

Wanting more than you have and it's Consequences for Well-being

J. Ian Norris · Jeff T. Larsen

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Abstract Americans have a lot of stuff, but are not necessarily happier for it. One possibility is that even if we want what we have, we want more. Wanting more may increase have-want discrepancies and reduce well-being. In this paper, we introduce the construct wanting more, and show that it negatively predicts well-being. We then identify materialism as a mediator of this relationship. Wanting more negatively effects well-being at least in part because those who want more are more likely to be materialistic. Finally, we show that wanting more than one has and wanting what one has are distinct constructs, and that wanting what one has moderates the relationship between wanting more and well-being. Those who want more are less happy only if they also do not want what they have. Wanting what one has may reduce attention to have-want discrepancies that result from wanting more.

Keywords Wanting more · Happiness, well-being · Materialism · Have-want discrepancies · Wanting what one has · Desire fulfillment

What kind of paradise am I looking for? I've got everything I want and I still want more.

—Ani DiFranco (2001)

Americans have a lot of stuff. Fully 98% of Americans own a television and 36% own flat-screen televisions (Pew Research 2006). Most of these flat-screens were probably purchased by people who already had a functioning television, which helps explain why the average American household has more televisions than people (2.8 vs. 2.5; Nielsen Media Research (March 17 2007). With the recent advent of 3-D television, it is likely that many of these perfectly good flat-screens will themselves be upstaged soon. The general

J. Ian Norris (✉)
Department of Psychology, Murray State University, 212 Wells Hall, Murray, KY 42071, USA
e-mail: ian.norris@murraystate.edu

J. T. Larsen
Department of Psychology, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA

principle is that sometimes even when we have a particular good (e.g., a television), we want another one. We term this phenomenon *wanting more*. We examine the potential negative consequences of wanting more for well-being as well as the potential mediating role of materialism. We also examine the possibility that wanting what we already do have might mitigate the negative effect of wanting more on well-being.

The last half-century has seen an explosion in consumer purchasing power, driven by two related factors: the availability of affordable consumer goods and a sharp rise in disposable income. These factors are related, because the production of ever-increasing numbers of goods has increased per-capita GDP, putting more people to work and increasing disposable income. As such, economic growth now depends on ever-increasing levels of consumption. The problem is that discontinuous innovations, or technological breakthroughs that truly revolutionize the way we live our daily lives (e.g., the automobile, the personal computer, the cell phone) are few and far between. The health of the economy depends far more greatly on continuous innovation, or the gradual, subtle, or merely perceived improvement of existing consumer goods. Cell phones, for example, have become sleeker and smaller and increasingly come equipped with cameras and other accessories. As carefully documented by Annie Leonard (2010) in *The Story of Stuff*, product marketing and advertising help create the perceived obsolescence of consumer goods by convincing consumers that if they do not continue to buy, they will be left behind by the latest improvements in terms of technology, convenience, social interaction, and social status.

Although the result of such discontinuous innovations has been a corresponding explosion in stuff, there is little evidence that discontinuous innovations, let alone revolutionary technological breakthroughs, have made us any happier. Although per-capita GDP increased by 50% over the last half-decade, the number of people reporting they are very happy has remained relatively unchanged (e.g., Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002, cf. Stevenson and Wolfers 2008). Wanting more may help explain this apparent paradox. According to desire-fulfillment theories (e.g., Parfit 1984), happiness is a function of the extent to which we have what we want. The smaller the discrepancy between what we want and what we have, the happier we will be. Indeed, Larsen and McKibban (2008) found that college students who had more of what they wanted were happier. Such approaches to happiness are broadly consistent with control-process theories of emotion and motivation in general (e.g., Carver 2004). Discrepancies between actual states and desired states motivate us to make progress toward achieving the desired state and such progress is rewarded by positive affect. In regard to consumer behavior, desire for a better television will create a *have-want discrepancy* (i.e., a discrepancy between what one has and what one wants) that will only be resolved after the desired television has been acquired. However, the new television will not lead to any lasting sort of happiness if we shortly come to want an even better television. In terms of basic models of adaptation (e.g., Brickman and Campbell 1971), the acquisition of material goods places us on a hedonic treadmill. To the extent that our wants outpace our haves, we might become less happy, even as our haves accumulate. This leads to the prediction that wanting more will be negatively associated with well-being.

Wanting more might also be negatively related to well-being by virtue of its potential relationship to goals and value systems that are negatively related to well-being, such as materialism. Materialists are those who focus on acquiring goods (Richins and Dawson 1992); thus, materialists are likely those who are high in wanting more. A wide body of research has documented the negative consequences of materialistic values and behavior on well-being (see Kasser et al. 2007, for a recent review); for instance, materialistic individuals report lower life satisfaction (Richins and Dawson 1992). One possibility is

that materialists are less happy because materialism leads to wanting more. That is, wanting more may mediate the effects of materialism more on well-being. On the other hand, there are many other reasons to expect that materialism is more directly related to lower well-being. Buying things brings less satisfaction than buying experiences, so materialists might cost themselves the kinds of experiences that tend to enhance well-being (e.g., Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Similarly, those who focus on the pursuit of wealth might cost themselves the pursuit of more intrinsically satisfying goals for community and social affiliation (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Kasser et al. 2007; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996). From this perspective, materialism may in part explain why those who want more are less happy, to the extent that wanting more leads to greater materialism. That is, it may instead be that materialism mediates the effects of wanting more on well-being.

One potential buffer against the potential negative effects of wanting more than we have is to want what you already have, which is positively related to well-being (Larsen and McKibban 2008). Whereas wanting more might be negatively related to well-being because it increases the discrepancy between what one has and what one wants, wanting what one has might mitigate these effects because those who want what they already have focus less on that discrepancy, even if it exists. That is, those who want more might focus on what they do *not* have, which may increase attention to the have-want discrepancies that result from wanting more, whereas those who want more but also want what they have focus more on what they *do* have, reducing attention to the have-want discrepancies that result from wanting more.

Accordingly, we are not suggesting that wanting more and wanting what one has are simply inverse constructs. Rather, they are conceptually distinct. Wanting more does not preclude people from wanting what they have because they have different referents (e.g., the car you have vs. the car you do not). For instance, someone who wants another car may want another car because they no longer want the one they have. On the other hand, they may want another car because they want as many cars as they can have. To the extent that wanting what one has and wanting more are empirically distinct, wanting more and wanting what one has will be uncorrelated.

1 Method

1.1 Participants

Participants were 101 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20$, 64% female, 87% White, 89% Christian) undergraduates at Murray State University who were compensated with course credit.¹

1.2 Materials

1.2.1 Individual Differences

To measure well-being, participants completed the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985). To measure materialistic values, participants completed the 18-item Consumer Values Orientation Scale (Richins and Dawson 1992).

¹ Although we did not collect income data, a comparable sample of Murray State undergraduates reported a median household income of \$67,500, compared to the 2008 median household income of \$52,029 (US Census Bureau, n.d.).

1.2.2 Measurement of Consumer Wants and Haves

The primary construct of interest was the extent to which participants wanted something more than they had. We also computed the extent to which participants wanted what they already had. The instrument used to collect these data was modified from the instrument used in Larsen and McKibban (2008), and included a subset of the items included in the original study. The items were chosen to represent various categories of items used in the original study, as well as various items in the Pew Research (2006) luxury/necessity questionnaire (e.g., vehicle, electronics, apparel). Furthermore, in order to capture conceptually the nature of wanting something different from what one already has, it was often necessary to collapse specific items into larger categories of items. For instance, whereas the items “Playstation” and “Xbox” were probed individually in Larsen and McKibban, these items were grouped into the category “video game system” for the purposes of the current study. This is because it was unclear why someone who had a Playstation would want a different Playstation, but reasonable to assume that someone who had a Playstation might want an Xbox or a Nintendo Wii instead. The ten items used in the study are listed in Table 1.

1.2.3 Quantification of Wanting and Having

For each item, participants first indicated whether or not they had the item. If they answered yes, they then answered two questions: “To what extent do you *want* the ____ that you have?” and “To what extent do you want a different ____?” If they answered no, they simply reported the extent to which they wanted the item. These questions were answered on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*a lot*) and recoded on a scale from 0 to 8, so that 0 would represent a lack of want altogether. Following Larsen and McKibban (2008), the extent to which participants wanted what they had was quantified as the average degree of want for the items they reported having divided by the number of scale points (8). Thus, scores ranged from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating a greater extent of wanting what one has. The extent to which participants wanted something different from what they had was calculated in a parallel manner.

Table 1 The extent to which participants had each of the ten items, wanted each of the items they had, and wanted more than they had (on the original 0–8 scale)

Item	Have (%)	WantHave	WantMore
Cell phone	100.00	5.80	2.96
Car	89.10	5.76	3.57
Laptop computer	82.20	6.46	2.80
MP3 player	80.20	5.90	1.96
Digital camera	69.30	5.97	3.61
Designer clothes	63.40	6.19	4.44
Video game system	56.40	4.58	2.02
Jewelry	48.50	5.84	3.43
Flat-screen tv	33.70	6.35	1.94
Car stereo system	31.70	6.31	2.63
Mean	65.45	5.92	2.94

2 Results

The extent to which participants had each of the 10 items ranged from a high of 100% (cell phone) to a low of 31% (car stereo system; see Table 1). Participants generally wanted what they had ($M = 0.73$, $SD = 0.14$); even so, they were not unlikely to want something more ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.21$). The two variables were uncorrelated ($r = -0.01$, $p = 0.94$), suggesting that wanting what one has and wanting something more are not simply inverse constructs; rather, they are conceptually as well as empirically distinct.

Participants reported slightly higher than average levels of well-being on the Satisfaction with Life Scale, $M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.95$. Although previous research demonstrated a positive relationship between wanting what one has and well-being (Larsen and McKibban 2008), the extent to which participants wanted what they had was unrelated to well-being in this sample, $r = 0.09$, $p = 0.39$ (see Table 2).

The extent to which participants wanted more than they had was negatively related to well-being, $r = -0.20$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, as predicted, those who wanted more than they had were less happy (Table 2).

2.1 The Role of Materialism

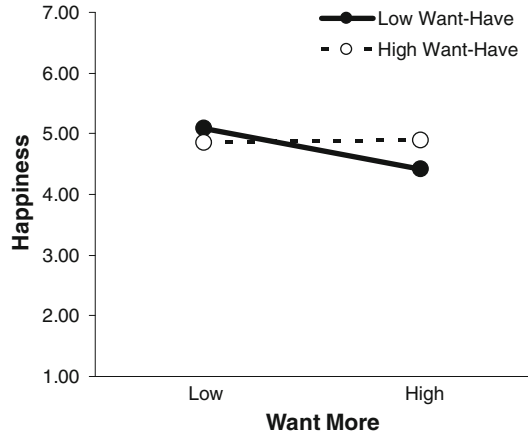
Consistent with previous research, materialists were less happy, $r = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$ (Table 2). As predicted, materialists were more likely to want more than they had ($r = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$), and perhaps surprisingly, to want what they had, $r = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$. Because wanting more and materialism were positively correlated with each other and both negatively correlated with well-being, we examined the possibility that either materialism mediates the effect of wanting more on well-being or that wanting more mediates the effect of materialism on well-being. That is, perhaps those who want more are less happy because they are materialists, or rather, that materialists are less happy because they want more. To test for the mediation, we predicted well-being from both wanting more and materialism simultaneously in a regression equation (i.e., Baron and Kenny 1986). The overall model was significant, $F(2, 97) = 4.81$, $p = 0.01$. The effect of materialism on well-being remained significant in the regression equation, $\beta = -0.24$, $t(97) = -2.33$, $p < 0.05$, but the effect of wanting more did not, $t(97) = -1.20$, $\beta = -0.12$, $p = 0.23$. Thus, the mediational analysis indicated that materialism completely mediated the effects of wanting more on well-being (Baron and Kenny 1986), and not vice versa. Furthermore, a Sobel test for the indirect effect calculated using the bootstrapping procedure provided by Preacher

Table 2 Standardized beta weights for the effects of wanting what you have, wanting more, and materialism on satisfaction with life, and predicted satisfaction with life scores for individual's one standard deviation above and below the mean of each predictor

Predictor	β	Predicted SWL Score	
		-1 SD	+1 SD
WantHave	0.09	4.72	4.88
WantMore	-0.20*	5.00	4.62
Materialism	-0.28*	5.08	4.56

* $p < 0.05$

Fig. 1 Wanting what one has moderates the negative effect of wanting more on well-being, such that those who want more than they have but also want what they have are no lower in well-being than those who do not want more than they have



and Hayes (2008) was significant, $z = -1.92$, $p < 0.05$.² In other words, people who want more are less happy at least in part because they are more likely to be materialistic.

2.2 The Role of Wanting What You Have

Wanting more was negatively related to well-being and unrelated to wanting what one has. One possibility is that wanting what one has mitigates the negative effect of wanting more. That is, perhaps wanting more is only negatively related to well-being for those who also do not want the things they do have, because focusing on what one has reduces attention to the have-want discrepancies that result from wanting more. To test this possibility, we mean-centered the predictor and moderator variables (wanting more and wanting what one has, respectively) and computed their product to obtain the interaction term (see Aiken and West 1991). We conducted the moderated regression analysis by predicting well-being from the extent to which participants wanted what they had and wanted more than they had in the first step of the regression equation and their interaction in the second step. The interaction was significant, $t(97) = 2.06$, $\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$ (see Fig. 1). To test for the moderating effect, we computed two separate regression equations. In the first, we recoded the moderator by adding 1 SD for participants who wanted what they had less (i.e., in order to set them to zero). In the second, we recoded the moderator by subtracting 1 SD for participants who wanted what they had more. We then re-conducted the regression analysis in order to examine the significance of wanting more on well-being in the first regression equation, in which participants who wanted what they had less were set to zero. In this equation, wanting more was negatively related to well-being, $t(97) = -2.86$, $\beta = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$. However, in the second regression equation, in which participants who wanted what they had more were set to zero, wanting more was unrelated to well-being, $t(97) = 0.13$, $\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.90$. That is, participants who wanted what they had did not suffer any deleterious effects of wanting more than they had on well-being.

² The SPSS Macro provided by Preacher and Hayes (2008) uses a 5,000-sample bootstrapping procedure to estimate bias-corrected and accelerated 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effect. The traditional Sobel test statistic yielded a significance value of .06. The primary difference between the traditional test and the bootstrapping procedure is that the Sobel test assumes normal distributions, but few distributions meet this assumption (Preacher and Hayes 2008). As is typically the case (Diener and Diener 1996), subjective well-being was negatively skewed in our sample.

3 Discussion

In this paper, we introduce a new construct—wanting more—that is associated with lower subjective well-being. We then identify a mediator of this relationship in materialistic values, such that wanting more negatively affects well-being at least in part because those who want more are more likely to be materialistic. Finally, we identify a moderator of the relationship in wanting what one has. Those who want more are less happy only if they also do not want what they have.

We hypothesized that wanting more might be negatively related to well-being because it increases the discrepancy between what people have and what people want, or, in the language of control-process theories of motivation (e.g., Carver 2004), between actual and ideal states. Wang and Wallendorf (2006) offer a similar explanation for the negative effects of materialism on well-being: “materialistic individuals’ persistent aspiration for better possessions...may dictate continuous upgrading of their symbolic possessions” (p. 503). Wang and Wallendorf suggest that materialism is negatively related to well-being because it leads to wanting more. However, our results suggest that the opposite is true. Materialism completely mediated the effect of wanting more on well-being, such that people who wanted more were less happy because they were materialists. The explanation for the effect of wanting more on well-being, then, may lie in understanding the effects of materialism on well-being.

Materialistic values are associated with a range of negative outcomes for well-being (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Kasser et al. 2007; Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996). Materialists’ focus on the pursuit of wealth, for instance, might cost them time and energy that prevents them from having more intrinsically satisfying experiences. In fact, materialism might be negatively related to well-being simply by virtue of the conflict that arises from pursuing goals that are inconsistent with materialism. Indeed, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) found that materialism correlated positively with values related to hedonism and achievement, but negatively with those related to universalism and benevolence. In light of our results, materialists might be less happy because wanting more than they have provides them less time to pursue more collectivist goals.

Nevertheless, wanting more did not make people want what they did have any less. At least for the items included in our survey, the two variables were unrelated. This was made even more evident by the fact that even though wanting something more was negatively related to well-being, wanting what one has was not positively related to well-being in this sample. There are a couple of reasons why we may not have replicated Larsen and McKibban’s (2008) finding that people who want what they have are happier. One simple possibility is that giving participants the option of indicating that they wanted a different car or a different car stereo system affected the extent to which they wanted what they had. This could have restricted the range of responses for the extent to which participants reported wanting what they had, thus suppressing correlations.

Another possible reason is that our survey included fewer items and less varied items than Larsen and McKibban’s (2008) survey. We specifically used a sample of items that are highly subject to continuous innovation, such as technology (cell phones, mp3 players) and fashion (clothing, jewelry). Many of the items were luxuries (e.g., flat-screen TV; Pew Research 2007) as opposed to necessities. Larsen and McKibban included many items that would more likely be considered necessities (e.g., living room furniture, a bed). Perhaps wanting the necessities, more so than the luxuries, that one has contributes to well-being. Indeed, this possibility is consistent with the unexpected positive relationship between materialism and wanting what one has. Materialists, who are generally less happy, just

wanted more things in general: the things that they already had and more than they had. In light of the fact that many of our items were luxuries, it is interesting that materialists are less satisfied with luxury purchases than other types of purchases (Wang and Wallendorf 2006). Materialists may be more likely to want the luxury items they have, but are not necessarily any happier for it.

Even though those who wanted what they had were no happier in this study, they were immune to the deleterious effects of wanting more. One possibility is that those who want (say) the television that they have simply pay less attention to their desire for a better television. Even so, wanting what we have may prevent people from recognizing the potentially harmful effects of wanting more. In short, it may keep us deadlocked in the consumer arms race that keeps the economy growing but prevents us from ever completely closing the gap between our haves and our wants. Meanwhile, though this pattern of consumption is generally good for the economy in the short term, it is unsustainable in the long term (Leonard 2010).

We close by discussing some limitations of the current research as well as potential directions for future research. Our sample was relatively homogeneous, so the relationships we obtained may not generalize to the population at large. Similarly, our findings are correlational in nature, and although our mediational analyses are suggestive of the directional relationships among wanting more, materialism, and well-being, they do not allow us to make definitive causal inferences. Future research could assess whether exposing people to advertisements for high-end consumer products induces people to want more and temporarily increases materialism and decreases subjective well-being.

Future research on both wanting more and wanting what one has could further examine their antecedents and consequences, in values (e.g., Schwartz 1992) and goal aspirations (e.g., Kasser and Ryan 1996). Just as materialism positively predicted wanting more, intrinsic goal pursuit may negatively predict wanting more and positively predict wanting what one has.

Future research could also examine how characteristics of products and purchases themselves are related to wanting more and wanting what one has. Material purchases, relative to experiential purchases, may be more prone to the negative effects of wanting more on well-being. Broadly speaking, material purchases tend to make people less happy than experiential purchases (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), in part because people tend to more readily compare material goods they have to unchosen options that might be better than those they have (Carter and Gilovich 2010). These comparisons might make participants want things they do not have more. Conversely, wanting the necessities that we do have and the experiences that we have had may promote well-being more than wanting luxury material goods (e.g., Wang and Wallendorf 2006).

More generally, future research should examine how consumption can be conducted in ways that sustain the individual and the economy without sacrificing the planet. We can only assume that achieving this daunting goal will ultimately entail convincing affluent individuals to want less, not more.

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