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## **Social Networking Websites Usage and Life Satisfaction: A Study of Materialist Values Shared by Facebook Users**

### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to analyze how materialist values mediate the relationship between time spent on social networking websites (SNW) and overall life satisfaction. Admittedly, younger generations spend more time on SNW compared to older generations, therefore we can anticipate that younger people are more affected by materialism and, consequently, less satisfied with their lives. The conceptual model proposed here was tested on a convenience sample of 390 Romanian adults. Using structural equation modeling, our findings validate the hypothesis that younger people spend more time on SNW; the SNW usage makes them more materialistic and, as a result, less satisfied with life.

These findings raise ethical questions regarding the impact of SNW on overall life satisfaction. For example, Facebook, the most popular SNW in Romania, is a virtual social sphere where people become “friends”, give or receive “likes”, are “fans” of something or somebody, etc. Therefore, we argue that Facebook is a symbolical locus for quantitative manifestations of something intimate and private, like feelings or appreciations. Such materialist approach to friendship and relationships has a significant negative impact on life satisfaction.

**Keywords:** social networking websites, Facebook, materialist values, life dissatisfaction.

### **1. Introduction**

The usage of SNW in Romania, Facebook in particular, has grown consistently in the past years. In 2014, Facebook has reached 7.2 million Romanians users, more than one third of population (<http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>). These come mostly from younger generations (70,7% of them are 13 to 34 years). Due to their high social impact, Facebook and SNW, in general, have become widely discussed among academics and business practitioners. There are, therefore, many studies dedicated to SNW (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, etc.) and to their social and psychological outcomes (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Kosinski et al. 2014; Wang et al., 2015). Nevertheless, prior research has not systematically examined the impact of SNW use on people’s values, particularly on developing materialist values. This issue should be approached taking into consideration that research in the field of materialism (Nickerson et al., 2007; Atay et al., 2010, Otero-López et al., 2010; Sirgy et al., 2012; Sirgy et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2013) has consistently shown that materialists are less happy, in general, than people who display lower interest in materialism.

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Materialism is a multifaceted concept; it has an economic dimension with physical manifestations – people buy products, goods and services –, but it can have a symbolic dimension too which can be easily depicted in the virtual realm of the SNW.

Using structural equation modeling, this paper will explore the presence of materialism in the context of social networking sites such as Facebook, and will discuss the impact of materialist values on SNW users' life satisfaction. Given this, it can be hypothesized that if people spend more time on SNW then they become more materialistic and consequently less satisfied with life in general.

## 2. The Notion of Materialism

When trying to define values, such as materialistic values, researchers have to take into consideration the risk of ideologisation. Nevertheless a critical approach should be a prerequisite when trying to define such complex concepts. According to the Oxford *Dictionary of Sociology* edited by Marshall (2003), the concept of “materialism” can be defined as the higher importance accorded to sensuous pleasure, to material possessions or psychical comfort. This perspective confers a derogatory connotation to the term, considering that materialist people do not express interest to superior or moral values.

A critical approach to this concept belongs to Marx who considers that in a capitalist society people show too much importance to commodities, ignoring the social relations needed for their manufacture (Marx, 1867/1960, vol. I). This is what Marx calls “commodity fetishism”, and consists of the fact that “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race” (Marx, 1867/1960, vol. I, p. 110). About two decades later, Veblen (1889/2009) analyzed the behavior of the rich leisure class in the American society that is characterized by conspicuous consumption as demonstration of wealth: “in order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (Veblen, 1889/2009, p. 43). Another fine-grained critical approach to materialism belongs to Baudrillard (1970/2005), who considers that we live in an opulent society, where goods and services are easily multiplied; consequently, people are not surrounded by other people, but mostly by objects. Even if these classical critical approaches cannot be ignored, in our investigation we will not give to the terms “materialistic values”, “materialism”, or “materialistic people” negative connotations.

We do not use the concept of materialism as presented in some philosophical theories that explain the ontological reality through the existence of matter. In this paper, materialism is defined as the importance given to material possessions that, in materialistic people's view, offer happiness and prestige. In our sociological approach, people as members of the society share materialistic values, which are produced by society and not by individuals. Materialist values can be found in the consumer society, where people express a higher interest in having instead of being (Fromm, 1976). For example, according to Fromm (1976, p. 23), leisure time, automobiles, television, travel, and sex are the main objects of desire.

Belk (1985) was one of the first authors who have developed a scale for materialistic values. His three-dimension scale is composed of indicators that focus more on how materialism influences interpersonal relationships and not solely on the desire to possess things.

According to Belk (1985), the materialistic scale has subscales to measure possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy. The author considers that possessiveness is the “tendency to retain control or ownership of one’s possession” (Belk, 1985, p. 267). Therefore, this dimension refers only to possession (and not to acquisition), materialistic people being worried that others will take their possessions. “Non-generosity” is the unwillingness to give or to share possessions with others, and “envy” is the desire for others’ possessions, be they objects, experiences and persons. We can see that according to Belk (1985) people who share materialist values express negative feelings towards others when possession is considered. For instance, two sub-indicators of possessiveness from the materialism scale developed by (Belk, 1985) are: “When I travel I like to take a lot of photographs” and “I never discard old pictures or snapshots”. Building on this, we can argue that the photos posted on Facebook - which are central to all Facebook related functions and activities - are not only part of the online management of impressions, but they are also an indicator for possessiveness of things, people or experiences, and, therefore, for materialism.

Another widely accepted conceptualization of materialism belongs to Richins and Dawson (1992). They define materialism as a multifaceted concept, composed of three dimensions: “acquisition centrality”, “acquisition as the pursuit of happiness”, and “possession-defined success”. In accordance with the first dimension, materialistic people place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives; consequently, they enjoy spending money on things that are not necessarily neither useful nor practical. The second dimension underlines that people who share materialist values see acquisition and possession of goods as essential to their satisfaction and well-being. They think that they would be happier if they would afford to buy more things. The last dimension underlines that the satisfaction is given by the possession of objects seen as indicators of success. Similar to Veblen’s (1889/2009) analysis of leisure class, Richins and Dawson’s (1992) perspective accentuates that materialistic people like to own things that impress people. In this paper we build on these two researchers’ operationalization of materialism, and define materialism as a higher appreciation of the acquisitions and possessions, perceived as source of happiness and success.

### **3. SNW and materialism**

The Internet is a non-material environment; however, the concept of materialism applies to the virtual realm as well. Some authors argue that “beliefs and practices cannot be described as non-material culture, because they involve assigning cultural meanings to tangible features of digital architecture. It can therefore be said that virtual spaces have material culture” (Lehdonvirta, 2010, p. 5). Others have found materialistic motivations in people’s digital activity (Chang, 2008). The online environment has therefore various materialistic traits which influence the way people interact online and the way they manage their online symbolic representations.

In the online environment, consumer goods are increasingly used “to compete for status and recognition, reach for ontological security and self-identity, and seek solutions to problems, real or imagined.” (Lehdonvirta, 2010, p. 884).

Based on such theoretical premises, we can argue that SNW are to a large extent a generalized form of self-defining and self-expressive online consumption. Users often choose products and brands that are self-relevant and communicate a desired identity. In this way

“consumers make their identities tangible, or self-present, by associating themselves with material objects and places.” (Schau & Gilly, 2009, p. 385). With the advent of the Internet, materiality has to be reinterpreted because in the online environment symbols are often not related to physical objects or places. SNW allow their users to present themselves using digital rather than physical referents (Schau & Gilly, 2009).

Social networking websites display various dematerialized artifacts that transform the ways in which we represent ourselves and interact with the others. Belk (2013) observes that pictures, music, and collections have all been transformed into dematerialized digital artifacts. Nevertheless, the author questions whether these digital possessions can be integrated to our extended self in the same way as their material counterparts. Other authors underline the blur between material and non-material possessions in the online environment. Lehdonvirta, for instance, argues that “there is no such as thing as completely immaterial consumption” (Lehdonvirta, 2012, p. 22). Furthermore, he emphasizes that virtual goods are as real and able to satisfy desires as material goods.

All these perspectives on the nature of virtual possessions are very valuable; however, they do not answer the question of whether the virtual environment is making us more altruistic and attentive to others’ needs or just more materialistic. Our external identity and internal sense of self, expressed through material and virtual goods, are reconstructed in the context of the online interaction (Belk, 2013). However, it is not clear whether our digital presence is an idealized self-extension or just mere materialistic extension of our physical personae.

#### **4. Materialism and life satisfaction**

Previous studies consistently show that materialistic people have a lower level of overall life satisfaction compared to people lower in materialism (Nickerson et al., 2007; Atay et al., 2010; Otero-López et al., 2010; Sirgy et al., 2012; Sirgy et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2013). Nickerson et al. (2007) summarize a large array of studies regarding the consequences of materialism on people. On the one hand, the majority of studies indicate a negative correlation between materialism and agreeableness, self-actualization, self-esteem, educational level, openness to experience, and religious values. On the other hand, numerous studies have shown that there are positive correlations between materialism and narcissism, right-wing authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, hedonistic values, need for recognition, and importance of security, particularly of financial security. Nickerson et al. (2007) show that materialism, measured as financial aspiration, negatively correlates with overall life satisfaction. Therefore, materialism influences life satisfaction directly and mediated by psychology constructs.

Valenzuela et al. (2009) demonstrated in their study that Facebook is related to attitudes and behaviors that enhance individuals’ social capital. These authors have found a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and American students’ life satisfaction. While these findings indicate an optimistic scenario about Facebook and its consequences on young adults, various recent studies have found significant negative associations between Facebook and users’ well being. For instance, Kross et al. (2013) have tested how satisfied Facebook users are through an original in-vivo experiment. Their results indicate that Facebook can generate negative shifts on users’ subjective well-being (how people feel moment-to-moment and how satisfied they are with their lives). The research validates the hypothesis that the more people use Facebook, the more their life satisfaction levels decline over time (Kross et

al., 2013). Such findings bring to question Facebook's potential to provide an effective resource for social interaction. Rather than enhancing life satisfaction and well being, SNW may foster materialism and undermine its users' general well-being.

A different approach belongs to Sirgy, who explains the positive correlation between materialism and life dissatisfaction by the gap between aspirations and reality (Sirgy, 1998; Sirgy et al., 2012; Sirgy et al., 2013). Sirgy (1998) stresses that materialists are more influenced by affective-based expectations than by cognitive-based ones. The first kind of expectations are ideal standards of living made by comparison with wealthy people that are not part of their family, friends, neighborhood; materialistic people compare themselves with people that are not like them. Based on a survey realized in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Egypt, Korea, Turkey, and the USA, Sirgy et al. (2012) show that a possible explanation for these fantasy-based expectations is the exposure to advertising that promote consumption and promises for a life full of satisfactions.

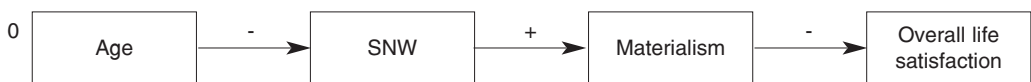
In more religious countries, materialism can determine life dissatisfaction mediated by stress produced by the incongruence between the desire for acquisitions and possessions of things and the religious moral values (Baker et al., 2013). Thus, life dissatisfaction can be determined directly by materialism and indirectly mediated by religious beliefs: "materialistic values in such cultures are in conflict with religious beliefs and such values tend to create stress that adversely affects one's well-being" (Baker et al., 2013, p. 559).

A nuanced explanation of the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction is given by Richins (2013) who reveals that materialistic people have higher positive emotions before purchase followed by hedonic decline after purchase. The thought of buying things makes materialistic people feel better than the same action performed by non-materialistic people, but these emotions last shorter after acquisition for the first group, which in return makes high-materialism consumers less happy than others. These findings are arguments for the idea presented by Dunn et al. (2011), according to whom money does not make us happy because we do not spend it right: "money is an opportunity for happiness, but it is an opportunity that people routinely squander because the things they think will make them happy often don't" (2011, p. 115). Consequently, the authors suggest that people should buy more small pleasures rather than fewer large ones and that they should spend money on gaining life experiences.

To sum up, we can quote Fromm (1976) who considers that "unrestricted satisfaction of all desires is not conducive to *well-being*, nor is it the way to happiness or even to maximum pleasure" (p. 2). Therefore, materialism defined as an intense desire for acquisition and possessions of things brings a lower level of overall life satisfaction.

Considering the aforementioned theories regarding SWN usage and materialism we developed a theoretical model involving the negative relationship between variables "age" and "time spent on SNW", and the positive relationships between "time spent on SNW", "materialism", and "overall life satisfaction" (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hypothetical model of the relationship between SWN, materialism, and life satisfaction.



This conceptual model presumes that time spent on SNW stimulates materialistic values that can have a negative impact on users by diminishing their overall life satisfaction. Due to

younger people spend more time on SNW (particularly on Facebook), we can suggest that this generation is more affected by possible negative effects of these online social networks.

## 5. Method

### Sample

We have conducted a sociological survey based on a convenience sample of Romanians ( $N = 390$ ). The demographic profile was not consistent with the demographics of the population at large. Among respondents, 57,8% were women, 58% had a college or graduate degree, 71,4% were employed. The respondents' age was between 14 and 78 (mean = 29,5, S.D. = 10.6) and 70% of them were younger than 30 (skewness = 1,62).

### Measures

The materialist values were measured with a six item-scale developed by Richins (1987), where four items measure "personal materialism" and two items measure "general materialism". The personal materialism consists in the fact that people desire the acquisition of things and consider that possession of goods would make them happy. The subscale "general materialism" measures how people respond to societal materialism. For example, an item from the first subscale is "I would like to be rich enough to buy everything I want", and an example from the second subscale is "It's really true that money can buy happiness". Therefore, Richins's scale (1987) measures the importance given to acquisitions and possessions by high-materialism people in the pursuit of happiness.

The materialist scale translated into Romanian was reliable and valid. The six item-scale translated and adapted into Romanian had a .62 coefficient alpha and if the item "People place too much emphasis on material things" was deleted, the coefficient alpha increased at 0.77. Because this item was one of the two items that measure general materialism we calculated a single mean score for the scale based on the other five items. To test convergent validity we asked the respondents what their income was during the last month and what monthly income would be sufficient, in order to satisfy their needs. According to Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 311), "people who desire a lot of possessions will need more money to acquire those possessions and thus are expected to report a higher desired level of income". In our sample, high-materialism people considered they needed significantly more income compared to those lower in materialism ( $r = .26, p < .01$ ). Thus, we can consider that the materialist scale has convergent validity.

We measured the time that respondents allocate daily to social network websites using an ordinal scale (from "1" – "no time allocated" to "5" – "over 4 hours"). The overall life satisfaction was measured on a Likert 5 point scale (from "1" – "not at all satisfied" to "5" – "very satisfied"). Age was measured with an open-ended question.

## 6. Results

Findings confirm that younger people spend more time on SNW (see Table 1); therefore, they could be more affected by potential negative effects of the virtual social networks. The

correlation between “time spent on SNW” and “materialism” is small but significant ( $\rho=.25$ ,  $p<.01$ ), which indicates clear support for the hypothesis that SNW are virtual places where people are encouraged to appreciate to a higher extent materialistic manifestations, such as the importance given to the quantity of photos, likes, and comments. The correlation between “materialism” and “overall life satisfaction” indicates that people higher in materialism are less satisfied with life in general ( $\rho=-.17$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

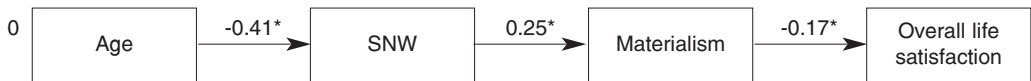
Table 1. Spearman correlations between variables.

	Age	Time spent on SNW	Materialism	Overall life satisfaction
Age	1.000	-.407**	-.094	-.016
Time spent on SNW	-.407**	1.000	.246**	.005
Materialism	-.094	.246**	1.000	-.171**
Overall life satisfaction	-.016	.005	-.171**	1.000

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To investigate the hypothesized model (Figure 1), we used the EQS program for structural equation modeling and the fit indices show that the model fits the data ( $\chi^2(7)=4.28$ ,  $p=0.23$ ),  $CFI=.99$ ,  $RMSA=.03$ ). Standardized solutions indicate that time spent on SNW increases the level of materialism, which determines in return a lower level of life satisfaction (Figure 2). Findings show that younger generations are more exposed to this unintended effect of SNW.

Figure 2. Observed Path-Analytic Model for the relationship between age, time spent on SNW, materialism, and overall life satisfaction(s).



### 7. Discussions

Using structural equation modeling, our findings show that time spent on SNW determines, mediated by materialism, overall life dissatisfaction. Taking into consideration that usually younger people spend more time on SNW (especially on Facebook in Romania), our data indicate that they could be more affected by virtual social networks than older people. Considering that our findings raise questions regarding the potential negative effects of SNW on users, this study should be continued by a more fine-grained investigation of Romanian Facebook users. Other variables should be taken into account, such as how the users manage the photos on their account, the likes, and the comments, in order to find out how much real life is negatively influenced by the time spent on Facebook.

Although there is no direct negative correlation between the duration of Facebook use and general life satisfaction, our findings don't necessarily indicate an optimistic scenario about Facebook and its consequences on young adults. The variable “materialism” mediates the relationship between SNW usage and life dissatisfaction, indicating that Facebook can generate negative shifts on users' general life satisfaction. Therefore, our research is in line with other studies, which indicate that the more people use Facebook, the more they become materialistic and, as a consequence, their life satisfaction levels decline. Such findings bring to question Facebook's potential to provide effective social interaction. Rather than enhancing life satisfaction, SNW seem to foster materialism and dissatisfaction with life in general.

To sum-up, we can observe that SNW have transformed virtually every aspect of our lives, modifying the social landscape in which we live and the interpersonal relationships, which are at the core of every society. Their tremendous impact on our lives raises, therefore, various concerns such as values, life satisfaction and predictions about the future. Related to the life satisfaction issue, the main reason of concern is the potential power of SNW to alter users' dissatisfaction with themselves and with others. We argue that this is a mediated process, a consequence of the climax of materialistic values through social networks. Before SNW, classical mass media, especially the television and television advertising, were those that had influenced viewers' materialism and dissatisfaction with life (Moschis & Moore, 1982; Sirgy et al., 1998; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Nowadays, SNW are a new source that stimulates materialistic values in users, with possible negative consequences.

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