



COVID may have made us less materialistic – new research

The early days of COVID brought a new sense of urgency to shopping for certain items. Toilet paper, pasta and bread flew off the shelves as people stocked up on vital supplies. Then came the must-have purchases to help with the tedium of lockdowns, with hot tubs, kitchen gadgets and new pets becoming extremely popular purchases. So did the pandemic make us generally more materialistic?

Certainly, research suggests that a tendency towards materialistic behavior – a focus on acquiring money and possessions that signal economic and social status – is caused by high levels of stress, anxiety and loneliness. For many, the pandemic has been a stressful, anxious and lonely period.

Materialism is also fuelled by media consumption. And [early reports](#) found that during periods of lockdown and social restrictions, people became even more glued to their screens than before.

But despite these conditions which might have been expected to make people more materialistic, [our research suggests](#) that the opposite was true. We asked people in the UK about their beliefs and values before and after the arrival of COVID and found that, overall, most people have moved to caring less about money and material gains.

They rated goals like “being financially successful” and “having a job that pays well” lower than before. Other social values to do with self-acceptance and sharing our lives “with someone I love” remained the same.

We believe that these changes might be explained by other factors related to the pandemic. For example, COVID focused attention on the importance of health. Also, advertising and social media promoted social values like solidarity and dealing with the challenges of a shared experience.

Not all of our respondents had the same response, it should be said. We used various data collection techniques to ask a representative sample of the UK population, and people who were more exposed to the media and more anxious about COVID, were seen to display greater levels of materialism. Nevertheless, we found an overall reduction in people’s material interests.

Fresh focus

There may be benefits to such a change in attitude. Research has found that materialism leads to lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction, as well as causing negative moods and anxiety.

Yet popular culture and social media make materialism hard to avoid. From a very early age, many children quickly learn to associate material gain with rewards for good behavior.

As they get older, they discover that things can help us to present ourselves in a more appealing way, and gain other people’s attention. Material items gradually become highly desired prizes that also help us to overcome some of our perceived shortfalls.

To add to the appeal, [the media](#) and advertising sectors generally promote materialistic beliefs through stories and images that link money and consumption to happiness, high self-esteem and social recognition.

Of course, big advertisers and marketing departments didn't completely avoid their traditional methods during COVID. Our research also revealed a higher number of social media posts from brands promoting consumption as a way to cope with negative emotions and improve wellbeing.

This, combined with a widespread reduction in value placed on financial and material gain, could eventually lead to the development of polarised mindsets. On the one side, it is possible that many people will continue the trend initiated by COVID and slowly drift away from consumerism, potentially bringing deep social consequences: it may already be part of the reason for the "[great resignation](#)" in the labor market, where a higher than usual proportion of workers have decided to quit their jobs.

On the other side, though, the higher number of adverts and online messages which present spending as a route to happiness could have the opposite result. Those more exposed to social media, like teenagers and young adults, may be more likely to embrace materialism, and encounter some of the negative effects it brings.

This kind of polarized thinking could develop into part of the long-term social impact of the global health crisis, with serious ramifications for younger generations. A pandemic which pushed many away from the damaging effects of materialism may have pulled others much closer towards them.

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