Three studies assessed the relations between materialism and regulatory focus. We hypothesize and show that prevention focus is positively related to materialism (primarily the happiness dimension) through its negative relation with self-esteem. Promotion is both positively and negatively related to materialism (primarily the success dimension) through two routes: A positive route through its positive relation with extrinsic goal pursuit and a negative route through its positive relation with self-esteem. The findings indicate that both promotion focus and prevention focus are related to materialism, but to different dimensions and through different mechanisms.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Materialism reflects the belief that wealth is an essential determinant of a successful, happy life (Richins and Dawson 1992). Apart from the influence of materialism, consumers’ goal-striving is driven by their regulatory focus (Higgins 1997). A promotion focus directs consumers’ attention to their aspirations and hopes (ideals), whereas a prevention focus directs their attention to duties and responsibilities (oughts). Three studies are presented to test the proposition that both promotion and prevention are related to materialism, but through different mechanisms.

Research has shown that prevention is negatively related to self-esteem, whereas promotion is positively related to self-esteem (McGregor et al. 2007; Moss 2009). Because materialism is associated with uncertainty feelings (e.g., Chang and Arkin 2002; Christopher et al. 2006) that may stem from an unfulfilled need for self-esteem (Chaplin and John 2007; Kasser 2002), we propose that promotion and prevention focus may have opposite effects on materialism, given their opposite effects on self-esteem. In addition to differences in self-esteem, differences in extrinsic goal pursuit between prevention- and promotion-focused consumers may also lead to differences in materialism. In many capitalist societies, wealth is considered the key to a successful life (Ger and Belk 1996). Correspondingly, striving for money and status (extrinsic goals; Deci and Ryan 2000; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996) is related to materialism (Kasser 2002). Given their concern with success, achievement (Higgins 1997), and realizing their ideal self (Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda 2002), promotion-focused individuals may be more likely to adopt culturally promoted, extrinsic goals than prevention focused consumers. This is to some extent evidenced in their preference for luxury and hedonic consumption (Higgins 2002; Wang and Lee 2006; Werth and Foster 2007).

In sum, we hypothesize that promotion will be related to materialism through two routes, a positive one (mediated by extrinsic goal pursuit) and a negative one (mediated by self-esteem). In contrast, prevention will be negatively related to self-esteem, which in turn will be negatively related to materialism (net positive relation between prevention and materialism). In addition to the general materialism effects, we expect promotion and prevention focus to relate differentially to specific dimensions of materialism. It would be consistent with striving for achievement and success (Higgins 1997) that promotion-focused consumers in particular believe that wealth communicates success. Thus, promotion may be particularly highly correlated with the success subscale of materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992). If prevention is related to materialism, and if low self-esteem accounts for this relation, it is plausible that promotion-focused consumers think that money would buy them happiness. Thus, prevention focus may be particularly highly correlated with Richins and Dawson’s (1992) happiness subscale.

Study 1 used European students to test the hypothesis that regulatory focus is related to materialism. Regulatory focus was assessed with the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Lockwood et al. 2002). Materialism was measured with the Material Values Scale (Richins and Dawson 1992). Overall, our hypotheses were supported. Prevention significantly predicts overall materialism, but promotion does not, consistent with our reasoning that promotion influences materialism both positively and negatively through different mechanisms, thus suppressing the effect. In addition, prevention, not promotion, significantly predicts scores on the happiness dimension of materialism. Promotion positively predicts scores on the success dimension, but prevention does not.

Study 1 confirmed that prevention is positively related to materialism, but this study did not allow testing both predicted paths between promotion and materialism. If our assumptions hold, materialism should decrease in consumers who are in an induced promotion focus who experience a self-esteem boost, compared to promotion focused individuals whose self-esteem is not boosted. In study 2, 38 participants were randomly assigned to either think about achieved goals (past promotion), or about future aspirations (future promotion). Considering achieved and future aspirations induces promotion focus (Lockwood et al. 2002; Pham and Avnet 2004; Zhu and Meyers-Levy 2007), and thinking of past successes was expected to enhance self-esteem (Leonardelli et al. 2007). Next, participants indicated selling prices for five products. Selling price has been shown to be a reliable measure of (temporal) materialism (Lens and Pandelaere 2009). As predicted, participants in the past promotion condition demanded lower prices than participants in the future promotion condition, suggesting that enhanced self-esteem due to promotion success decreases materialistic pursuits.

In study 3, we replicated the findings of studies 1 and 2 in an American, non-student sample. This study extends the previous studies by explicitly measuring self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965) and extrinsic goal pursuit (Aspiration Index; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996). Regulatory focus and materialism were measured as in study 1. To assess the predicted relations between overall materialism, prevention, and promotion, we estimated a path model. The model adequately fits the data. In a second model, happiness and success were regressed separately on self-esteem and extrinsic goal pursuit. The model is improved significantly if we allow for a direct relation between prevention and happiness (not mediated by self-esteem). As expected, prevention was positively related to materialism, and this effect was mediated by self-esteem. Promotion was positively related to materialism via the mediating role of extrinsic goal pursuit, but negatively related to materialism through self-esteem. In addition, as hypothesized, the effects for prevention on materialism were driven by the happiness dimension, whereas the effects for promotion were driven by the success factor.

These findings show that consumers may adopt different “types” of materialism, and through different mechanisms, as suggested by the fact that promotion- and prevention-focused consumers tend to value different aspects of materialism congruent with their goal orientation.

REFERENCES


