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Materialism, Brand Consciousness and Psychological Distress among University Students

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationship between materialism, brand consciousness and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. A sample of 190 was recruited through convenience sampling and data were collected using standardized scales i.e. Measures Values Scale, Brand Consciousness Scale and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. Pearson Correlation results revealed that materialism was negatively related with both brand consciousness and psychological distress whereas brand consciousness showed a significant positive relation with psychological distress. Regression analysis further gave insights that brand consciousness and psychological distress significantly predicted materialism with the overall model accounting for 60% variance. These findings diverge from prior research, suggesting that economic and cultural factors may shape the relationship between materialism and well-being in distinct ways within Pakistani context.



Introduction

Materialism refers to the value a consumer places on worldly possessions and the importance attached to them (Belk, 1985). Materialistic individuals are often self-centered and indulgent (Richins, 1992), viewing possessions and money as symbols of happiness and success (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). They are highly involved in purchasing and acquiring goods, particularly branded products (Rassuli, 1986).

Face consciousness, on the other hand, reflects the importance individuals attach to maintaining social image and interpersonal harmony (Hwang, 1987). People with high face consciousness often

purchase luxury or branded products publicly to signal wealth and social standing (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998).

Materialism has been conceptualized as a character quality consolidating voracity, desire and non-appearance of magnanimity (Belk, 1985). Other consider materialism to be partner degree interminable focus on lower necessities for the material comfort and physical security over higher solicitation wants (Inglehart, 1993). Brand Consciousness is a related construct concerning the mental orientation to decide on brand name products that are renowned and extremely publicized (Sprokes, 1986). Brand reliability referring to associate degree earnest dedication for the brands that cause or make a re-purchase mentality within the shopper (Hoyer & MacLannis, 2008). Cain (20120) contends that individuals or purchasers have complete up being progressively negative. The agents advance attentiveness and enthusiasm of their product and ventures to make deals within the created nations of the planet. (Berner et Al., 2001).

However, materialism and face consciousness are conceptually distinct. First, they need completely different social and economic conditions. Materialism is rooted within the trendy economic mode (Belk 1985). Whereas the face has existed since the earlier period. Secondly, they need a completely different social cultural base. Materialism is predicated on an individualistic culture that is inclined to fostering independent self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), whereas face is a lot of self-addressed to a collectivist culture that represents a lot of social thought of the self (Ho, 1976; Huwang, 1987; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Third, they need completely different beginning points (motives). Whereas materialism focuses on individual indulgent meanings. Face address social significance. Fourth, they vary within the influence they need on completely different areas of life. As a sort of shopper price materialism is especially associated with shopper behavior whereas face as a motive to hunt social support us said to the majority respects of life, together with family, marriage, friendship and work.

Psychological distress is basically plot as a state of excited suffering portrayed by symptoms if unhappiness (e.g. lost interest; wretchedness; bitterness) and apprehension (e.g. nervousness; feeling tense) (Mirowsky & Ross 2002). These reactions are similarly associated with physical signs i.e. lack of sleep, headaches, non-attendance of essentialness that are probably to vacillate transversely over social orders (Kleinman 1992 & Kirmayer 1989). Psychological distress is sometimes depicted as a non-unequivocal mental state disadvantage (Dohrenwood 1982). Be that as it may, in endeavor with (Wheatson 2007), this non-attendance of unequivocally ought to be qualified since psychological distress is doubtfully portrayed by distress and pressure appearances. (Paytib, 2009)

Recent empirical studies reinforce the links among materialism, brand consciousness, and social comparison in Pakistan. For example, Waqar, Javed, & Rasool (2023) found that among Pakistani teenagers, brand consciousness and social comparison both positively predict materialism. Saleem & Tariq (2025) also report among university students that social comparison orientation mediates the relationship between self-esteem and materialism. Moreover, Masood, Musarrat, & Mazahir (2017) report increased materialistic trends among youth in Lahore, with social media and brand consciousness identified as key factors.

While much literature focuses on materialism and brand consciousness, fewer studies examine how these are associated with **psychological distress** specifically among university students in Pakistan. Given documented high levels of depressive symptoms among this population (meta-analysis shows ~42.7% prevalence) and increasing pressure from academics, social expectations, and economic concerns, it is plausible that materialism and brand consciousness may contribute to or exacerbate psychological distress (PMC, 2021).

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between materialism, brand consciousness psychological distress among university students. It was hypothesized that materialism, brand consciousness and psychological distress would be positively related. Furthermore, age was expected to be negatively associated with brand consciousness and psychological distress while positively associated with materialism. Finally, it was proposed that materialism would predict both brand consciousness and psychological distress among university students.

Method

The present study employed convenient sampling technique. Sample size was calculated through g-factor software which came out to be 190. After obtaining permission from respective authors and the department, the data was collected by administering three standardized scales. Materialism was assessed using the Material Values Scale (MVS; Richins, 2004), which evaluates the extent to which individuals place importance on material possessions. Brand consciousness was measured with the Brand Consciousness Scale (Sproles & Kendall, 1986), designed to capture consumers' orientation toward well-known and prestigious brand-name products. Lastly, psychological distress was assessed using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), which measures symptoms of anxiety and depression as indicators of general emotional suffering. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality of their data and their right to withdraw at any stage. They were also prompted with the informed consent. Questionnaires were administered and respondents completed them voluntarily. All the ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the process.

Result

Reliability analysis was conducted to analyze the internal consistency of the scales used in the study. The reliability analysis conveyed overall satisfactory internal consistency, with psychological distress scale posing good internal consistency, brand conscious scale having acceptable reliability however the reliability of materialism scale was poor.

For the main analysis, inferential statistics i.e. Pearson correlation and linear regression was run through SPSS. Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted the determine the relationship between the key variables and Simple Linear Regression was run to check the predictive role of brand consciousness and psychological distress on materialism.

Table 1 shows correlation between materialism, brand consciousness, psychological distress and the demographic variables (N=190).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
Materialism	-	-.306**	-.275**	-.019	.011
Brand consciousness		-	.206	.047	.057
Psychological distress			-	.329**	.175*
Age				-	.138
Birth order					-

It is revealed from the table that materialism had a negative relationship with brand consciousness and psychological distress. However, brand consciousness has a significant relationship with

psychological distress whereas psychological distress had a significant correlation with age and birth order.

Table 2 shows Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Materialism from Brand Consciousness and Psychological Distress (N=190)

Predictors	Materialism	
	ΔR^2	B
Brand Consciousness	.089	.30.69*
Psychological Distress	.071	.39.08*
Total R2	1.6	-

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

The above tables give insights that brand consciousness and psychological distress explain 89% and 71% respectively variance in Materialism, which means they come out to be significant predictors of Materialism. Overall, the model accounted for 60% of variance.

Discussion

The findings of the present study provide important insights into the relationship between materialism, brand consciousness, and psychological distress among university students. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, materialism demonstrated a negative association with both brand consciousness and psychological distress. This suggests that students who place greater importance on material possessions may not necessarily be highly brand conscious or distressed, a result that diverges from earlier studies reporting positive links between materialism and consumer orientations such as brand attachment (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Chaplin & John, 2007). One possible explanation may lie in contextual differences, as Pakistani university students could be driven more by practical or economic concerns than by social comparison through brands, particularly in light of rising inflation and financial pressures that constrain luxury consumption (Masood, Musarrat, & Mazahir, 2017).

Interestingly, the positive association between brand consciousness and psychological distress aligns with prior findings suggesting that the pursuit of branded products can intensify stress, especially when students perceive discrepancies between their desires and their financial capacity (Kasser, 2016; Dittmar et al., 2014). Social comparison processes likely play a mediating role, as individuals who value brand prestige may experience greater anxiety and dissatisfaction when they cannot attain socially valued products (Waqar, Javed, & Rasool, 2023). This outcome supports evidence that brand-conscious orientations may heighten vulnerability to psychological distress by fostering self-worth contingencies tied to external markers of success (Park & John, 2010).

The regression results further demonstrated that both brand consciousness and psychological distress significantly predicted materialism, with the overall model explaining a substantial proportion of variance. While unexpected in direction, these results suggest a complex interplay where psychological distress may motivate compensatory materialistic values as a coping mechanism. This interpretation resonates with prior research highlighting that individuals experiencing distress may turn toward material possessions as a means of regulating emotions and alleviating insecurity (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Pieters, 2013). However, the negative correlation patterns observed in this study imply that students under distress may disengage from overt materialistic consumption, possibly due to limited resources or shifting value orientations toward non-material domains.

Age was negatively correlated with both brand consciousness and psychological distress, which is consistent with developmental literature indicating that younger adults are more prone to social comparison, self-image concerns, and stress (Arnett, 2015). Older students may develop more stable identities and coping mechanisms, reducing their susceptibility to brand-driven pressures. The observed association with birth order further suggests that family dynamics could play a role, although this warrants deeper exploration in future studies.

Overall, the present findings highlight the nuanced and context-dependent nature of materialism and its associations with brand consciousness and psychological distress. While much of the existing literature positions materialism as a risk factor for poor psychological outcomes (Kasser, 2016; Dittmar et al., 2014), the current results suggest that among Pakistani university students, economic realities and cultural factors may moderate these links. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to disentangle these relationships and examine the role of mediating factors such as social comparison orientation, self-esteem, and financial strain.

Conclusion

In nutshell, the present study contributes to the understanding of materialism, brand consciousness, and psychological distress among university students in Pakistan. The findings reveal unexpected negative associations between materialism, brand consciousness, and psychological distress, while also highlighting brand consciousness as a predictor of distress. These results suggest that materialistic values and consumer orientations operate differently across cultural and economic contexts, with financial constraints and social dynamics shaping their impact on well-being. Given the high prevalence of psychological distress among students, the study underscores the need for further research exploring mediating factors such as social comparison, financial strain, and self-esteem. Future interventions aimed at promoting healthier coping strategies and reducing consumer-driven pressures may help safeguard the psychological well-being of young adults.

Limitations & Suggestions

1. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inferences. Longitudinal research would help clarify whether distress leads to materialism or vice versa.
2. Reliance on self-report measures may have introduced social desirability bias.
3. The low reliability of the Material Values Scale in this sample suggests the need for culturally adapted measures.

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