

## Materialistic Lifestyles as Facilitators of Environmental Violence

*Can Flow Experiences Offer an Antidote?*

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### Summary

In societies that rely on the economic framework of consumer capitalism, materialistic values, whereby individuals place high importance on acquiring money and material goods to improve well-being and status, tend to be rife. Materialistic values, however, negatively impact human health and well-being. One way in which they do this is by facilitating environmental degradation. Psychological research demonstrates that strong materialistic values can directly lead to lower levels of physical and mental health. In contrast to the problems presented by materialistic values and lifestyles, flow experiences, whereby people are completely immersed in an activity, may offer a means of limiting environmental violence and enhancing human well-being. The benefits of flow for well-being are well documented within the field of positive psychology. Further, research is beginning to show that flow may be able to support sustainable outcomes by occurring in activities with low environmental costs and encouraging stronger self-transcendent values. This chapter reviews the evidence to show that materialistic values support environmental violence before considering how flow experiences can offer an antidote that would allow us to reduce environmental violence and to live better and more sustainably. In doing so, practical recommendations are made for how to encourage flow experiences across society.



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### Engaging Environmental Violence

The first half of this chapter is dedicated to outlining the detrimental consequences of materialistic values in order to highlight how materialism can be considered a form of cultural violence, which facilitates the persistence of environmental violence. In outlining the problems presented by materialistic values, I also want to highlight that all hope is not lost. The second half of the chapter is, therefore, dedicated to a potential antidote to materialistic values and lifestyles, in the form of flow experiences. Flow experiences could thus offer a means of limiting environmental violence. I end by considering how to encourage flow experiences and reduce the prevalence of materialistic values across society.

## The Emergence of Materialism

Striving for happiness and well-being has long been considered a feature of the human experience [1]. However, understanding of the factors that lead to happiness differs across time and space [2]. This is because the understanding of what makes for happiness or “the good life” is socially constructed and results from the interaction of people with each other and their environments. In the contemporary societies of Europe, North America, and Australasia, the materialistic understanding of the good life is commonplace.

On an individual level, materialism is considered a value or goal orientation [3, 4]. People with strong materialistic values and goals consider the acquisition and ownership of material goods to be a major life goal [5], which takes precedence over concerns for freedom, aesthetics, and civil power [6]. They also consider the acquisition of material goods as essential for their own happiness [7], with Richins [8] highlighting that, for materialists, the possession of goods is seen as a means to achieve life satisfaction, rather than religious contemplation, a simple life, or social interaction. Materialism, therefore, seems to involve viewing consumer objects as a determinant of happiness and placing relatively more importance on their acquisition than other life aspects, such as relationships or religion.

Definitions of materialism also commonly emphasise the use of material goods to portray status or a particular image. For example, Bauer et al. [9] stressed that highly materialistic individuals are not only engrossed by possessions, but also the social messages they are able to project. The inclusion of possessions as a means of portraying a certain image and status was echoed by Dittmar et al. [10], p. 880, who defined materialism as “individual differences in people’s long-term endorsement of values, goals, and associated beliefs that centre on the importance of acquiring money and possessions that convey status.” Likewise, Csikszentmihalyi [11] emphasised that materialism not only involves excessively wanting to own material items, but also the desire to showcase possession of them. Therefore, there appears to be a strong social aspect to materialism whereby individuals seek to influence how others perceive them through a public display of their possessions.

Accordingly, materialism is more than just an interest in getting and spending. It involves placing material possessions at the center of one’s existence and pursuing their acquisition as a means of becoming happier and appearing successful, both in your own eyes and the eyes of others. Note also that, although the definitions outlined here have been concerned with individual materialism, materialism is sometimes discussed at the cultural level, with certain cultures (e.g., the USA) considered to be more materialistic than others [12]. A materialistic culture is one in which the majority of the members place a lot of value on material objects [13]. This aligns with definitions of “consumer culture” which emphasise a social system whereby consumption is used as a means of allocating status and prestige, perceived well-

being, and creating social bonds [14]. Materialistic values could, therefore, be seen as the individual manifestation of participating in a consumer culture.

The extent to which someone holds materialistic values is typically determined using one or more survey assessments that have been devised within the fields of consumer research and applied social psychology. Popular measures include the Material Values Scale, which includes items such as “I like a lot of luxury in my life” and “I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things,” [15] and the Aspiration Index [3], which asks individuals to rate how important different goals (e.g., “to be rich” and “to grow and learn new things”) are to them. Respondents rate their agreement with each item on Likert-type scales, with responses to individual items being summed to create an overall materialism score. The extent to which an individual is considered materialistic is therefore represented along a continuum with some individuals scoring higher and, therefore, considered to be more materialistic than others. There are no strict cut-off points from which an individual is either considered to be materialistic or not.

Prevalent materialistic values and goals are a logical consequence of consumer capitalism, which remains the dominant economic framework within the Western world [16]. Under this paradigm, the success of a nation’s economy is judged via its gross domestic product (GDP), which rises as a greater number of goods are produced and consumed. While no theory of GDP explicitly proposes this measure to be indicative of societal welfare, it has often come to be viewed as such [17]. A nation’s economic development and social well-being would, therefore, require that individuals within that nation choose to go out and shop. To stimulate these increasing levels of consumer spending, the advertising industry projects messages that happiness can be achieved via the acquisition of material goods [18].

In line with the association between materialistic values and consumer capitalism, much academic research exploring materialism has been focused on the contemporary societies of Europe, North America, and Australasia [19]. Scholars have suggested that materialistic values may be expressed differently across cultures [20], and although studies using samples from non-Western and less developed/developing economies are emerging [21], findings concerning how materialism links to well-being and the environment in these contexts is less well established [19]. In this chapter, therefore, I focus primarily on the consequences of materialistic values in contemporary societies, and how flow may be a means of reducing environmental violence for individuals in these contexts.

Research shows that exposure to advertising is a key promoter of strong materialistic values and goals, especially among children and adolescents [22, 23]. The relationship between television advertisement exposure and materialistic values may also be reciprocal, such that those individuals who already hold stronger materialistic values and goals show greater interest in television commercials [24]. Hence, once an individual starts adopting materialistic tendencies, they are susceptible to falling into a cycle of increasing materialistic values and goals due to heightened attention to consumer advertising. Materialistic values and goals can also be passed down through generations. Studies have shown that highly materialistic children tend to have parents who are also very materialistic [24] and that mothers who greatly value their teens’ financial success are more likely to have children who value their own financial success, over and above self-acceptance [25]. The experience of personal or economic insecurity has also been suggested to encourage stronger materialistic values and goals [26, 27]. Evidence suggests that the prevalence of materialistic values increased over the latter half of the twentieth century in the USA [28] and, when global news reports are documenting increasing levels of economic insecurity and a mental health crisis [29, 30], we may predict that the prevalence of materialistic values and goals will continue to increase.

## Materialism as a Form of Environmental Violence

Despite the apparent encouragement of materialistic values and goals within consumer capitalist societies, such values and goals are highly problematic for human health and well-being [31]. Here, I will argue that there are two key pathways through which materialistic values and goals can work to have detrimental impacts on human well-being. The first is a direct pathway, informed by findings from psychology and consumer research documenting that increases in the strength of materialistic values and goals lead to reductions in different facets of personal well-being. The second is a more indirect pathway through environmental degradation. Research increasingly documents that individuals with strong materialistic values and goals are less likely to care for the environment and engage in pro-environmental behaviours. The environmental degradation that materialistic values and goals contribute to can then negatively impact human health and well-being. This latter pathway represents an instance of environmental violence.

Environmental violence describes the process through which human-produced pollution and other forms of environmental damage have subsequent negative impacts on human health and well-being [32]. It can operate at individual, community, regional and global scales. The founders of the environmental violence framework discussed in this volume, Marcantonio and Fuentes, highlight that environmental violence arises through dynamic, socio-ecological processes, whereby structural, cultural, and behavioural factors all have a role to play. Materialism represents an individual action that can cause environmental violence, and this individual action is facilitated through a consumer culture that normalises materialistic behaviours, thus, allowing them to continue to occur unchallenged.

### *Materialism Directly Impacts Individual Well-Being*

Although highly materialistic individuals believe that acquiring more money and material possessions will improve their well-being, evidence disputes this idea. On a more macro level, the well-being consequences of consumerism and economic growth appear to be capped. While increases in consumption can help to raise subjective well-being in less economically developed countries [33, 34], the relationship between consumption and subjective well-being for nations, such as the UK, US, and Australia is weak at best [35, 36]. This is not to ignore any positive role of wealth and consumer goods in our society. Our possessions can help us to construct and express our identity as we age. They signal our interests, in-groups, and interpersonal relationships [37]. However, when we become too focused on the apparent value of money and consumer items, we can come to neglect those things that really matter for personal well-being.

Evidence of negative associations between materialistic tendencies and personal well-being help to support the case that the endless pursuit of material goods fails to provide any significant benefits to individual well-being. A wide-ranging meta-analysis [10] demonstrated that holding strong materialistic values and goals was associated with various indicators of poor personal well-being, including lower life satisfaction, poorer self-esteem, symptoms of depression and anxiety, and even somatic symptoms of ill health and health-risk behaviours, such as alcohol or drug addiction. While much of the research included in this highly cited meta-analysis is only cross-sectional, hence eliminating the ability to draw causal conclusions, more recent work has documented that increasing the strength of materialistic values and goals can directly cause reductions in personal well-being. This causal evidence is derived from longitudinal [38, 39] and experimental [9, 40] studies.

### *Materialism Impacts Individual Well-Being through Environmental Degradation: A Case of Environmental Violence*

Alongside reductions in well-being, materialistic values and goals have also been negatively related to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours [41]. On a societal scale, the endless pursuit of increasing rates of production

and consumption places devastating pressures on the Earth's ecological resources [42, 43] as more energy and materials are needed to produce in-demand products [44]. Consumer culture and associated behaviour patterns have been identified as one of the key drivers of unsustainable resource use [45] and it has been documented that the more a nation values the distribution of resources as a means of indicating power and hierarchy, the higher its CO2 emissions [46]. On an individual level, highly materialistic people tend to be untroubled by the environmental impacts of consumption [47] and are less likely to accept that the world is currently facing environmental issues [48]. The negative relationship between the strength of materialistic values and the extent to which individuals care about the environment has been replicated across different nationalities, including participants in the USA [49], Sweden [20], the UK [50], Turkey [51], and China [52].

Given that materialism is associated with less concern for the environment, it is not surprising that findings have also documented that materialism is linked to less engagement in pro-environmental behaviours and lifestyles. Pro-environment behaviours are actions that are usually undertaken with the purposeful intention to help the environment, such as recycling, reducing household waste, eating more seasonal or vegan produce, and driving less [48, 53–55]. Pro-environment lifestyles encompass choices that individuals make to alter their way of living on a larger scale. For example, voluntary simplicity describes a lifestyle whereby individuals aim to reduce material consumption to have more time and money to dedicate to non-material sources of satisfaction and meaning [56]. It is similar to a sufficiency orientation, where individuals try to consume just enough for optimal well-being [57]. Strong materialistic values are associated with a reduced likelihood of engaging in both voluntary simplicity and sufficiency [58, 59]. The evidence here also points to a causal effect of materialism on reduced pro-environmental behaviours, using longitudinal designs [21] and experiments which prime (or temporarily heighten the salience of) materialistic values and goals [60].

As well as reducing the tendency to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, materialistic values and goals have been associated with a greater amount of time spent engaged in activities that we may intuitively expect to have higher environmental impacts. For instance, given the importance they place on acquiring material goods, it is not surprising that individuals with stronger materialistic values and goals tend to be more likely to engage in both impulsive [61] and compulsive [62] buying. They have also been shown to spend more time shopping and a greater amount of money when they do so [63]. Materialism seems to be particularly associated with greater consumption of “conspicuous” products such as branded items which help to signal status [64].

Outside of retail contexts, there are also patterns of time-use that could link materialism to higher environmental impacts. For example, Andersson and Nässén [20] reported that Swedish adults with stronger materialistic values did tend to cause higher greenhouse gas emissions than their less materialistic counterparts, and this was largely due to more frequent air travel. Travel to distant locations could be seen as a form of conspicuous consumption, as destination holidays can showcase wealth. On top of this, materialism has been linked to less time out walking in nature [54] but more time spent using electronic devices, such as watching television or playing computer games [65]. When looking at the overall association between the strength of materialistic values and the size of an individual's ecological footprint, Brown and Kasser [53] reported a positive association.

When materialism leads to these adverse environmental consequences, it also then indirectly harms human health and well-being. Unsustainable levels of consumption and associated resource extraction compromise the health of the natural environment [43] and contribute to anthropogenic climate change. Environmental degradation and climate change present significant risks for public health, both physically and psychologically [66, 67]. When ambient temperatures rise, so does the risk of heat exhaustion, heat stroke, and mortality [68]. A lack of access to green spaces is

associated with higher levels of cortisol, diastolic blood pressure, and incidence of Type II diabetes [69]. When exposed to environmental degradation and extreme weather events, people often report feelings of distress and hopelessness [70]. Through these effects, materialistic values and goals represent a form of environmental violence that is enacted by individuals and supported by pro-consumption cultural norms.

There are also moral issues at play here. As research shows that coming from a background of economic insecurity can lead to greater increases in materialism into adulthood [25, 71], disadvantaged children are more likely to experience the adverse effects of materialism on their well-being. This relationship between socioeconomic insecurity and materialism has been suggested to be partly attributable to the fact that children from deprived backgrounds tend to have higher rates of advertising exposure and a stronger belief in the credibility of advertising [23]. TV is an inexpensive form of entertainment compared with sporting, musical, or other social and recreational activities that are less easily afforded by families that are more financially stretched or have fewer amenities in their local area.

A further moral issue is that the negative environmental effects of materialistic lifestyles will not be uniformly felt across the globe. Those individuals in developing countries, especially in Africa and across South Asia, will be the first to feel the negative effects of global warming [72, 73]. However, despite being hit hardest by the environmental consequences of consumer lifestyles, those in developing countries contribute least to the problem. An individual in Europe consumes three times as many resources as an individual in Asia, and four times as many as an individual in Africa [74]. Accordingly, it appears that both the direct and indirect adverse consequences of materialism as a form of environmental violence are more likely to hit less advantaged groups.

## Flow Experiences

Given the problems presented by materialistic lifestyles, it is important that we explore alternative ways of living that may enhance both human well-being and planetary health and, hence, be a means of combating environmental violence. I wish to focus on the potential benefits that flow experiences can offer to these areas. Flow describes a state of optimal experience whereby a person's attention is completely focused on the activity they are engaged in [75]. This state of concentration can be so intense that individuals become temporarily unaware of their everyday worries and feel transported into a new reality. There is no attention left over that can process any stimuli other than those directly relevant to the activity [76, 77]. Although normally one would need to expend a lot of effort to maintain such intense concentration, during flow there is less perceived effort required to stay focused on the task [75].

This intense concentration helps create other phenomenological characteristics of flow. For example, individuals often stop perceiving themselves as separate from the actions they are performing [77]. This blurring of the boundaries between the self and the action can give rise to an experience of effortless movement, as individuals are not aware of any conscious effort to initiate their actions. They can also begin to experience a sense of oneness with the activity for the same reasons. Granting all attention to the activity also means that there is no attention available for self-scrutiny, and self-consciousness temporarily disappears. Rather than being pre-occupied with living up to a certain standard, one is free to engage with a challenge in the absence of fear of failure, ridicule, or embarrassment. Self-consciousness returns after the flow experience subsides [76, 77]. Similarly, individuals are not paying attention to the passing of time and, hence, during flow, perception of time is altered such that hours may seem to go by in minutes, or alternatively, minutes may feel like hours [77]. The former experience appears to be more common [75]. Descriptions of what it feels like to be in flow are given as follows [78].

My mind isn't wandering. I am not thinking of something else. I am totally involved in what I am doing. My body feels good. I don't seem to hear anything. The world seems to be cut off from me. I am less aware of myself and my problems.

*My concentration is like breathing I never think of it. When I start, I really do shut out the world. I am really quite oblivious to my surroundings after I really get going. I think that the phone could ring, and the doorbell could ring or the house burn down or something like that. When I start I really do shut out the world. Once I stop I can let it back in again.*

*I am so involved in what I am doing. I don't see myself as separate from what I am doing.*

Being in a flow state is highly enjoyable. So much so that the experience is said to be intrinsically motivating. That is, it is so enjoyable and rewarding to be in flow that individuals will choose to engage in the activity providing flow for them simply for the sake of doing the activity, and not to gain any external rewards such as money or praise. This may occur even if engagement in the activity incurs great costs against the person. For example, a person who experiences flow when playing football may choose to continually practice the sport, even in bad weather or when dealing with other life pressures. For these reasons, the flow experience is often referred to as an "autotelic" (auto = self, telos = goal) experience because the activity is seen as an end worth striving for in itself. Each experience of flow increases the actor's motivation to experience it again [75, 76].

Flow experiences are suggested to be more likely to occur when certain conditions are present. Often flow is spoken of as a "high challenge high skill" experience because it is suggested to occur when there is both a matching of the level of challenge presented by an activity and the individual's skillset, and this matching occurs above an individual's average skill level for the activity [79]. This means that people feel that they are being stretched to perform at a level that is good for them, but still able to eventually overcome any challenges. It is important to highlight that everyone's own perception of their skills in comparison to the challenges present in a situation is more important than their objective skillset. If an individual perceives there to be a match between their skills and the activity, then this is more important than any objective matching in terms of experiencing flow [80].

Other conditions that support flow include that the task has clear goals. Having clear goals helps people to know what they need to achieve and, thus, what they need to focus on to get there. Being aware of the purpose of one's actions also helps to maintain connection with the task [75]. Alongside perceiving clear goals, flow is also more likely to occur if individuals are receiving unambiguous feedback concerning their progress toward these goals. Feedback could be in the form of bodily awareness or cues from the environment [76]. Feedback does not have to be positive; its purpose is to help the actor adjust their behaviour appropriately in response to the demands of the task. Receiving feedback concerning the consequences of one's actions also helps to support the feelings of control that are common during flow [77]. Individuals feel as though they are acting freely and can directly influence the outcome of the activity.

Although Csikszentmihalyi [77] highlighted that, theoretically, any activity could be moulded to support flow, certain activities have been shown to support flow experiences more frequently than others. For instance, work activities have been suggested to be well equipped to support flow in that people often have clear goals that they are working toward. Outside of work, the leisure activities that have been found to better support the experience of flow include reading, sports, and creative activities [81]. Many of these are "everyday" activities that do not have to require significant investments of time or money. In line with this, recent work by Isham and Jackson [82] has explored the demographic associates of the extent to which people experience flow among a largely representative sample of adults in the UK.

Findings document that factors such as age, gender, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status had a very little role to play in accounting for how often individuals reported experiencing the characteristics of flow, explaining less than 7% of variation in scores overall. Accordingly, within contemporary societies, such as the UK, flow experiences appear to be fairly dispersed across different demographic groups. Much of the research that has been conducted on flow to date has tended to focus on individual experiences of flow. Nevertheless, emerging work documents that flow can also occur in group contexts whereby flow is sometimes experienced on a more collective level as teams effectively cooperate to perform a task together [83].

## Flow as an Antidote to Environmental Violence

It may not be immediately obvious why flow experiences should be an antidote to environmental violence. Within the field of positive psychology, flow is considered an optimal and largely beneficial experience. However, many of these benefits have been confined to the areas of individual well-being and performance. Athletes who experience flow during practice and competitions, or students who experience flow when studying, are shown to have better finishing positions and grades than those who do not experience flow [84, 85], for example. In this chapter, I aim to highlight that flow's benefits extend beyond individual outcomes to ecological well-being. By being able to enhance individual and ecological well-being in tandem, flow experiences offer a powerful tool for limiting environmental violence.

### *Flow Enhances Individual Well-Being*

Having frequent or intense experiences of flow has consistently been linked to higher levels of individual well-being. People who spend more time in flow tend to say that they are more satisfied with their lives [86]. Similarly, experiencing flow in particular contexts such as work can enhance satisfaction with that specific life domain [87]. In addition to influencing people's evaluations of the quality of their lives, flow can also impact the degree to which people experience both positive and negative emotions. Especially in the moments immediately following a flow experience, people have been shown to experience a boost in positive feelings [88, 89] and a decrease in negative feelings [90]. As people increase or decrease their engagement in flow, they have been shown to display concurrent increases and decreases in their self-esteem [91]. This increase in self-esteem as people come to experience flow more often may be because, following an experience of flow, the "self might be said to grow" ([76], p. 41). It has developed new skills by stretching the mind or body to its limit.

Parallels have also been drawn between the characteristics of eudaimonic well-being and the experience of flow [92, 93]. Eudaimonic well-being describes an individual's sense of well-being that is more focused on meaning, personal development, and purposeful action than simply feeling good [94]. It has been suggested to have similarities with flow experiences in that flow involves successfully completing a challenging task (therefore acting at the top of one's ability level), when the purpose of the activity is clear, and the individual has chosen to engage in the activity because they themselves want to. For these reasons, Fullager and Kelloway [88] highlighted that flow may represent a transient state of eudaimonic well-being. In line with this, Asakawa [86] reported that the more time an individual spent in a flow state, the greater their sense of fulfilment (referred to in Japanese as "Jujitsu-kan"). Because one of the main components of eudaimonic well-being is that individuals work to fulfil their potential, a sense of fulfilment can imply greater levels of eudaimonic well-being.

### *Flow Supports Ecological Well-Being*

While research has been documenting a positive association between flow and personal well-being for several decades, academics and practitioners have only recently turned their attention to the links between flow and ecological well-

being [95], which describes the well-being of the Earth's natural systems alongside that of its inhabitants. One of the first studies to explore this link came from Isham et al. [96]. They examined experience sampling data taken from the members of 500 families in the United States. Experience sampling is a method whereby people are prompted to report what they are doing, who they are with, and how they are feeling at random times during the day. It is a useful method for getting real-time measures of people's everyday experiences. Isham et al. used data surrounding how participants were feeling to infer in which cases they were having stronger experiences of flow. They then correlated this with the greenhouse gas intensity of the activities in which they reported having varying degrees of flow. Results demonstrated that people reported having stronger experiences of flow in activities with lower greenhouse gas intensities. In other words, flow experiences appeared to be more likely to occur in less environmentally costly activities. There were particular types of activities that appeared to often support the experience of flow while having low environmental costs. These revolved around the five categories of: (1) positive, romantic relationships (e.g., spending time with a partner and physical/sexual intimacy); (2) contemplative activities (e.g., prayer, yoga, and meditation); (3) creative activities (e.g., arts and crafts and performing arts); (4) sports and physical exercise (e.g., cycling, running, aerobics, and ball games); and (5) social engagement (e.g., playing with children and talking with neighbours). The authors of this work were at pains to note that they are not suggesting that flow experiences only occur in less environmentally costly activities, but the fact that these types of actions can effectively support flow is a promising sign that well-being can be achieved in the absence of a reliance on material consumption.

By allowing people to find intrinsic reward in more sustainable activities, flow experiences should prompt further engagement in those activities due to the intrinsically motivating nature of flow. This is one way in which flow can encourage participation in more sustainable lifestyles [97]. A more recent study can be seen to further support this notion. Whittaker et al. [98] found that if people experienced flow as they were using an app that featured games promoting sustainable behaviours, they evaluated the act of engaging in sustainable behaviour more positively and had stronger intentions to enact sustainable behaviours themselves in the future. Accordingly, when people experience flow in more sustainable activities or those promoting sustainable behaviours, they may come to have more positive views on acting in ways that will support environmental well-being.

A further way in which flow may support environmental well-being is by influencing the strength of personal values. Values represent people's beliefs about what is important to strive for in life [99]. They are important because they are a strong guide for people's judgments and actions. People will act in ways that are in line with their values. For example, as we have already noted in this chapter, if someone has strong materialistic values, whereby they believe it is important to acquire money and material goods, then they are likely to spend more time shopping [63]. Although values are suggested to be somewhat stable over time [100], they are still subject to change as an individual matures or experiences situations which challenge their perceptions of what is desirable [101].

Isham and Jackson [102] aimed to test whether having frequent flow experiences could influence the strength of people's personal values. They focused on a specific category of values known as self-transcendent values. Self-transcendent values cover the importance people place on the well-being of the environment and other people [103]. When people hold strong self-transcendent values, they are more likely to engage in pro-environmental and prosocial behaviours [104, 105], report greater support for environmental charities [106], and have more favorable attitudes toward policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions [107]. Promoting the uptake of self-transcendent values can, therefore, be an important step in encouraging practices that support ecological well-being.

The reason Isham and Jackson [102] predicted that having experiences of flow may be able to encourage stronger self-transcendent values is because flow can be considered a self-transcendent experience [95, 108, 109]. During flow, people lose self-consciousness and so are not focused on themselves as an isolated entity. There is also a reduction in the salience of the boundaries between the self and “other” as people start to experience a sense of oneness with the activity that they are engaged in. Given that people are less self-focused during flow, it may encourage them to care more about nonself-entities, such as other people and nature [110]. Indeed, other experiences that have been described as self-transcendent, such as mindfulness and awe, have also been shown to lead to greater engagement in prosocial and pro-environmental behaviours [111, 112]. To test their prediction, Isham and Jackson administered surveys to a sample of UK adults at three points over the six-month period. At each time point, participants completed measures of the strength of their self-

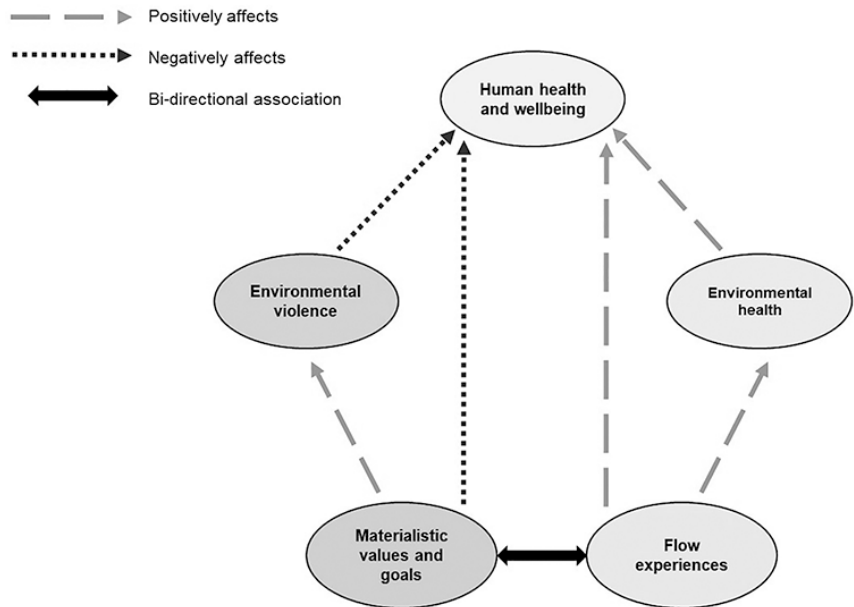


Figure 16.1 Graphical representation of materialism, flow, and their links to environmental and human health and well-being

transcendent values and how often they were experiencing flow in their day-to-day lives. Their analysis revealed that as people increased how often they were experiencing flow, they showed subsequent increases in the strength of their self-transcendent values. This study therefore offers a sign that flow experiences may be able to cause people to value ecological well-being more strongly; see Figure 16.1.

## Practical Steps for the Reduction of Environmental Violence

The reduction of environmental violence will require deliberate steps across governments, institutions, and individuals. In line with its theoretical focus, this chapter makes two general recommendations to support the reduction of environmental violence. First, the prevalence of materialistic values and goals needs to be reduced. Second, the experience of flow needs to be promoted. These two recommendations must both be undertaken, as neither is sufficient on its own. If materialistic values, goals, and activities are reduced, then people will need alternative values and actions to fill the void, which is where flow experiences can make a valuable contribution. Equally, research has shown that strong materialistic values and goals undermine people’s tendency to experience flow [113–115]. Therefore, flow experiences are unlikely to be experienced frequently while materialistic values and goals are still rife.

There are several ways in which the strength of materialistic values and goals could be reduced [116]. One key route would be to reduce the prevalence of consumer advertising within societies. Research demonstrates that exposure to consumer advertising and brand logos encourages materialistic values [9, 23]. In São Paulo, billboard advertising is banned under the Clean City Law, with Mayor Gilberto Kassab calling outdoor advertisements “visual pollution” [117]. Advertisements targeted at children could also be banned, as they have been in places such as Norway and Quebec

[118]. This latter point is especially important given the issues I have highlighted surrounding how children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are more susceptible to adopting materialistic values and goals due to more time spent watching television [23]. If we cannot limit the amount of advertising people are exposed to, then parents should be encouraged to discuss the intent/accuracy of advertising regularly with their families. Research has shown that children are less susceptible to advertising and consumer messages if their family regularly discuss advertising and consumption issues [119]. Such education around the purpose of advertising could also be included within the school curriculum.

Materialistic values are often viewed favourably by governments and advertisers in the belief that such values and associated behaviours help to fuel economic growth [16]. Given this, consideration of alternative economic models may help to reduce encouragement of materialism on a more macro scale. Academic research in the fields of “degrowth” and “postgrowth,” for example, is exploring how we might live in societies whereby rising consumption, productivity, and economic growth are not at the heart of prosperity and government policy [31, 120]. Governments would do well to pay genuine attention to such research and implement appropriate policies accordingly, in order to help mould societies that are focused on pro-environmental and prosocial practices, rather than the endless acquisition of materials goods.

A further means of reducing materialistic values and goals is to encourage the types of personal values that conflict with materialism. Individual values do not exist in a vacuum, but are rather part of a complex, interrelated system [103]. Within this system, some types of values are complementary and so easy to hold at the same time. For example, it is logical to both be concerned with upholding family traditions and conforming to rules. However, some types of values conflict with one another and are, thus, harder to hold at the same time. For example, it is difficult to care strongly about helping other people while also highly valuing having power and control over others. If certain types of values are hard to hold at the same time, then emphasising and promoting those values that conflict with materialism could help to reduce the strength of materialistic values and goals. Materialism conflicts with self-transcendent values, which place importance on nonself-entities such as family, charity, and the environment [121, 122]. Research has shown that getting people to reflect on two personal self-transcendent values [123] can successfully increase the strength of this value type. This form of reflection could therefore be practiced by individuals to reduce the strength of their materialistic values. Advertisers are also well equipped to use their creative skills to help people see alternative, positive visions of the future. Organisations such as Purpose Disruptors (<https://www.purposedisruptors.org/>) and Glimpse (<https://weglimpse.co/>) in the UK are already developing campaigns which focus on promoting the importance of self-transcendent values such as love, nature, and community.

It is my hope that encouraging the incidence of flow experiences could also act as a means of reducing materialistic values. For one, flow experiences appear to be able to encourage stronger self-transcendent values [102] which conflict with materialistic values. Further, research shows that when people are experiencing self-doubt or poor well-being, they are more likely to orient toward materialistic values and goals [26]. This is because they may view material goods either as a distraction or as a means of building a “better” self [124]. Existing work has shown that gratitude could reduce materialistic values because it boosts people’s feelings of security by enhancing their awareness of other people’s kindness [125, 126]. If flow experiences can enhance individual well-being, then they may reduce the need for people to seek satisfaction through material goods.

Encouraging flow experiences can involve two processes. On the one hand, we can focus on altering the environment to make it more supportive of flow. On the other hand, we can try to alter the individual such that they hold the characteristics or capabilities that make them more suited to crafting flow experiences. One way in which we could alter the environment to make it more supportive of flow would be to increase free access to flow-supportive activities. Local

provision of sports or arts clubs would help to give people the opportunity to find flow. It is important that these activities are free and accessible to all to make sure that participation is not limited to certain socioeconomic or demographic groups. It is also important that people have time to engage in activities that may be supportive of flow for them. To this end, a shorter working week may be beneficial. Several organisations are currently trialing a four-day work week, with advocates arguing that it could raise individual well-being while reducing carbon emissions [127]. On top of this, it has been suggested that a shorter work week could help create jobs for groups (e.g., women) who might otherwise be excluded from work due, for example, to greater caring responsibilities [128]. This may, therefore, also increase access to flow experiences at work for different demographic groups. When participating in flow-supportive activities, it is important that people are not being externally motivated, as research shows that flow experiences are more likely when people are intrinsically motivated (i.e., doing something primarily for enjoyment) [129]. Therefore, parents should not try to force their children to partake in activities using rewards such as new toys or more pocket money. Instead, they should allow children to explore and let them know that it is okay to do something just because you like it.

There are several individual characteristics that research has shown to be linked to more frequent experiences of flow. When an individual holds many of these characteristics, we might suggest they have something like a “flow personality” [130]. Examples of traits that might be part of this flow personality include high levels of openness to new experiences. This trait encourages individuals to seek opportunities to engage in new, challenging activities that may be better suited to supporting flow, rather than staying on routine or boring actions that are not conducive to flow. While research suggests that interventions to encourage the trait of openness often do not result in significant or large changes [131], some studies have had success using cognitive training such as learning new puzzles [132]. Another quality of highly flow-prone individuals is that they often have good self-control [114]. This characteristic allows people to be better at regulating and focusing their attention, such that they are not so easily distracted and are more likely to have the high levels of concentration that occur during flow. Research has shown that higher levels of self-control can be developed through practices such as mindfulness [133] and cognitive training that focuses on exposure to reward delays, goal setting, or breaking habits [134, 135].

## Conclusion

The Environmental violence refers to the process through which humanity comes to harm its own health and well-being through unsustainable patterns of action [32]. In this chapter, I have outlined how materialistic values and goals, and the corresponding lifestyles that they promote, can be considered as a form of environmental violence that is normalised across consumer cultures. I also suggest that flow experiences can be a beneficial means of reducing environmental violence and improving human health and well-being because of how they can both directly enhance human well-being and promote more sustainable values and behaviours. The key aim now is to find pathways that orient people away from lifestyles dominated by materialism toward lifestyles that provide ample opportunities for finding flow.



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❖ **Tags:** Capitalism, democracy, positive psychology, flow, materialistic values, consumer capitalism, alternative self-transcendent values.

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