that other people own reported being less materialistic and happier, although these relationships were weak. Ratings of overall physical health were unrelated to materialism scores, but positively related to happiness scores. Finally, people who were more likely to report having enough resources and/or income to meet their needs were less materialistic (particularly with respect to deriving their happiness from material things) and happier.

We also examined these relationships separately for each country. There were several interesting findings from these analyses (see Table 7). First, Austrian and Malaysian participants who reported not paying attention to the material objects of others were much less materialistic compared to the participants from other countries. Higher ratings of overall physical health were associated with higher subjective happiness especially for the Japanese and Austrian participants. And, unlike the other countries, the US participants who reported greater overall physical health were significantly more materialistic. Finally, having enough resources to meet one’s needs was associated with less materialism and greater happiness for the participants from most of the countries.

Table 6 Correlations of General Items with Materialism and Happiness Measures for Entire Sample

Materialism	I don’t pay much attention to the material objects other people own	My overall physical health is good	I have enough resources and/or income to meet my needs
Success	-.20 ***	.08*	-.18 ***
Centrality	-.22 ***	0.05	-0.04
Happiness	-.11 **	-0.02	-.43 ***
Total Score	-.22 ***	0.05	-.30 ***
Subjective Happiness	.15 ***	.10 ***	.17 ***

Note. N = 863 for physical health and enough resources items; 731 for don’t pay attention item; \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

Table 7 Correlations of General Items with Materialism and Happiness Measures for Individual Countries

Materialism	I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own	My overall physical health is good	I have enough resources and/or income to meet my needs
<b>Japan (N = 132)</b>			
Success	---	0.04	-0.03
Centrality	---	0.05	-0.05
Happiness	---	-0.1	-.31 ***
Total Score	---	0	-.18 *
Subjective Happiness	---	.31 ***	.20 *
<b>Austria (N = 257)</b>			
Success	-.42 ***	-0.01	-.17 **
Centrality	-.36 ***	0.02	-0.07
Happiness	-.24 **	-.15 *	-.49 ***
Total Score	-.41 ***	-0.07	-.32 ***
Subjective Happiness	0.1	.32 ***	.20 **
<b>Nigeria (N = 86)</b>			
Success	-0.08	0.02	0.1
Centrality	-0.13	-0.11	0.01
Happiness	-0.07	-0.1	-.29 **
Total Score	-0.13	-0.08	-0.07
Subjective Happiness	0.12	0.17	0.07
<b>US (N = 200)</b>			
Success	0.03	.39 ***	.22 **
Centrality	0.07	.30 ***	-0.01
Happiness	-.36 ***	.21 **	-0.09
Total Score	-0.13	.37 ***	0.05
Subjective Happiness	.17 *	-0.08	.15 *
<b>India (N = 100)</b>			
Success	-.20 *	0.12	-0.04
Centrality	-0.18	0.04	-0.1
Happiness	-0.12	-0.03	-.31 **
Total Score	-.22 *	0.06	-0.18
Subjective Happiness	-0.02	0.12	.27 **
<b>Malaysia (N = 90)</b>			
Success	-.43 ***	0.05	-.31 **
Centrality	-.46 ***	-0.21	-.23 *
Happiness	-0.09	-0.03	-.43 ***
Total Score	-.40 ***	-0.11	-.41 ***
Subjective Happiness	0.15	0	0.19

Note. Japan sample did not complete "pay much attention" item; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



Analysis of the open-ended category mentions (yes/no) by gender, using the entire sample, revealed some interesting differences. First, female participants (72%) more often mentioned family as something they value most compared to male participants (60%),  $X^2(2) = 14.28, p < .001$ . On the other hand, male participants (45%) more often mentioned material goods as something they value most compared to female participants (37%),  $X^2(2) = 6.01, p = .05$ . Finally, with respect to what really matters, female participants (45%) mentioned family more often than did male participants (30%),  $X^2(2) = 17.98, p < .001$ .

Repeating these analyses on participants from individual countries also produced several interesting results. There were no significant gender X mention differences for the Japanese participants. For the “value most” question, female participants (22%) from the US sample more often mentioned education compared to male participants (7%),  $X^2(1) = 6.71, p = .01$ . Women (61%) from the Nigeria sample reported valuing family more often than men (35%),  $X^2(1) = 4.25, p = .04$ . For the “really matters” question, there was a tendency for male participants (7%) from Malaysia to mention God/religion more often compared to female participants (0%),  $X^2(1) = 4.70, p = .03$ . Female participants (55%) from the India sample were more likely to mention material goods compared to male participants (30%),  $X^2(1) = 5.56, p = .02$ . Alternatively, male participants (45%) from the Nigeria sample more often mentioned material goods compared to female participants (19%),  $X^2(1) = 4.14, p = .04$ . Finally, female participants (66%) from the Austria sample more often mentioned family compared to male participants (49%),  $X^2(1) = 6.23, p = .01$ .

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that life values, materialistic attitudes, and subjective happiness varied across six countries. Our findings reveal the need for further cross-cultural research examining the relationships among these variables. As we expected, participants across the entire sample who reported greater overall levels of materialism scored lower on happiness. This result is consistent with much previous research (e.g., Dittmar et al., 2014; Górnik-Durose, 2020). However, the observed relationship was weak.

Participants from Austria, India, and Malaysia showed the strongest negative relationship between overall materialism and happiness, with participants from the US, Japan, and Nigeria showing very small and non-significant correlations. Alternatively, four countries—Austria, India, Malaysia, and US—showed stronger and significant relationships between the materialism happiness subscale (reflecting the tendency to acquire material goods to enjoy life) and the happiness measure. Apart from the Austria sample, the materialism success and centrality subscales from the other samples were unrelated to happiness scores. In other words, happiness appears to be unrelated to using the acquisition of materials goods to establish or determine one’s social status or personal achievements (success) and seeing material possessions as essential to one’s sense of self and overall life (centrality). Given that participants from different countries showed variety on the strength of the materialism/happiness relationship, the importance of attending to need to cultural differences is apparent.

When we considered the entire sample, we found interesting demographic differences. Whereas women reported that materialism was more central to their sense of self and overall life than did men, men reported that their enjoyment in life was more dependent on material goods and their acquisition compared to what women reported. This is consistent with past cross-cultural research (e.g., Workman & Lee, 2010) showing that women report higher materialism centrality than men. These results suggest that women might place greater importance on acquiring material objects and use those to contribute to their sense of self or identity, whereas men appear to use the acquisition of material objects for their everyday enjoyment. The Nigerian sample, which was older and better educated than the other samples, reported the highest happiness scores among the six countries, which is consistent with earlier data from the World Values Survey (Minkov, 2007).

Our open-ended questions were phrased in a manner that should not have prompted or caused the participants to report specific items or categories. Listing “the three things that you value the most in life” provided an interesting snapshot of what is likely to be most salient for people from each country. Answering “what is it that really matters to you in your current life situation and in the future,” while having some similarities to the “values most” question, provided us with insights about potential differences between what is valued and what really matters. Taking this approach resulted in categories that were very similar to those used by the World Values Survey (e.g., Kornaszewska-Polak, 2021), which include the importance of the domains of family, friends, leisure, politics, work, and religion for people’s lives.

The relative infrequency of mentions of God/religion was also a noteworthy aspect of our results. Around a quarter of the US and Nigeria participants mentioned this facet as something they value, with only the Nigeria participants also mentioning it as something that really matters. The Nigeria sample was older than the other groups, and the US data were collected in the southern part of the country, an area frequently referred to as the “Bible Belt” (Heyrman, 2013). For the other samples, God/religion was rarely mentioned by participants in response to the two open-ended questions.

We can think of a few possible reasons for this finding. First, young people worldwide are becoming less traditionally religious or choosing unaffiliated in their self-definition (e.g., Inglehart, 2020). Second, the data might reflect a “distinctiveness” effect (e.g., McGuire & McGuire, 1988). According to research in this area, people tend to define themselves based on the attributes that make them distinct from other people. In some of our samples that are traditionally considered highly religious (e.g., India and Malaysia), participants might have shared a religious orientation that served as a less-distinct “background” when they answered the open-ended questions.

#### **Limitations of the Current Study**

The gender differences we found between countries must be interpreted with caution. As Table 1 shows, the Nigerian sample was much older than the participants from the other countries. In addition, the participants from the US, Austria, and Malaysia samples were majority female, whereas the participants from the other countries were primarily male. More generally, people from university settings (in some countries such as India and Malaysia) may not be as representative as the population at large, with respect to social status and resource accessibility.

Future researchers might also consider using a different measure of materialism when conducting cross-cultural research. For example, Gurel-Atay et al. (2021) developed a new measure based on the underlying materialism motives (happiness, social recognition, and distinctiveness) that people show. We suspect that collecting data on what people value most and what really matters to them, as we did, might show stronger relationships to a materialism measure that is more motive-based than the MVS.

The way we measured what people value most and what really matters to them had its limitations. We asked people to list the three specific things that they value most, which was likely to lead participants to focus on “things” rather than more general universal values, such as those highlighted by Schwartz (1992). In addition, asking participants to report “what it is that really matters to you in your current life situation and in the future” may have directed them to focus less on “big picture” as opposed to “current situation” things.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Our research helps to clarify the potential influence of cultural values on the perception of materialism and happiness across demographic sectors of societies. The pattern of open-ended results from Tables 4 and 5 (things valued most and that really matter) provide some interesting profiles that could be aligned with the levels of development and GDP for the respective countries. Future cross-cultural research might compare the ways that materialism relates to happiness using scores from a variety of world ranking indices, such as an individualism and collectivism index, the World Values Survey, the World Happiness Index, the World GDP index, and the World Health Organization Five Wellbeing Index (WHO-5).

We do not know what specific factors might lead participants to report being more materialistic overall or with respect to the materialism sub-facets. The higher overall materialism scores reported by participants from Japan and Malaysia could be related to levels of economic development. Both countries have moderate to high levels of GDP, which might be associated with increased tendencies toward materialism. However, the US and Austria samples reported the lowest levels of overall materialism, despite having high levels of economic development. Thus, our materialism data do not appear to be directly related to indicators of economic development, even though research shows that countries with greater economic freedom and higher GDP tend to report less materialism (e.g., Teague et al., 2020).


Another interesting angle for future research would be to focus on changes in materialism and happiness in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Routledge & FioRito, 2021; Trzebiński et al., 2020). Our data were collected prior to the pandemic and could be used as baseline data for such a future comparative study. Another interesting topic is the effects of social media use on materialism and happiness (e.g., Debreceni & Hofmeister-Toth, 2018). Cross-cultural research on social media use and these variables could provide additional insight into how social and historical factors might relate to people's materialism and happiness.

In conclusion, understanding how members of society experience and perceive materialism and happiness also has implications for social policies and practical approaches to vocational education and training. For example, our data suggest that it may be valuable to promote personal practices that support relational experiences unrelated to materialism. There is a well-established negative relationship between materialism and happiness, and there appear to be cultural differences in the strength of this relationship. This suggests that there are likely to be cultural and generational shifts in materialism and happiness. These variables might in turn relate to values and attitudes toward vocation and career. The need for more-nuanced education programs for vocational development, financial planning, and life skills seems warranted.

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