

“I Do” Want it All:
Weddings, Materialism, and Marital Satisfaction
by
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Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to understand the emphasis placed on extravagant weddings in today's society, and to explore its effects on the perception of the marriage relationship as a result. We hypothesized that those who hold materialistic values would report lower marital satisfaction; however we found that materialistic values and high income actually lead to greater relational satisfaction (Studies 1 & 3), though the popular perception remains true to our hypothesis that small, inexpensive weddings lead to happier marriages (Study 2). The present study could reveal much about how we think about weddings in today's society, and could potentially offer truth about our expectations when it comes to weddings and marriage.

Keywords: weddings, materialism, marital satisfaction, income,

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In popular media, such as bridal magazines and television shows, expensive weddings are glorified. With many individuals possessing the desire for an elaborate wedding day, could the emphasis placed on the things needed to make that fairy-tale dream a reality take the focus away from the marriage relationship itself? Empirical research exists in support of this idea, revealing that materialistic values are associated with shorter, less positive, and more negative relationships. Kasser (2002) tested participants' extrinsic, materialistic values (e.g., image, financial success) using the Aspiration Index measure (e.g., “You will buy things just because you want them,” “You will have a job that pays well”; *for chances of obtaining these goals in the future; 1=very low, to 5=very high*). They then asked participants to report the length of their longest relationship, and describe it using adjectives. They found that students who scored high on the materialism measure also reported lower quality relationships with others. In follow-up studies, the researchers also found that people who hold materialistic values tend to experience more conflict and aggression in their relationships, and feel less connected to others. It is important to note that correlation does not imply causation, so the causal effects in these studies remain unclear. Experimental work is needed.

A love of money and healthy relationships often cannot co-exist because materialism “crowds out” other pursuits in one's life, as time and resources are spent on obtaining material things while relationships are neglected (Kasser, 2002). Other possible explanations include that materialistic individuals simply devalue their relationships with others, so they do not invest in those relationships, or that materialistic values translate into one's relationships with others,

causing the materialistic individual to be difficult to please as he is unsatisfied with whatever intimacy or connection he is afforded within the relationship (Kasser, 2002).

In a similar vein, Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2008) found that people who are reminded of money desire less physical intimacy and want to participate in more solitary activities. She suggests that people who are reminded of money are more self-sufficient because they tend to view relationships in an economic manner, in terms of input and output, and an expectation of fairness, and are less sensitive to relationships. This might account for the findings concerning materialism and relationships, as materialistic individuals might think of relationships as a fair exchange of each other's wants and needs, void of sensitivity and therefore lacking in closeness and intimacy, leading to shorter, less satisfied relationships, and more aggression and conflict, due to the lack of sensitivity toward one's partner.

The possibility that materialistic values can potentially lead to relationships that end prematurely, are low-quality, and contain more aggressive behavior and conflict, in which the couple feels less connected to one another, could be especially detrimental to the marriage relationship in particular. The aforementioned studies look at romantic relationships and friendships; however they do not explore the effects on the marriage relationship. It is commonly reported in the news and other media that the divorce rate is currently at a high level. With our increasingly materialistic society, which is reflected in the value placed on large, expensive weddings, the above findings concerning the adverse effects of materialism on relationships could provide profound information concerning the reasons for the high divorce rate. Given the previous findings, it is possible that the prevalence of materialistic values among individuals in our society is leading to marriages that are unhappy, poor in quality, distant, and insensitive, that ultimately end in divorce. Studying the effects of materialism on the marriage relationship in

particular could provide valuable information concerning the high rate of failed marriages in today's society.

In addition, because the event that begins the marriage relationship, the wedding, is often an opportunity to express materialistic values, we wondered if it might be possible that there are long-term effects on the marriage relationship as a result of materialistic values expressed on one's wedding day. Specifically, in this investigation we aimed to test the relationship between materialistic values and relationship satisfaction, as well as the relationship between wedding cost and relationship satisfaction. Given the previous findings concerning materialism and relationship quality, we hypothesized that individuals who spent a lot of money on their wedding day would report being less satisfied in their marriage, and that those who scored high on the materialism measure would also report lower relationship satisfaction.

Studies and Hypotheses

In order to explore the relations between wedding cost, materialism, and marital satisfaction, we conducted a series of three studies. In Study 1, we asked married individuals to complete an online questionnaire, asking them to think of their wedding in either a materialistic or experiential framework. Calling upon previous findings that experiential purchases bring more happiness than material purchases (Van Boven, 2005), we framed the question in terms of cost (material) or size (experiential), testing this distinction specifically for weddings. Participants were then asked a series of questions to measure their marital satisfaction, as well as a series of questions to determine the presence of materialistic values. They were also asked to report the actual US dollar amount that they spent on their wedding.

For this study, we hypothesized that those asked to think of their wedding in a materialistic framework (“How much money did you spend on your wedding?” $1 = \$0-5,000$ to, $7 = \$35,001+$) would report lower marital satisfaction than those asked to think of their wedding in an experiential framework (“How big was your wedding?” $1 = \text{very small}$ to, $7 = \text{very large}$), in accordance with Van Boven’s findings (2005). We also predicted that those who spent more money on their wedding would report lower marital satisfaction than those who spent less.

After testing the actual marital satisfaction of married individuals in relation to the amount of money they spent on their wedding, as well as whether they thought of their wedding in terms of cost or size, we thought it would be necessary to know what the popular perception is concerning wedding cost and size, and marital satisfaction. To test what people generally think about wedding size and marital satisfaction, in Study 2 we asked undergraduate students to read the hypothetical stories of two couples’ weddings, and then make a judgment for each concerning how happy the couple is. One wedding was large and the other was small, and in one condition both the large and small weddings were described in materialistic terms, through a budget example, while the other condition reported the large and small weddings through a short story describing the experience of the wedding, in keeping with the experiential versus material framework used in Study 1. This study was essential in determining popular perceptions of wedding day expectations. We predicted that students in each condition would rate the couple who had the larger, more expensive wedding as being happier overall than the couple who had the smaller, inexpensive wedding.

Study 3 intended to explore the possibility that money itself is not problematic, but that the goals that we have for our money have the power to bring us closer to others or drive us apart. Kahneman et al. (2006) named the desire for wealth a “focusing illusion,” in which people

tend to consider this one single factor of increased importance in regards to their well-being, when the actual happiness acquired from higher income is minimal. In considering the way people think about money, we tested whether adults are happier in their relationships after thinking about a materialistic goal (e.g., a new car) versus an experiential goal (e.g., your child's education). We hypothesized that those who thought about an experiential goal would report higher relationship satisfaction than those who thought about a material goal, and that those who were presented with a money-prime would report higher materialism than those in the no-money-prime condition.

Study 1

Participants and Design

Participants included 96 married individuals in the United States, 28 males and 68 females, age 19 to 67, who were recruited online through a notice advertising the study posted on the Amazon Mechanical Turk recruitment website, through which subjects were provided a link to the online survey. Participants were compensated \$0.10 for their participation in the study and were randomly assigned to a 2 (material vs. experiential recall of wedding) between-subjects design.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were told that the researchers were interested in learning about their wedding and their marriage. In the material condition, subjects were asked to recall how much their wedding cost, and were given a scale of 7 price ranges to choose from (*1*=\$0-5,000, to *7*=\$35,001+). In the experiential condition, subjects were asked to recall how big their wedding was, and were asked to choose the size from a scale of 7 choices, (*1* = *very small*, to *7* = *very*

large). In both conditions, subjects were then asked to complete a series of questions that measure relationship satisfaction. Questions included, “Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?” ($1=Unhappy$, to $5=Happy$), “How similar are your partner’s values to your values?” ($1=Not\ at\ all\ like\ me$, to $5=Just\ like\ me$) (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), “My partner helps me become what I ideally want to be—he/she elicits the best in me,” ($1=Strongly\ Disagree$, to $5=Strongly\ Agree$) (Drigotas et al., 1999), and “How exciting are the things you do together with your partner?” ($1=Not\ exciting\ at\ all$, to $5=Extremely\ exciting$) (Aron et al, 2000). The relationship satisfaction scale was created from these items, having a Cronbach’s Alpha of .952.

These relationship questions were followed by a short series of materialism measures (Belk, 1985). These questions included, “I like a lot of luxury in my life,” “I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes,” and “It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can’t afford to buy all of the things I’d like,” with all questions having a scale of 5 answer choices ($1=Strongly\ disagree$, to $5=Strongly\ agree$). The materialism scale was created from these items, having a Cronbach’s Alpha of .695. Finally, participants were asked to fill out a demographics questionnaire, which included an estimate of how much money each couple actually spent on their wedding.

Results and Discussion

Contrary to our hypothesis, we found no difference in relationship satisfaction ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.91$) between the experiential ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.76$) and material conditions ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(92) = 0.73$, $p = .47$. We also found no difference in relationship satisfaction depending on the actual dollar amount the couples spent on their wedding ($M = \$13,332$, $SD =$

\$52,190), $r(94) = .056$, $p = .60$. However, regression analysis revealed that materialism ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 1.13$) strongly predicted relationship satisfaction, $\beta = .441$, $t(94) = 22.9$, $p < .001$, suggesting that individuals who reported being more materialistic also reported being more satisfied in their marriage.

We controlled for income, as we thought individuals who are materialistic might simply have more money. Because much of what couples fight about is monetary, we thought maybe these individuals were happy in their relationships because financial provision was not an issue (Papp, 2009). We also wondered if only the individuals who have more income, and not those who have less income, are materialistic. However, we found no relationship between income and materialism, $r(94) = .020$, $p = .85$. Therefore, according to our findings, people can be materialistic, no matter how much or how little material wealth they actually possess.

In addition, we found that those who were asked to think of their wedding in terms of cost (material condition), relative to those who were asked to think of their wedding in terms of size (experiential condition), showed a stronger correlation between their materialism scores and their relationship satisfaction (see Figure 1). Those who were thinking of cost reported being more materialistic, but they also reported higher marital satisfaction, which is contrary to what we expected to find ($\beta = .22$, $t(92) = 2.08$, $p = 0.04$).

How can subjects in our study who endorse materialistic values be more satisfied in their marriage, when the current literature on materialism and relationships points to the opposite? One possible explanation is that participants are satisfied with what they possess, so the negative effects of their materialistic values are lessened. Kahneman and colleagues (2006) found that materialistic values often do not result in people being happy, because as their income or

material gains rise, so do their expectations, so their happiness levels off rather than rising with material gains, as they now desire even more material wealth. It is possible that participants in the present study, though they value material things, are satisfied with the level of material gain they have achieved, so they are able to be satisfied in their marriage as well.

Another possible explanation is the presence of gratitude. Polak and McCullough (2006) found that the presence of gratitude lessens the effects of materialism, and that gratitude can act as a positive alternative to materialistic values. It is possible that the participants in the present study might possess gratitude for what material wealth they do have, which may change the relationship between materialism and marital satisfaction.

Still more possible explanations exist. For instance, researchers have found a relationship between materialism and narcissism (Rose, 2007). Because individuals who are materialistic tend to be self-focused, their answers given in response to the relationship questions may be an untrue representation of the health of their actual relationship with their spouse. In future studies, it would be valuable to measure the above variables—satisfaction with material possessions, gratitude levels, and narcissism—in respect to materialistic values and relationship satisfaction, in exploring further the ideas put forth in the present study.

Study 1 revealed that our original hypothesis may not be correct, that instead of causing harm to relationships, materialistic values may actually improve relationships in some way. In addition, whereas we thought that small weddings would predict happier marriages, we found no difference in relationship satisfaction for those who had weddings of any size. In response to this, we wondered what the popular perception concerning wedding cost or size and marital

satisfaction is, and if the popular perception coincides with our original hypothesis, or with the findings from Study 1. We addressed this question in Study 2.

Study 2

Participants and Design

Participants included 66 undergraduate students on the campus of the University of Michigan. Experimenters approached students on campus to request their participation in a brief survey, which was then administered after subject consent. They were randomly assigned to a 2 (material versus experiential description of wedding) between-subjects design.

Procedure and Measures

Subjects were told that the researchers are interested in studying people's impressions of weddings. In the material condition, students were given two couple's wedding budgets, one describing a large, expensive wedding (\$56,000), the other describing a small, inexpensive wedding (\$7,300). The budgets were followed by a series of questions measuring the students' perceptions as to which couple is happier based on the budgets (e.g., *Which couple do you think is happier now? 1 = Couple 1 is much happier, to 7 = Couple 2 is much happier; How happy do you think couple 1 is now? 1 = not happy at all, to 7 = very happy*). Finally, the students were asked to complete a demographics survey.

In the experiential condition, students were given two couple's wedding stories, describing each wedding in terms of size and experience, one wedding small, and the other large (see Appendix). The students were then asked to answer the same series of questions measuring

their perceptions as to which couple is happier based on the stories. Finally, the students were asked to complete a demographics survey.

Results and Discussion

Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that the bigger the students rated couple 1's wedding to be, the less happy they rated them to be, $r(66) = 0.38, p = .03$ (see Table 1). Although we expected people to generally think in the opposite way, consistent with popular media that promotes big, expensive weddings, the popular perception actually appears to be consistent with the researchers' own ideas concerning wedding size and marital satisfaction.

Interestingly, what we expected to find concerning the popular perception of wedding cost, materialism, and marital satisfaction (Study 2), and the reality of the interactions between these variables (Study 1), has been reversed in our actual findings. Where we expected to find that people generally believe that bigger weddings lead to happier marriages, consistent with the ideas put forth in popular media that values big weddings, we found that people actually think that smaller, less expensive weddings lead to happier marriages. In addition, where we thought that smaller, less expensive weddings, and less materialistic values, would lead to happier marriages in real life, we found that wedding cost and size have no influence on marital satisfaction, and that materialism actually leads to more satisfied relationships.

Because our findings in Studies 1 and 2 are contrary to the findings put forth in previous literature concerning materialism and relationship quality, as well as contrary to our own hypothesis, we wondered what other variables might be at work in the relationship between materialism and relationships with others. Could it be that money itself is not problematic to relationships, but that the intentions we have for the use of money, the reasons why we value it

(material versus experiential/relational purposes), affect the relationship between materialism and relationship satisfaction? We explored this question in Study 3.

Study 3

Participants and Design

Participants included 62 individuals who are in a serious relationship and are over the age of 18 within the United States. Participants were recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk, through which subjects were given a link to the online survey. Participants were compensated \$0.10 for their participation in the study and were randomly assigned to a 2 (material vs. experiential purchasing goal) x 2 (money prime vs. no-money-prime) between-subjects design.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were told that the researchers are interested in learning more about their social life with their significant other. In the material condition, individuals were first asked to imagine a material purchasing-goal (a new car). They were then asked to complete a money-priming task, by unscrambling words and phrases related to money (e.g., “worth its weight in gold,” “hit the jackpot,” “I feel like a million bucks”) (Vohs, 2008). In the experiential condition, individuals were asked to imagine an experiential purchasing-goal (education for your child). They were then asked to complete the same money-priming task. In a no-money-prime control condition, participants were not given the money prime measure, but instead were given a similar unscrambling task that involved neutral words and phrases (e.g., “New York minute,” “drink like a fish,” “all in the same boat”). They were then given either the material purchasing-goal or the experiential purchasing-goal thought task. Finally, in a no-goal condition, participants

were given only the money prime task and were not asked to imagine either of the purchasing-goals. We predicted that those who were in the experiential condition would report higher relationship satisfaction than those in the material condition. We also predicted that those who were presented with a money-prime would report higher materialistic values than those who were not.

Participants in all conditions were then asked to complete Vohs' solo versus social activity measure, in which they were given four activity options, two that occur alone, and two that occur with others, and were asked, "Which of the following activities would you find most enjoyable?" Based on Vohs' findings, we predicted that those in the material condition would prefer solo activities, while those in the experiential condition would prefer social activities. Participants were then asked to complete Vohs' self-sufficiency measure, in which participants were asked, "Imagine you are assigned a project at work, and are given the choice to either complete the project yourself or with a co-worker. Which do you prefer?" We predicted that those in the material condition would prefer to complete the project alone, while those in the experiential condition would prefer to complete the project with a co-worker. The relationship satisfaction and materialism measures were then repeated from Study 1.

Results and Discussion

Contrary to our hypothesis, we found no difference in relationship satisfaction (overall $M = 5.33$, $SD = 0.62$) between the material ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 0.63$) and experiential conditions ($M = 5.37$, $SD = 0.59$), $t(62) = 0.009$, $p = .95$. There was also no significant relationship between money prime ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 1.28$) vs. no-prime conditions ($M = 6.08$, $SD = 1.80$) and the materialism ratings ($M = 6.21$, $SD = 1.52$). We found no significant difference in preference to

participate in solo versus social activities (overall $M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.42$) or self-sufficiency (overall $M = 1.55$, $SD = 0.5$) between the material and experiential conditions (*solo vs. social between conditions*: $t(62) = 0.62$, $p = .07$; *self-sufficiency between conditions*: $t(62) = 0.58$, $p = .07$). However, in further exploratory analysis, regression analysis revealed that household income ($M = 1.94$, $SD = 1.20$) predicts relationship satisfaction, $\beta = 0.29$, $t(62) = 5.48$, $p = .02$, such that participants who had higher income were happier in their relationships than those with lower income. This contradicts our findings from Study 1, in which individuals who were materialistic were happier in their relationships, and income had no part in that relationship. It is possible that participants in Study 1 had much different income levels than those in Study 3, so the focusing illusion effect applied only to Study 3 participants, but not to Study 1 participants.

It is quite possible that participants with higher income are more satisfied in their relationships as a result because they do not fight with their partner about money. Previous research has shown that conflict about money, though not the most frequent source of conflict between couples, is the most reoccurring, the most problematic, and the most unresolved issue that arises between couples (Papp, 2009).

Also, according to Boyce (2010), increased income itself does not lead to greater happiness, but high income relative to others around you does. Increased income also increases happiness only when your societal rank increases as well. Given these prior findings, it is possible that our participants are more satisfied in their relationships because they have higher income relative to other people in their surrounding community. Investigating these possibilities further could provide a direction for future study.

Discussion

We predicted that smaller weddings would lead to happier marriages, and that materialistic values, on one's wedding day and beyond, would prove to be destructive to one's relationship. The present studies tell quite a different story. In Study 1, thinking of one's wedding in terms of cost or size made no difference to relationship satisfaction, and neither did the actual cost of one's wedding. To the contrary, we found that materialism predicted relationship satisfaction. The more materialistic our participants were, the more satisfied they were in their relationships. Similarly, in Study 3, where we attempted to show that money itself makes no difference to relationship satisfaction, but that the purchasing-goals one sets for their money matters, the data again showed us quite the opposite. We found that the more money participants made, the happier they were in their relationships. Finally, in Study 2, we found that the popular perception of weddings and relationship satisfaction is that smaller, less expensive weddings would lead to happier marriages. However, the adult participants in Studies 1 and 3 showed that money and materialism actually do matter to relationships.

We wondered if the previous findings concerning materialism and poor relationship quality applied to marriage as well, and if materialistic values among couples were contributing to the high rate of divorce. However, what we found in our study of weddings and marriage is quite opposite to the findings concerning materialism and relationships. One possible explanation is that the previous findings do not apply to marriage, as only non-marital relationships were previously studied. However, there are many commonalities between non-marital romantic relationships and the marriage relationship, as marriage most often begins in a non-marital romantic relationship, so it is surprising that the previous findings would not apply whatsoever.

A more plausible explanation might be that that materialism only affects relationship quality, measured through dimensions such as investment in the relationship, length of the relationship, and the presence or absence of conflict in the relationship, and it does not affect relationship satisfaction. It is possible that individuals may still be satisfied in their relationship, even if it is not a healthy, high-quality relationship. This could be due to the individual's desire to project a certain image, an extrinsic value similar to materialism. This could also be due to the individual's narcissistic tendencies, causing them to see the relationship from their own limited point of view only, preventing them from providing a true representation of the actual health of their relationship, taking into account their partner's feelings as well. A materialistic individual might also be satisfied in a low-quality relationship because they de-value their relationship, as Kasser suggested (2002). They may also desire less intimacy and togetherness, so if these things are not present, the individual is still satisfied (Vohs, 2008). This is a limitation of the present study that could be addressed in future investigations by asking participants questions that gauge relationship quality instead of relationship satisfaction, or along with satisfaction, as well as surveying both individuals in the couple dyad, not just one individual, in order to get a more complete picture of how materialism affects relationships.

Though one's relationship satisfaction may not be affected by one's materialistic values, relationship quality may still suffer, so couples should still try to keep their materialistic tendencies in check. Although as an individual one might still feel quite satisfied in their relationship despite their materialistic values, their partner may feel differently. Through these studies we now know that a lack of relationship satisfaction due to materialistic values is not the culprit behind today's divorce rate, however a lack of relationship quality, and reciprocal

feelings concerning relationship satisfaction within the couple dyad, could be a contributor. This is a topic requiring further study.

In addition, according to our findings couples should not be concerned with the cost of their wedding, as we found that having an expensive wedding is not actually harmful to later marital satisfaction (Study 1). So although people may generally be concerned that bigger weddings may lead to less happy marriages (Study 2), this should not be a concern as couples plan their wedding. If a big wedding fits the budget, there is no harm in that. Though the media may promote weddings that are too big for some budgets, it is not doing any harm to marriages in encouraging people to desire a big, extravagant wedding. Whether this media promotion causes individuals to desire a wedding more than a marriage is questionable, however. This would be an interesting inquiry for future studies. Finally, having money appears to do more good than harm to relationships, so working toward financial goals might actually help to increase relationship satisfaction in addition to one's bank balance (Study 3).

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Table 1

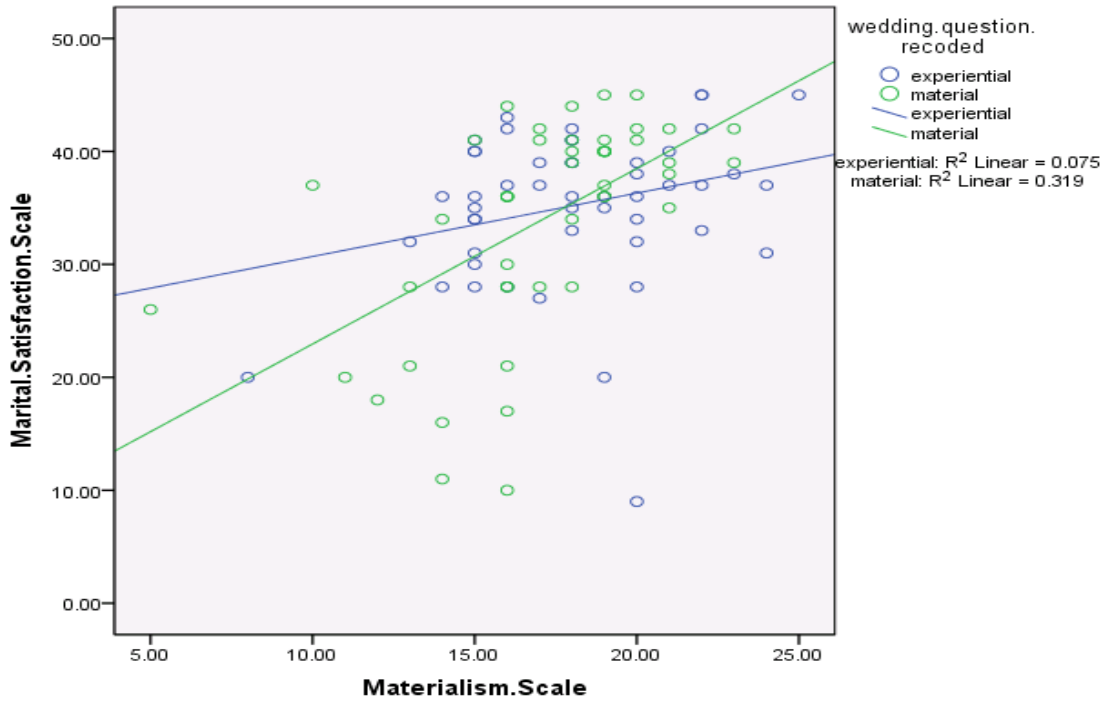
Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables in Study 2

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How happy do you think couple 2 is?	5.55	1.30
How big do you think couple 1's wedding was?	6.34	0.75

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Marital satisfaction as a function of materialism and experiential (blue) vs. material (green) frame of wedding question in Study 1.

Figure 1



Appendix

Wedding 1, Large.

Couple 1 had an elegant wedding at a historical cathedral followed by a reception attended by 300 friends and family members. The bride wore a beautiful Vera Wang wedding dress and veil, and carried a bouquet overflowing with white roses, while the groom wore a tuxedo he purchased for the occasion. They enjoyed a catered banquet dinner with their guests, and then cut the four-tier red velvet cake which was enjoyed for dessert. The reception party went on long into the night with a DJ and a live band to entertain the guests, and an open bar. The professional photographer and videographer captured every moment of their special day. A limousine picked up the bride and groom following the reception and whisked them away to their hotel room for the night, before they caught a plane for their honeymoon vacation in the morning.

Wedding 2, Small.

Couple 2 had a beautiful wedding at their local church, followed by a reception in the hall attended by 40 close friends and family members. The bride wore her mother's wedding dress and veil, with a few alterations having been made, and carried a beautiful bouquet she designed herself, while the groom wore a new suit. They enjoyed a buffet dinner in the hall following the ceremony, then cut the delicious white cake made by the bride's aunt. The reception party went on long into the night with a DJ and dancing. A friend took pictures at the wedding and reception so the bride and groom could remember every moment of their special day. The bride and groom spent their first night as a married couple at a nearby bed and breakfast.