Interpersonal influences on adolescent materialism: A new look at the role of parents and peers

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Abstract

What causes adolescents to be materialistic? Prior research shows parents and peers are an important influence. Researchers have viewed parents and peers as socialization agents that transmit consumption attitudes, goals, and motives to adolescents. We take a different approach, viewing parents and peers as important sources of emotional support and psychological well-being, which increase self-esteem in adolescents. Supportive parents and peers boost adolescents’ self-esteem, which decreases their need to turn to material goods to develop positive self-perceptions. In a study with 12–18 year-olds, we find support for our view that self-esteem mediates the relationship between parent/peer influence and adolescent materialism.

Rising levels of materialism among adolescents have raised concerns among parents, educators, and consumer advocates. More than half of 9–14 year-olds agree that, “when you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you are,” and over 60% agree that, “the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money” (Goldberg et al., 2003). These trends have lead social scientists to conclude that adolescents today are “…the most brand-oriented, consumer-involved, and materialistic generation in history” (Schor, 2004, p. 13).

What causes adolescents to be materialistic? The most consistent finding to date is that adolescent materialism is related to the interpersonal influences in their lives—notably, parents and peers. The vast majority of research is based on a social influence perspective, viewing parents and peers as socialization agents that transmit consumption attitudes, goals, and motives to adolescents through modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction. In early research, Churchill and Moschis (1979) proposed that adolescents learn rational aspects of consumption from their parents and social aspects of consumption (materialism) from their peers. Moore and Moschis (1981) examined family communication styles, suggesting that certain styles (socio-oriented) promote conformity to others’ views, setting the stage for materialism. In later work, Goldberg et al. (2003) posited that parents transmit materialistic values to their offspring by modeling these values. Researchers have also reported positive correlations between materialism and socio-oriented family communication (Moore & Moschis, 1981), parents’ materialism (Flouri, 2004; Goldberg et al., 2003), peer communication about consumption (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Moschis & Churchill, 1978), and susceptibility to peer influence (Achenreiner, 1997; Banerjee & Dittmar, 2008; Roberts, Manolis, & Tanner, 2008).

We take a different approach. Instead of viewing parents and peers as socialization agents that transmit consumption attitudes and values, we consider parents and peers as important sources of emotional support and psychological well-being, which lay the foundation for self-esteem in adolescents. We argue that supportive parents and peers boost adolescents’ self-esteem, which decreases their need to embrace material goods as a way to develop positive self-perceptions. Prior research is suggestive of our perspective. In studies with young adults, researchers have found a link between (1) lower parental support (cold and controlling mothers) and a focus on financial success aspirations (Kasser, Ryan, Zax, & Sameroff, 1995: 18 year-olds) and (2) lower parental support (less affection and supervision) in
divorced families and materialism (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997: 20–32 year-olds). These studies do not focus on adolescents, do not examine peer factors, nor do they include measures of self-esteem or self-worth. But, they do suggest that parents and peers can influence materialism in ways other than transmitting consumption attitudes and values, which has been the focus of prior research on adolescent materialism.

In this article, we seek preliminary evidence for our view by testing whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between parent/peer influence and adolescent materialism. We include parent and peer factors that inhibit or encourage adolescent materialism, which allows us to test self-esteem as a mediator under both conditions. For parental influence, we include parental support (inhibits materialism) and parents’ materialism (encourages materialism). Both factors have appeared in prior materialism studies, but our interest here is whether self-esteem is a mediator of their influence on materialism. For peer influence, we include peer support (inhibits materialism) and peers’ materialism (encourages materialism), with our interest being whether self-esteem is a mediator of their influence on materialism. These peer factors are new to materialism research and offer potentially new insights. Contrary to prior materialism research, which views peers as encouraging materialism among adolescents, we also consider the possibility that peers may be a positive influence by providing emotional support in the same way that parents do.

Our research offers several contributions to understanding materialism in adolescents. First, we provide a broader perspective on the role of parents and peers as influences on adolescent materialism. The social influence perspective, which views parents and peers as transmitting consumption attitudes and values, has dominated materialism research with children and adolescents since its early days. We provide a broader perspective by considering parents and peers as much more than socialization agents—they contribute heavily to the sense of self-esteem that adolescents possess, which influences materialism. Second, our perspective provides a process explanation for why parents and peers influence materialism that can be empirically tested. Prior research offers a valuable set of findings about what factors correlate with adolescent materialism, but the process responsible for the correlation is left untested. Finally, we provide a parsimonious explanation for why different factors related to parent and peer influence affect adolescent materialism. Although the number of potential parent and peer factors is large, it is possible that there is a common thread (self-esteem) for why these factors influence adolescent materialism. Isolating mediators, such as self-esteem, could provide the basis for developing a conceptual framework to tie together findings across prior studies with different factors, providing a more unified explanation for why certain adolescents are more vulnerable to materialism.

**Conceptual overview**

Among the psychological correlates of materialism, attitudes and feelings about the self have received the most attention. Low self-esteem, which reflects a negative attitude toward the self, has been linked to materialism in adults (Mick, 1996; Richins & Dawson, 1992) as well as children and adolescents (Chaplin & John, 2007). Why does low self-esteem lead to materialism? Most researchers believe that material goods are an instrument individuals use to cope with or compensate for doubts about their competence and self-worth (e.g., Chang & Arkin, 2002; Kasser, 2002).

In the following sections, we relate aspects of parent and peer interaction to self-esteem among adolescents, which forms the basis for predicting that self-esteem mediates the relationship between parent/peer factors and materialism. Examined are parental support and peer support (factors predicted to inhibit materialism) as well as parents’ materialism and peers’ materialism (factors predicted to encourage materialism).

**Parental and peer support**

Materialism develops when people have experiences that do not support their needs for security, safety, and self-fulfillment (Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, & Sheldon, 2004). Parents and peers are important sources of support and acceptance, and this support is key to the development of healthy self-esteem in children and adolescents. In this section, we propose that adolescents with more supportive parents and peers possess higher self-esteem, and as a result, find less need for material goods to compensate for feelings of low self-worth.

**Overall parental support**

An impressive body of research documents the effects of parenting style on children’s social and cognitive functioning (e.g., Baumrind, 1978; Berman, 1997). For over 50 years, researchers have defined effective childrearing as parents providing overall support for their children (Baumrind, 1971; Becker, 1981; Peterson & Rollins, 1987). Overall support includes behaviors such as encouraging children to communicate feelings, being involved in children’s lives, using effective control (i.e., encouraging autonomy and self-expression), and providing acceptance and support (i.e., allowing children to exercise independent thinking) (e.g., Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Openshaw, Thomas, & Rollins, 1984).

Overall parental support is positively associated with all aspects of social competence, including cognitive development, moral behavior, self-esteem, and creativity (for a review, see Openshaw et al., 1984). Emotionally supportive relationships encourage children and adolescents to identify with their parents and to adopt their attitudes, values, and role expectations (Henry, Wilson, & Peterson, 1989). Parental support also encourages children’s self-expression, providing a secure base from which they can explore and meet challenges apart from the family (Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986), thereby enhancing self-esteem.

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1. Support refers to warmth, affection, nurturance, and acceptance (Becker, 1981; Ellis, Thomas, and Rollins, 1976). Parental nurturance involves the development of caring relationships, in which parents reason with their children about moral conflicts, involve them in family decision making, and set high moral expectations (Maccoby, 1984; Staub, 1988).
As described earlier, aspects of parental support have been found to influence young adults’ materialism and financial aspirations. Here, we are interested in the extent to which self-esteem is a viable mediator of the relationship between parental support and adolescent materialism. Adolescents who lack the kind of parental support that fosters the development of a healthy and complete self-concept are more likely to have lower self-esteem. As a result, these adolescents are more likely to rely on possessions to feel better about themselves, and therefore, become more materialistic. Thus, we predict:

**H1:** Self-esteem mediates the relationship between overall parental support and adolescent materialism.

**Peer support**

Discussions of materialism among adolescents inevitably turn to the influence of peers, with observers pointing to peer pressure as the reason why adolescents value material goods and popular brands. Here, we examine peer influence from quite a different and more positive perspective, viewing peer support as an important contributor to adolescent self-esteem, which diminishes materialistic tendencies.

Research in child development documents the fact that children’s peer groups (classmates, teammates, neighborhood friends) are important socializing agents who contribute to a child’s psychosocial development (Weiss & Ebbeck, 1996). Specifically, peers have emerged time and again as an important source of self-worth for children by providing positive feedback and reinforcement (Klint & Weiss, 1986). Studies have found that children’s friendships allow opportunities for emotional support and self-esteem affirmation (Weiss & Ebbeck, 1996). In fact, low peer acceptance can have a negative effect on children’s and adolescents’ self-esteem (Rigby, 2000; Sharp, 1995), with peer rejection strongly associated with low self-esteem (Damon, Lerner, & Eisenberg, 2006).

We propose that peer support positively affects adolescents’ self-esteem, which in turn diminishes materialism. Supportive peers increase adolescents’ sense of security and competence (Weiss & Ebbeck, 1996), which decreases the likelihood that they will look to material goods to compensate for feelings of low self-worth. In contrast, adolescents with less supportive peers are more likely to have lower self-esteem. As a result, they may rely more on material goods as a way to fit in, deal with peer pressure, and gain acceptance. Formally:

**H2:** Self-esteem mediates the relationship between peer support and adolescent materialism.

**Parents’ and peers’ materialism**

Prior research has viewed materialistic parents and peers as fostering adolescent materialism through their transmission of values, whereby adolescents observe their parents’ and peers’ materialistic tendencies and model their behavior. We take a different approach. In this section, we discuss how materialistic parents and peers, who focus on material goods more than strong interpersonal relationships, can negatively affect adolescents’ self-esteem, which fosters a need to embrace material goods to compensate for feelings of low self-worth. We discuss these views in more detail below.

**Parents’ materialism**

Materialism develops when individuals are exposed to social models that encourage materialistic values (Kasser et al., 2004). Parents are important models for their children, and prior research finds higher levels of materialism among adolescents who have parents holding similar materialistic values (Flouri, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2003). A desire for material goods may be taught by parental example if parents spend too much time working for external success and higher standards of living. Parents can teach their children all the right things about materialism, but if children see it is important to their parents, they will gravitate to materialistic tendencies through modeling their parents. Thus, prior research views the role of parents as fostering materialistic tendencies in children through their transmission of values.

In contrast, we view materialistic parents as detrimental to adolescents’ self-esteem, which leads to materialistic tendencies. Parents who focus on material goods as a source of life satisfaction communicate a sense that one’s worth is tied to material possessions. More enduring sources of self-esteem, such as pride in one’s achievements or close relationships with family and friends, receive less emphasis in the household. Without a balanced view of life, adolescents with materialistic parents suffer from lower self-esteem. As a result of having lower self-esteem, they rely on possessions to compensate. Thus, we predict:

**H3:** Self-esteem mediates the relationship between parents’ materialism and adolescent materialism.

**Peers’ materialism**

Peers are often seen as more important than parents in influencing the adoption of materialistic values. Surprisingly, there is little empirical evidence that the level of materialism among one’s peers increases adolescent materialism. However, the same transmission of values is likely to be exerted by peers as by parents. For example, when adolescents communicate with their peers about consumption (e.g., what the cool brands are, what’s in and what’s out, how much they spent on a pair of sneakers, etc.) and observe the acquisitive desires of their peers, they are likely to model such behavior and want the same things their peers want or have.

In contrast to this view, we examine how peers’ materialism can affect adolescents’ self-esteem, which then influences materialism. Materialism is both a manifestation of an underlying insecurity and a coping strategy used to alleviate problems and satisfy one’s needs (Kasser, 2002). As children learn the social significance of consumption products (e.g., kids who wear “Abercrombie and Fitch” are cool and popular; kids who shop at Kmart are unpopular and not fun), those with highly materialistic peers may experience lower feelings of self-worth for a couple of reasons. First, not being able to compete with their wealthier peers who can afford expensive and popular brand names may lead to lower self-esteem in children. Second,
since more materialistic individuals place less emphasis on building strong interpersonal relationships (Kasser, 2002; Richins & Dawson, 1992), children with highly materialistic peers are likely to feel less close to their peers and less secure with their friendships, which contributes to lower feelings of self-worth. As a result of having lower self-esteem, these children are likely to place more importance on possessions and therefore become more vulnerable to developing materialistic values. Thus, we forward the following hypothesis:

**H4**: Self-esteem mediates the relationship between peers’ materialism and adolescent materialism.

**Methodology**

**Sample and procedure**

One hundred participants (50 boys and 50 girls) ages 12–18 were recruited from summer programs in the Midwestern part of the United States. As parents arrived to sign their child up for various camps (e.g., sports camps, science camps, day camps), we asked parents to complete a survey about themselves and about their child, which yielded a 100% response rate. Parental consent and participant assent were obtained prior to the study. Participants were interviewed individually. After a brief description of the study, participants completed several tasks that assessed levels of materialism, self-esteem, parental support, peer support, and parental and peer materialism. Each task was described and demonstrated by the interviewer to ensure understanding of the task. After tasks were completed, participants were debriefed, asked not to talk about the study until its completion, and given small prizes for their participation. The interviews took approximately 45 min to complete.

**Measures**

**Materialism**

Two different measures of materialism were obtained and subsequently used for all hypothesis tests. The first was Goldberg et al.’s (2003) Youth Materialism Scale (YMS), which is the only scale specifically developed for adolescent populations (see Table 1). Respondents are asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements that reflect materialistic values, such as “When you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you’ll be.” We modified the scale, using scale points of “YES/yes/no/NO” instead of “agree/disagree.”

The second measure used a collage methodology to measure materialism (Chaplin & John, 2007). Participants were asked to construct a collage to answer the question, “What makes me happy?” To make their collage, participants were given a set of 100 laminated labels/pictures mounted on five poster boards representing different themes: hobbies, people, sports, material things, and achievements (20 labels per theme board). For example, “fishing” and “reading” labels were included on the hobbies board, “getting into a good college” and “being good at math” were found on the achievements board, “car” and “cell phone” were included on the material things board, “lacrosse” and “football” were pictured on the sports board, and “coach” and “mom” were included on the people board. These items were selected to appeal to a wide range of interests.

Participants were asked to construct their happiness collage by choosing items from the theme boards or making their own items using blank cards and markers we provided. When their collage was finished, we asked participants why they had placed certain items on the collage to check whether the items were being accurately interpreted as material goods or non-material goods. A photograph of the collage was then taken for later data analysis. For each respondent, we counted the number of “material things” included on the collage, and used this as our materialism measure, based on the idea that choosing more material goods—such as money and new clothes—over non-materialistic sentiments—such as “being with family” or “playing sports”—indicated higher levels of materialism.

**Self-esteem**

Participants were given a deck of 20 3 × 5 cards, with each card containing a statement adapted from Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale, such as “I feel good about myself” (see Table 1). Participants were instructed to read the item on each card and decide whether it described them “all of the time,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” or “never.” To record their response, they placed the card into one of four piles labeled “all

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th># of items</th>
<th>Scale examples</th>
<th>Response scale:</th>
<th>Reliability (α)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“I feel good about myself”; “I am happy with the way I look”</td>
<td>4=all the time, 3=most of the time, 2=sometimes, 1=never</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall parental support</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>“My mom makes me feel very special”; “My mom puts time and energy into helping me”</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>.89 Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ materialism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“My mom would love to buy things that cost lots of money”; “My mom thinks the more money you have, the happier you are”</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>.82 Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Materialism Scale (YMS)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>“[My friends] would love to buy things that cost lots of money”; “[My friends think] When you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you’ll be”</td>
<td>4= YES, 3= YES, 2=no, 1= NO</td>
<td>.81 Participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ Materialism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“My friends like me for who I am”; “My friends get mad at me”</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>.83 Peers</td>
</tr>
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</table>
of the time,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” and “never.” This procedure was repeated for all cards in the deck.

**Overall parental support**

Participants were given a deck of 22 3×5 cards, with each card containing a statement adapted from Buri’s (1991) Perception of Parental Authority Survey (POPS). The statements measured parents’ overall support—for example, being available for their children and encouraging them to think independently (see Table 1). Participants read the item on each card and responded whether it described their parents “all of the time,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” or “never.” This procedure was repeated for all cards in the deck.

**Parents’ materialism**

Participants were given a deck of 8 3×5 cards, with each card containing a statement adapted from Goldberg et al.’s (2003) and Richins and Dawson’s (1992) materialism scales. The statements measured parents’ materialism—for example, the importance their parents place on material things (see Table 1). Participants read the item on each card and responded whether it described their parents “all of the time,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” or “never.” This procedure was repeated for all cards in the deck.

**Peer support**

Participants were given a deck of 8 3×5 cards, with each card containing a statement developed to measure peer support, such as how often their peers are understanding and helpful (see Table 1). Participants read the item on each card and responded whether it applied to their peers “all of the time,” “most of the time,” “sometimes,” or “never.” This procedure was repeated for all cards in the deck.

**Peers’ materialism**

Peers’ materialism was measured by asking participants to complete Goldberg et al.’s (2003) Youth Materialism Scale (YMS) about their friends. In order to get participants to answer the rating scale items about their friends, the pronoun “I” was replaced with “my friends” throughout the survey (see Table 1).

**Results**

**Measure reliability and validity**

Reliability analyses were conducted for each rating scale. These analyses indicated acceptable levels of reliability for the Youth Materialism Scale (α = .81), modified Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale (α = .88), overall parental support scale (α = .86), parents’ materialism scale (α = .88), peer support scale (α = .83), and peers’ materialism scale (α = .89).

Additionally, we validated a number of these scales with measures obtained from parents and camp counselors. First, for self-esteem, we identified camp counselors or staff who had known each participant for at least a year and asked them to rate the participants’ level of self-esteem. Correlations between adolescents’ and counselor/staff ratings indicated an acceptable degree of convergence (r = .71, p < .01). Second, we asked the parents of each participant to fill out the overall parental support and parents’ materialism scales (α = .82, α = .84, respectively). Parents’ responses to the parental support scale and parents’ materialism scale were correlated strongly with those of their children (r = .91, p < .01 and r = .88, p < .01, respectively), indicating convergent perceptions. Finally, we checked for convergence between the two measures of materialism, representing a standard rating scale approach (Youth Materialism Scale) and a more qualitative collage approach (Happiness Collage), and found they were significantly correlated (r = .60, p < .01). Taken together, data obtained with different measures and informants (participants, parents, and camp staff) provide confidence for our measures.

**Hypothesis tests**

For each hypothesis, we tested whether self-esteem mediates the relationship between each parent/peer factor and adolescent materialism. Fig. 1 provides an overview of the factors involved in each hypothesis test, along with simple correlations between these factors. Results for mediation tests are reported below.

**Overall parental support (H1)**

As expected, we find a negative relationship between overall parental support and adolescent materialism (r_{YMS} = −.38, p < .01; r_{Collage} = −.25, p < .01). Adolescents with more supportive parents were less materialistic. More critical to our hypothesis, we find that this relationship is mediated by adolescent self-esteem. Following Baron and Kenny (1986), we performed three separate regressions (see Table 2). In the first two regressions, significant effects of overall parental support on adolescent materialism as well as overall parental support on adolescent self-esteem emerged. Results from the third regression indicated self-esteem to be a partial mediator of the relationship between overall parental support and adolescent materialism. Sobel’s test of mediation was significant (Z_{YMS} = 2.51, p < .01; Z_{Collage} = 3.20, p < .01). Thus, H1 was supported.

**Peer support (H2)**

As expected, we find a negative relationship between peer support and adolescent materialism (r_{YMS} = −.44, p < .01; r_{Collage} = −.65, p < .01). Adolescents with more supportive peers were less materialistic. More central to our hypothesis, we find that self-esteem mediates this relationship. Using the procedure outlined earlier, we specified three separate regressions (see Table 3). In the first two regressions, a significant effect of peer support on adolescent materialism and a significant effect of peer support on adolescent self-esteem emerged. Results from the third regression indicated self-esteem to be a partial mediator of the relationship between peer support and adolescent materialism. Sobel’s test of mediation was significant (Z_{YMS} = 3.06, p < .01; Z_{Collage} = 2.73, p < .01). Thus, H2 was supported.

\(^2\) In subsequent analyses, we obtain the same results regardless of whether we use the parents’ data or the adolescents’ data.
Parents’ materialism (H3)

Our data indicate a positive relationship between parents’ materialism and adolescent materialism ($r_{YMS} = .36$, $p < .01$; $r_{Collage} = .45$, $p < .01$). Adolescents with more materialistic parents were also more materialistic. Turning to our central interest, we found that self-esteem mediated this relationship. Using the procedure outlined earlier, we specified three separate regressions (see Table 2). In the first two regressions, significant effects of parents’ materialism on adolescent materialism as well as parents’ materialism on adolescent self-esteem emerged. Results from the third regression indicated self-esteem to be a partial mediator of the relationship between parents’ materialism and adolescent materialism. Sobel’s test of mediation was significant ($Z_{YMS} = 2.03$, $p = .02$; $Z_{Collage} = 2.05$, $p < .02$). Thus, H3 was supported.

Peers’ materialism (H4)

Our data indicate a positive relationship between peers’ materialism and adolescent materialism ($r_{YMS} = .39$, $p < .01$; $r_{Collage} = .51$, $p < .01$). A higher level of peers’ materialism was associated with higher levels of adolescent materialism. More critical to our concern, we found that self-esteem mediated this relationship. Using the procedure outlined earlier, we specified three separate regressions (see Table 3). In the first two regressions, significant effects of peers’ materialism on adolescent materialism as well as peers’ materialism on adolescent self-esteem emerged. Results from the third regression indicated self-esteem to be a partial mediator of the relationship between peers’ materialism and adolescent materialism. Sobel’s test of mediation was significant ($Z_{YMS} = 2.68$, $p < .01$; $Z_{Collage} = 2.44$, $p < .01$). Thus, H4 was supported.

General discussion

How do parents and peers influence levels of materialism among adolescents? Prior research has viewed parents and peers as socialization agents that transmit consumption attitudes and materialistic values to adolescents through modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction. Although it is true that parents and peers can influence adolescents in this way, we
believe parents and peers exert their influence in a much broader and more general way. Our perspective views parents and peers as important contributors to the growth of self-esteem in adolescents, which decreases the need to turn to material goods as a way to develop positive self-perceptions. Consistent with this perspective, our findings show that self-esteem mediates the relationship between adolescent materialism and a set of parent and peer factors, including parental support, peer support, parents’ materialism, and peers’ materialism.

Research contributions

Our findings contribute to research on adolescent materialism in several ways. First, we introduce a new psychological process for understanding how parents and peers influence adolescent materialism (parent/peer factors → self-esteem → materialism). Unlike prior materialism research, which only reports correlations between parent/peer factors and adolescent materialism, we were able to test the mechanism (self-esteem) responsible for parent and peer influence. By isolating a main driver of correlations between materialism and interpersonal influences, not only are we able to corroborate findings from prior research linking materialism to parent and peer influences, but we are also able to tie together findings across prior studies and provide a parsimonious explanation for why certain adolescents may be more vulnerable to developing materialistic tendencies.

Second, our findings provide additional insight on the nature of parent and peer influences. Prior materialism research has focused on the ways in which parents and peers influence

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<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Mediation analyses for parental influences.</th>
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N=100 (ages 12–18) for all regression models. Regressions include age and gender as control variables (p’s> .30).

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<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Mediation analyses for peer influences.</th>
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N=100 (ages 12–18) for all regression models. Regressions include age and gender as control variables (p’s> .30).
influences on adolescents. Parents are often viewed as furthering materialism by being too materialistic, too autocratic and controlling, or too uninvolved in their children’s lives (Flouri, 1999; Kasser et al., 1995; Moore & Moschis, 1981). Peer influence is usually characterized in only negative ways, with high levels of materialism among adolescents being attributed to peer pressure to possess the latest styles, brands, and electronic gadgets. Our results show that parents and peers can also have positive effects on the lives of adolescents, thereby reducing materialistic tendencies. Parents and peers can provide support and acceptance, which fosters a healthy sense of self-esteem among adolescents and reduces their need to compensate for poor self-esteem through material goods.

Third, we validate relationships found in prior materialism research with adolescents using more efficacious measurement procedures. In the past, most researchers have elicited data for parent/peer factors and adolescent materialism from only one informant, the adolescent or parent, using paper-and-pencil survey measures. In our research, we used multiple informants (adolescents, parents, camp counselors) to measure factors such as parental support, parents’ materialism, and adolescent self-esteem, which allowed us to validate adolescent self-reports. Furthermore, we were able to corroborate the results of our meditational analyses, with data from adolescents, with meditational analyses using data for several measures from parents (for parental support and parents’ materialism). These findings reduce the possibility that our results were compromised by adolescents’ response biases or correlated measurement errors. In addition to multiple informants, we used different methods to measure adolescent materialism (collage method) and parent/peer factors (paper-and-pencil), which reduces the possibility that the relationship between these factors is attributable to common methods of measurement.

**Future research**

Our research provides a starting point for a broader view of parent and peer influence on adolescent materialism, which proposes that parent/peer factors \(\rightarrow\) self-esteem \(\rightarrow\) materialism. To fully examine the role that self-esteem plays in adolescent materialism, a more expansive research effort will be needed. We included several parent and peer influence factors in our research, but there are a variety of other factors that should be included in future work, such as family income, family structure, and susceptibility to peer influence. Given that self-esteem is a partial mediator of the relationship between parent/peer factors and adolescent materialism, it would be fruitful to consider others that may influence this relationship. Including a larger set of factors, with a larger sample size, would allow researchers to build a more integrated model explaining how different parent and peer factors jointly influence adolescent self-esteem and materialism.

A more expansive modeling effort could also shed light on causal relationships among parent/peer factors and adolescent materialism. Given the nature of this topic, researchers use survey correlational methods, which are often subject to the criticism that “correlation does not imply causation.” The inability to distinguish cause and effect is particularly noticeable for simple correlations between two variables, such as the one between adolescent materialism and parents’ materialism. However, systems of relationships found in more complex models often reduce this concern. For example, our findings imply that higher levels of parents’ materialism \(\rightarrow\) lower adolescent self-esteem \(\rightarrow\) higher adolescent materialism. It is conceptually improbable that higher adolescent materialism \(\rightarrow\) lower adolescent self-esteem \(\rightarrow\) higher levels of parents’ materialism. Similarly, it is difficult to envision an argument that would favor a mediation path such as higher adolescent materialism \(\rightarrow\) lower adolescent self-esteem \(\rightarrow\) lower parental support versus our conclusion that lower parental support \(\rightarrow\) lower adolescent self-esteem \(\rightarrow\) higher adolescent materialism. However, a causal modeling approach could provide even further insight into these issues.

Efforts in this direction would be a welcome addition to research on adolescent materialism. Questions about how materialism develops in adolescents are not only intriguing but are important to a wide range of constituents—parents, educators, and public policy officials. Questions about the role of self-esteem, self-identity, and self-worth in forming consumption behaviors and values are increasingly important to consumer researchers (Oyserman, 2009; Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009; White & Argo, 2009). Addressing these questions holds the promise of providing a stronger foundation to build informed discussions on the topic of materialism, about how values develop in our families and communities, and how children become socialized as consumers in contemporary society.

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