

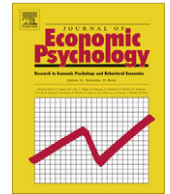


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The material and immaterial in conflict: Spirituality reduces conspicuous consumption

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ABSTRACT

Many spiritual leaders have argued that materialistic pursuits are incompatible with following a spiritual life. Consistent with this view, we found that higher levels of spirituality correspond to a decreased desire to consume material goods in a conspicuous manner. Study 1 was correlational, and found that people who reported having spiritual experiences reported a decreased desire to spend lavishly for visible consumer goods, such as a cell phone. Study 2 was experimental, and found that participants assigned to recall a spiritual event also demonstrated a decreased desire to consume conspicuously, relative to participants assigned to recall an enjoyable event.

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1. Introduction

The pursuit of material goods has long been an important part of human life, as has been the display of those goods (Saad, 2007). Religion has also been a powerful social force, and it has often conflicted with the desire to possess and display wealth. In both traditional Eastern and Western religious thought, the pursuit of spirituality is viewed as conflicting with the acquisition and of material possessions (Landis, 1957). Spiritual leaders as diverse as Jesus, Buddha, Thoreau, and Gandhi warned against conspicuous consumerism (McKibben, 1998). In the current work, we tested the hypothesis that spirituality (defined as seeking to transcend a narrow focus on the self) reduces the desire to consume conspicuously (defined as overspending for goods in order to display one's wealth).

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Why the apparent conflict between spirituality and materialistic pursuits, such as conspicuous consumption? Nietzsche (1967/1887) may have argued that believers renounce materialistic aspirations out of a sense of inferiority and a hostility towards those who have wealth (termed *ressentiment*). In this view, it is not spirituality that reduces materialistic pursuits but rather the renunciation of a materialistic lifestyle which follows an existing hostility towards the wealthy. A different reason for the apparent conflict between spirituality and materialistic pursuits was proposed by Schwartz (1992, 1994) and Kilbourne, Grunhagen, and Foley (2005). He analyzed cross-cultural similarities and differences in human values and found that self-enhancement values (epitomized by materialistic pursuits such as conspicuous consumption) and self-transcendence values (epitomized by spirituality and religion) are oppositional and conflicting. According to Schwartz, one cannot simultaneously pursue self-enhancement and self-transcendence. Therefore, a strong sense of spirituality should correspond to a diminished desire to consume conspicuously because conspicuous consumption exemplifies self-enhancement.

Another reason to expect a conflict between spirituality and conspicuous consumption was proposed by Sorokin (1941/1992), who suggested that spirituality and religious commitment reduce the number of extant desires one seeks to fulfill. From Sorokin's perspective, spirituality frees the individual from an unending number of desires, and perhaps especially materialistic desires (Watson, Jones, & Morris, 2004). Accordingly, a strong sense of spirituality should correspond to a weaker desire to consume material possessions in a lavish and conspicuous manner.

1.1. Conspicuous consumption

We define conspicuous consumption as overspending with the intent of displaying one's wealth and status (see Veblen, 1899/1994). Conspicuous consumers derive pleasure from spending in a lavish and flashy manner, both by virtue of the enhanced status and material comforts their possessions provide (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005). There is also evidence that conspicuous consumption is used as a means for men to attract women. In several studies, men who were placed in a romantic mindset (for instance, by thinking about a date with an attractive woman) reported a willingness to spend greater amounts of money on visible consumer goods (Griskevicius, Tybur, Sundie, Cialdini, Miller, & Kenrick, 2007).

Conspicuous consumption often is viewed as a practice only of the wealthy, but people of lesser means also conspicuously consume (Charles, Hurst, & Roussanov, 2007). Conspicuous consumption and related behavior have been observed in dozens of countries around the world (e.g., Cleveland, Laroche, & Papadopoulos, 2009; Wan et al., 2009). Despite what its endorsers might believe, it is clear that conspicuous consumption does not promote long-term happiness (cf. Kasser & Kanner, 2004). Rather, spending one's time in pursuit of material goods comes at the cost of spending time with loved ones, which is known to be an enduring source of happiness (Duesenberry, 1949; Frank, 1999; Kahneman, Diener, & Schwarz, 1999).

1.2. Spirituality and conspicuous consumption

The term *spirituality* is often used to refer to the personal, subjective side of religious experience with *religion* being used to refer to an organized system of spiritual beliefs, rituals, and cumulative traditions associated with a group (Hill et al., 2000). Both religion and spirituality are constants in human life (Grinde, 1996, 1998). Yet aside from using religiosity as a segmentation variable, researchers have largely steered clear of measuring how religion and spirituality affect spending. Despite the relative dearth of research in this area, some findings hint at our hypothesis. People who are intrinsically religious are those who practice religion for self-driven reasons rather than external reasons (such as attending a church for social benefits). As such, intrinsic religiosity is related to spirituality. Research indicates that intrinsically religious people are less likely to view money as a means of attaining power and prestige (Watson et al., 2004). Seeking power and prestige are signs of a self-promoting orientation, and intrinsic religiosity is at odds with viewing money as serving a self-promoting function.

Likewise, religious dedication is related to a decreased desire to spend money lavishly. Among Protestants, those who reported being devout, as compared to the less devout, also were more likely to report that they sought to purchase items at a discounted price (Sood & Nasu, 1995). These findings regarding Protestants are consistent with our expectation that greater spirituality would correspond to less conspicuous consumption. Moreover, we believe – and tested – that there will be an effect of spirituality in general, one that is not specific to a particular religious group.

The relationship between religiosity and financial well-being is informative. Strong religious beliefs correspond to lower income and net worth. Yet, despite this fact, strong religious beliefs also correspond to fewer fiscal liabilities and lower credit card debt. Thus, highly religious people were found to make less money but hold less debt (Gwin & Gwin, 2009; see also Davies & Lea, 1995). We submit that one interpretation of these results is that religious people avoided unnecessary spending, including conspicuous spending.

Most of the evidence heretofore discussed is correlational and subject to questions about direction of effects and third-variable explanations. Yet there is some experimental support for our hypothesis, although it does not speak directly to spending. In one experiment, participants assigned to engage in daily prayer reported more selfless concern for others compared to controls (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010). Accordingly, spirituality may help individuals transcend the narrow focus on self-enhancement inherent to conspicuous consumption. Other experimental work has found that priming people with god concepts causes them to behave less selfishly in a dictator game, compared to controls (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Insofar as conspicuous consumption is a selfish pursuit, this finding is consistent with our expectation that higher levels of spirituality would correspond to less conspicuous consumption.

1.3. Materialism as a mediator

How might spirituality reduce the desire to consume conspicuously? One likely mechanism is by reducing materialism, or the value one places on material possessions (Belk, 1984). Correlational work has found that placing a low value on material possessions is related to decreased use of possessions for self-aggrandizing purposes, such as conspicuous consumption (Christopher, Marek, & Carroll, 2004). Likewise, researchers have categorized people who are materialistic (and loose with money) as “big spenders”, as they deliberately seek expensive goods (Tatzel, 2002). Further, people high in materialism tend to see themselves as spenders and tend to take on more consumer debt (Watson, 2003).

There is also evidence that a stronger sense of spirituality corresponds to less materialism. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) found that materialism conflicts with collective-oriented values, including religious values. In other words, they found that placing value in that which transcends the individual (spirituality) is at odds with placing value in material goods (materialism). Researchers have found that this negative relationship is evident in the US, Canada, and Germany (Kilbourne et al., 2005). In short, prior work suggests that materialism is a likely candidate to mediate the relationship between spirituality and conspicuous consumption.

1.4. Competing mediators

Other mediators are plausible. In particular, there is evidence that some of the benefits of spiritual practices occur indirectly, through self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). This suggests that increased self-control might mediate the relationship between spirituality and decreased consumption. Other research has found that some of the benefits of spiritual practices occur via an increased sense of meaning in life (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Still others have speculated that thoughts of God increase prosocial behavior due to a belief in a supernatural observer (Bering, 2006; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2009). Thus, there are other plausible ways in which spirituality could bring about decreased consumption.

1.5. Current investigation

We tested the hypothesis that spirituality would reduce conspicuous consumption in two studies. We measured conspicuous consumption by asking participants how much they would be willing to pay for common, visible items such as a phone or watch. Study 1 was correlational and tested whether highly spiritual people were disinclined to consume conspicuously. We also tested two possible mediators, self-control and materialism, with the expectation that materialism would mediate the relationship between heightened spirituality and decreased consumption.

Study 2 was experimental, and tested whether participants assigned to reflect on a personal spiritual event would be less inclined to consume conspicuously than control participants. We again tested whether the effect of spirituality on conspicuous consumption was mediated by reduced materialism. We also tested two other possible mediators; belief that life is meaningful (Steger & Frazier, 2005) and the belief that a supernatural entity is watching (Bering, 2007). We predicted that materialism would mediate the relationship.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 144 undergraduates (89 female) who participated in exchange for partial course credit. Ages ranged from 18 to 23 ($M = 19.18$, $SD = 1.41$). Participants completed materials online at a time of their choosing. The sample was 70% White, 9% Black, 8% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 6% reported other or mixed race. Study outcomes were unrelated to race or age.

2.1.2. Spirituality

The independent variable of spirituality was measured by four items we created: “I feel God’s presence”, “I experience a connection to all life,” “I feel a selfless caring for others,” and “I feel deep inner peace or harmony.” Ratings were from 1 (*Not at all true of me*) to 6 (*Very true of me*), ($\alpha = .76$).

There were two main considerations in using these items (rather than a published measure of intrinsic religiosity, for example). First, we sought to capture individual differences in spirituality among both the irreligious and the traditionally religious. Second, we sought to measure spirituality in a way that was sensitive to Eastern and Western traditions. The items in our scale were derived in part from Worthington and Aten’s (2009) description of the most common forms of spirituality.

2.1.3. Conspicuous consumption

Participants were asked to imagine they had \$5000 in the bank. Next, they indicated how much they were willing to pay for five items. Each item was measured by an 11-point scale, with each point corresponding to a specific dollar amount. Items were as follows: a watch (1 = \$25, 2 = \$50, 3 = \$75, 4 = \$100, 5 = \$125, 6 = \$150, 7 = \$175, 8 = \$200, 9 = \$225,

10 = \$250, 11 = \$275), buying friends dinner (\$50–\$300), a cell phone (\$25–\$275), European vacation (\$500–\$3000), and a car (\$5000–\$50,000) (as used in [Griskevicius et al., 2007](#)). Each item noticeably conveys one's financial resources and varies substantially in prestige from low-end to high-end.

2.1.4. Materialism

We employed [Kasser's \(2004\)](#) widely used Materialistic Desires scale. Sample items include “I wish I made more money,” and “I wish I had a nicer car.” Reliability was very good, $\alpha = .91$.

2.1.5. Self-control

We used the 13-item trait self-control measure ([Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004](#)). Reliability was acceptable, $\alpha = .77$.

2.2. Results and discussion

As expected, participants who reported more spirituality reported a lower desire to consume conspicuously, $\beta = -.19$, $t = 2.28$, $p < .05$. Next, we tested whether materialism and self control mediated the relationship between spiritual experiences and conspicuous consumption. Following recent advances in mediation analysis and recommendations about the interpretation of indirect effects ([MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002](#); [Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008](#); especially [Hayes, 2009](#)), we opted to conduct our mediation analysis using sampling with replacement, with a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure (in this case, 5000 samples were taken). The bootstrapping procedure for this study was performed using the SPSS script provided by [Preacher and Hayes \(2008\)](#) for multiple mediation.

The total effect of spirituality on conspicuous consumption was significant (c path; coefficient = $-.44$, $se = .19$; $t = 2.30$, $p = .02$), such that higher spirituality corresponded to less consumption. The direct effect of spirituality on consumption (controlling for the indirect effects through self-control and materialism) was short of significance (c' path; coefficient = $-.37$, $se = .19$; $t = 1.93$, $p = .06$), indicating that part of the effect of spirituality on consumption was indirect.

The results of a multiple mediation analysis revealed that materialism, not self-control, mediated the effect. The effect of spirituality on self-control was marginally significant (a path; coefficient = $.29$, $se = .16$, $t = 1.85$, $p = .07$), but the effect of self-control on conspicuous consumption was nonsignificant (b path; coefficient = $.12$, $se = .11$, $t = 1.14$, $p = .26$). In contrast, spirituality corresponded to significantly less materialism (a path; coefficient = $-.57$, $se = .24$, $t = 2.33$, $p = .02$), and the effect of materialism on conspicuous consumption was significant (b path; coefficient = $.19$, $se = .07$, $t = 2.68$, $p = .008$).

We formally tested for mediation using the aforementioned bootstrapping procedure. The procedure creates a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effects. If the range between the lower and upper boundaries of the confidence interval includes zero, then the indirect effect is not statistically significant. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of materialism was $-.01$ to $-.27$, indicating that materialism was a significant mediator (the confidence interval for self-control was not significant, ranging from $.16$ to $-.01$). In sum, participants who possessed strong spiritual beliefs also evinced a decreased desire to consume conspicuously, and the effects of spirituality occurred indirectly, through lowered materialism.

People who were more spiritual were also higher in self-control (a marginally significant effect), as one might expect ([McCullough & Willoughby, 2009](#)). However, self-control did not have an effect on consumption. One explanation for this null finding is that self-control primarily affects impulse buying ([Vohs & Faber, 2007](#)). In contrast, the path from spirituality to materialism was significant, as was the path from materialism to consumption. Although both paths were significant, the effect sizes were modest. The relatively small effect of materialism on consumption suggests that materialism and consumption are related but certainly not interchangeable (as is occasionally the case in some meditational analyses).

3. Study 2

Although the findings from Study 1 were promising, the data were correlational and did not allow inferences about the direction of effects. Study 2 used an experimental design to determine whether spirituality causes a decrease in the desire to consume conspicuously. Study 2 also examined two potential mediating mechanisms in addition to materialism. Research has linked some of the positive effects of religiosity to an increased sense that life is meaningful ([Steger & Frazier, 2005](#)). Belief in a supernatural watcher has also been proposed to mediate the relationship between spiritual thoughts and behavior ([Bering, 2006](#)). Thus we tested three mediators.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 208 undergraduate students (135 female) who indicated nonatheistic views on a prescreening measure. Ages ranged from 18 to 34 ($M = 19.51$, $SD = 2.29$). They received partial course credit for participation. Participants arrived at the lab individually and study materials were administered by computer. Racial demographics were as follows: 74% White, 13% Black, 7% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and the remainder did not report race. Participants self-identified primarily as Christian (75%), with the remainder being Agnostic (15%) and Jewish (9%). Race, age, and religion were unrelated to the variables of interest.

3.1.2. Spirituality condition

We sought to induce a sense of spirituality in a manner that was inclusive and sensitive to diverse beliefs (Worthington & Aten, 2009). Participants were asked to describe "...the most spiritual moment of your life. What this means is up to you, but it may entail a closeness with God, a sense of connection to humanity, a closeness with nature, or feeling 'at one' with the universe." These instructions were informed by Worthington and Aten's (2009) description of common forms of spirituality.

3.1.3. Control condition

To ensure that any differences between conditions were not attributable simply to recalling any positive event, participants in the control condition were asked to describe "the most enjoyable moment of your life."

3.1.4. Mediators

Following the experimental manipulation, we assessed state levels of three potential mediators: materialism, life meaningfulness, and supernatural watching. State materialism was assessed with three items, "How much do you currently desire material possessions?", "I currently want to own things that impress people", and "I currently believe having material possessions is an important achievement" on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) (our search of the literature revealed no published state measures of materialism). We assessed state meaningfulness and belief in higher powers with single-item measures: "I currently have a strong sense that my life is meaningful", and "I currently feel that a higher power is watching over me."

3.1.5. Conspicuous consumption

Participants completed the Griskevicius et al. (2007) measure of conspicuous consumption described in Study 1. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, "Currently I have a sense of spirituality on my mind," from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

3.1.6. Mood

Last, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule to determine whether the manipulations differentially affected mood (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

3.2. Results and discussion

The experimental manipulation was effective, as participants in the spirituality condition reported higher state spirituality ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.23$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.24$), $F(1148) = 4.46$, $p < .05$. The experimental manipulation did not cause differences in positive or negative affect ($F_s < 1$). Thus, the manipulation increased state spirituality but did not exert unintended effects on mood.

In line with hypotheses, inducing spirituality had a significant effect on conspicuous spending, with participants in the spirituality condition reporting lower desires to spend lavishly ($M = 19.06$, $SD = 7.85$) than those in the control condition ($M = 21.28$, $SD = 8.33$), $F(1206) = 3.92$, $p < .05$, $d = .27$. We tested whether materialism mediated the effect of experimental condition on conspicuous spending, and the use of multiple mediation enabled us to determine whether materialism mediated the effect alone or in combination with life meaningfulness or belief in a Higher Power. We used the test for multiple mediation described by Preacher and Hayes (2008) and used a bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping procedure (5000 samples were taken).

The total effect spirituality condition on conspicuous consumption was significant, (c path; coefficient = -2.22 , $se = 1.12$; $t = 1.98$, $p = .049$), such that those asked to write about a spiritual experience evinced a decreased desire to consume relative to those who wrote about an enjoyable experience. The direct effect (c' path; controlling for the proposed mediators) was not significant (coefficient = -1.87 , $se = 1.13$; $t = 1.66$, $p = .10$), indicating that part of the effect of spirituality on consumption was mediated.

Spirituality condition had no effect on belief in a supernatural watcher (a path; coefficient = $.18$, $se = .18$, $t = 1.00$, $p = .32$), and no effects were observed for the effect of supernatural watching on conspicuous consumption (b path; coefficient = $.17$, $se = .47$, $t < 1$, ns). Likewise, spirituality condition had no effect on life meaningfulness (a path; coefficient = $.04$, $se = .11$, $t < 1$, ns), and life meaningfulness had no effect on conspicuous consumption (b path; coefficient = $.73$, $se = .74$, $t = .98$, $p = .32$). In contrast, we observed that those assigned to the spirituality condition demonstrated decreased materialism relative to participants in the control condition (a path; coefficient = $-.49$, $se = .26$, $t = 1.95$, $p = .05$), and materialism significantly reduced conspicuous consumption (b path; coefficient = $.72$, $se = .30$, $t = 2.37$, $p = .02$).

The formal test of multiple mediation revealed that materialism mediated the effect. The 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect of materialism was $-.02$ to -1.05 , and was therefore a significant mediator as the interval did not include zero. In contrast, the indirect effects for supernatural watching ($-.13$ to $.49$) and meaningfulness ($-.38$ to $.11$) included zero and were therefore nonsignificant. Hence, materialism was the only mediator.

4. Discussion

Spiritual and religious leaders have claimed that spirituality and the desire to have and display wealth are inimical (Landis, 1957; McKibben, 1998). In the current investigation, we found empirical evidence that they are conflicting values, as higher levels of spirituality corresponded to a weakened desire to spend money in a lavish and flashy manner. Study 1 found that stronger inclination toward spirituality reflected a decreased desire to consume conspicuously. Study 2 used an experimental design by asking some participants to bring to mind a previous spiritual experience and others to think about an enjoyable experience. As predicted, thinking about a spiritual event caused a relative decrease in the desire to consume conspicuously.

Both studies clarify the relationship between spirituality and conspicuous consumption. Traditionally, research on religion and spirituality has relied almost exclusively on correlational research, which precludes any inferences about the direction of effects. However, Study 2 allows for causal inferences about the relationship between spirituality and spending, namely that spirituality causes a decreased desire to consume conspicuously. However, one might claim that the effect of the laboratory manipulation of spirituality was dependent upon a carefully controlled laboratory procedure and does not generalize outside the laboratory. However, Study 1 found that naturally occurring individual differences in spirituality also predicted individual differences in the desire to conspicuously consume. Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 suggest spirituality decreases conspicuous consumption and that the effect is not an artifact of a particular experimental technique.

In both studies, we found that the effect of spirituality on conspicuous consumption was indirect, in that materialism mediated the effect. Higher levels of spirituality significantly reduced the value that people placed on material goods, which in turn reduced their desire to spend higher amount of money on material goods. We sought to identify alternative mediators, but only materialism was found to mediate the effect. The effect of spirituality on reduced consumptive motives cannot be explained by high self-control, enhanced life meaningfulness, or belief in a supernatural observer.

These findings may shed light on seemingly contradictory research indicating that highly religious people make less money than those who are less religious, but highly religious people also have less debt (Gwin & Gwin, 2009). One could argue that frugal spenders are attracted to religious institutions or that religious people are less inclined to spend, as religiosity cannot be randomly assigned. We eschewed the problems inherent to religiosity research by investigating a related concept, spirituality. By randomly assigning participants to think about a past spiritual event, we found spirituality amenable to experimentation.

One theory that is consistent with our findings is terror management. According to this view, the knowledge of one's mortality provokes existential anxiety (Becker, 1973). Such anxiety has been associated with an increased desire for material goods (Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Kasser & Sheldon, 2000; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009). Insofar as contemplating spiritual matters helps people to manage their fear of mortality (e.g., Jonas & Fischer, 2006), one would expect spiritual contemplation to decrease the need for material comforts.

5. Limitations and future directions

In both studies, the effect sizes were modest. One explanation for this might be that the effect of spirituality on conspicuous consumption might vary from person to person. For instance, it seems plausible that those who are highly religious might demonstrate an especially strong reaction to the spirituality manipulation. The observed effects might also vary according to one's specific religious background. For example, some Evangelical preachers advance a "prosperity gospel", in which religious and spiritual pursuits are not inimical to spending and wealth, but are explicitly linked to financial and materialistic rewards. It seems plausible that the spending motives of adherents to the prosperity gospel might be differentially affected by spirituality than those of others. Likewise, some people adopt numerous spiritual practices out of a desire to be superior to others (termed *spiritual materialism*; Gould, 2006; Trungpa, 1939/1973), and they could be expected to increase conspicuous consumption when in a spiritual mindset. In short, future research might seek to identify moderators to the present findings.

It is important to situate the current investigation within a broader culture context.

The university at which these studies took place is predominantly Monotheistic (84%) as assessed in Study 2. Although our operationalizations of spirituality were designed to capture spirituality across a broad spectrum of people, we hesitate to generalize the current findings beyond cultures that are Western and primarily Monotheistic.

6. Conclusion

Many influential writers and thinkers have argued that having and displaying wealth conflicts with spiritual pursuits. The current work found empirical support for this proposition, as spirituality reduced the desire to consume conspicuously. The means by which this occurs was via weakened materialistic motivations, which in turn reduced the desire to spend large amounts on visible goods.

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