

Neutralizing the shamefulness judgements of materialistic buyer behavior: The role of price promotions and the smart-shopper attribution

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Abstract

As a value and lifestyle of acquiring more things to attain happiness, materialism has been long condemned by religious leaders, philosophers, and psychologists, among others. This criticism comes also from American citizens who readily affix moral-shamefulness judgments to their country's standing as a leading materialistic culture, while they continue, nonetheless, purchasing discretionary, and self-presentational goods at breath-taking levels. We integrate dispersed literature on materialism, moral psychology, American history, and retailing to propose that observers judge higher materialistic buyer behavior as being more morally shameful; however, we also propose that observers will reduce the harshness of their judgments when the buyer secures a favorable price promotion that has been shown in prior research to evoke the smart-shopper attribution. Three studies provide supportive evidence, including the moderating role of different levels or types of price promotions on shamefulness judgments and the mediating role of the smart-shopper attribution. Together these new insights reveal the substantive and theoretical knowledge value of considering materialism more intently from a moral psychology perspective and considering how retail promotions can influence materialism judgments and buying behavior. Discussion focuses on extensions of our findings in future research and for consumer education.

KEYWORDS

materialism, price promotions, shamefulness judgments, smart shopper

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumer materialism varies by degree along a continuum that represents the acquiring and owning of things to meet needs and reach important life goals. It is also distinctively predicated on a desire for more of such things (Richins, 2017). Over the centuries, elevated materialism has been analyzed and reproached on moral grounds (e.g., its immoderation) by numerous religious ideologies as well as an array of historians, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists (see reviews by Belk, 1983; Larsen, Sirgy, & Wright, 1999; Rudmin & Kilbourne, 1996; Wilk, 2001). People who place a

disproportionate emphasis on this particular behavior are labeled higher materialists. These are individuals, according to Csikszentmihalyi (2004), who avidly and myopically obtain things at the expense of other pursuits that are more psychologically-enriching, socially-connecting, and spiritually-uplifting. Indeed, a variety of social science studies reveals that higher materialists are regularly perceived as self-centered, possessive, envious, excessive, irresponsible, less likable, status-oriented, and addicted (Fournier & Richins, 1991; Harwood Group, 1995; Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010; Watson, 2015). Taken together, these perceived characteristics signify a moral meta-theme of shamefulness (Cohen, 2003),

which dictionaries define as a state of being unworthy or acting with unworthiness in a manner that deserves dishonor, public disgrace, and loss of respect or esteem.

Today, as many of the world's national economies are evolving into advanced materialism, the United States ranks at or near the top, whether in the actuality of what Americans value and how much they buy and own, or in the opinions of outsiders and Americans themselves (Becker, 2015; Harwood Group, 1995; Kohls, 1984; Mead, 2017; Whitehouse, 2011). For instance, the US Commerce Department has estimated that American consumers are spending upwards of \$1.2 trillion annually on nonessential items and services (Whitehouse, 2011), that is, just the sort of things that materialism history and theory are centrally concerned about. Moreover, the average size of the American home has almost tripled over the last five decades, and Americans now spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches (approximately \$100 billion) than on higher education (see other pertinent data in Becker's [2015] summary). Living this way, Americans seem mired in hypocrisy, but not in denial. They readily join the historical chorus of materialism's critics: 82% of a random sample of 800 Americans agreed that "most of us buy and consume far more than we need" and 95% characterized the majority of their fellow citizens as either materialistic or very materialistic (Harwood Group, 1995). They further opined that greed and selfishness are now overshadowing other ideals related to family, community, and responsibility (see also Wuthnow, 2009).

Given the seriousness of these facts and opinions, as well as the longstanding moral disparagement of materialism, it is worth noting that materialism researchers have made substantial progress in elaborating how it develops and persists at the level of the individual consumer. Common foci have included inherited cultural values, the family environment and parental influences, peer impacts, TV viewership, fear of death, threats to and maintenance of self-identity, money attitudes, and interpersonal insecurities, among others (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Duh, 2015; Larsen et al. 1999; Shrum et al., 2014; Richins, 2017; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004; Vohra, 2016). However, what the materialism literature has under-prioritized, especially empirical work, is the role of marketing per se, its absence manifested in the reviews cited above. This knowledge gap includes retailing strategies and particularly price promotions that generate a sense of buying urgency which, if not attended to, could lead the materialistic buyer to miss an opportunity to acquire more (often nonessential) things through timely and shrewd purchasing. Retailing research has confirmed that when consumers buy through retail deals, they earn a "smart-shopper" attribution that reflects a sense of success, pride, and intelligence (Schindler, 1989, 1998). This attribution appears to apply to a variety of shoppers who takes advantage of a favorable price promotion, materialistic consumers included. And as a result, two intriguing research questions arise at the nexus of materialism and price-promotion buyer behavior which we focus on in this paper. First, given the negativity of moral-shamefulness judgments long aimed at materialists, might a favorable price promotion serve to mitigate the moral-shamefulness judgments aimed at a materialistic buyer, especially one

who fits a higher materialism profile (RQ1)? Secondly, as a theoretical-process insight, might the smart-shopper attribution that often attends the use of a favorable price promotion mediate the mitigation effect of that promotion on the moral-shamefulness judgments of a higher materialistic buyer (RQ2)? If empirical findings answer affirmatively, such substantive and theoretical knowledge advancements would reveal that beyond the commonplace understanding that retail price promotions stimulate buyer behavior, they can also serve other previously unrecognized roles in the justification of materialistic buyer behavior and an accompanying reduction of its pejorative moral evaluation in everyday purchasing events. Thereby, scholarship on the moralism of materialism and the psychology of price promotions would be extended.

Empirical research has yet to address these two aforementioned research questions, and we do so by connecting previously detached insights from the literatures on materialism, moral psychology, American history, and retailing (price promotions and smart shoppers). We show across three studies that observers judge the purchases of higher materialistic buyers as less morally shameful when they partake of a more favorable price promotion (including a so-called "zero-price" free-product offer), as compared to (a) a less favorable price promotion; (b) a regular price of no promotion; or (c) a substantial discounted-price promotion that has an equivalent cost to a free-product offer. Moreover, we demonstrate in two of the studies that the effect of the more favorable price promotion on reduced moral-shamefulness judgments is indeed mediated by the smart-shopper attribution.

First, we turn to prior relevant literatures that underpin our three hypotheses on the roles of materialism and price promotions in regard to shamefulness judgments of a given purchase event. Next, we report on three studies that test and support our hypotheses. Finally, in the general discussion, we focus on how these findings advance theory and insights on materialism and retailing, and we provide pertinent directions for future research as well as consumer education.

2 | CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Materialism and shamefulness

As noted above, materialism has been long discussed and mostly vilified. In the same vein, the majority of consumer researchers has addressed materialism as a fundamental problem or weakness among buyers and owners (e.g., Belk, 1985; Duh, 2015; Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Richins, 2017; Richins & Dawson, 1992; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004; Van Boven et al. 2010; Vohra, 2016).¹ However, despite the burgeoning literature on materialism since Belk's (1983; 1985) and Richins and Dawson's (1992) pioneering works, very few consumer researchers have investigated materialism distinctively as a moral

¹Although fewer overall, some social analysts have indorsed American materialism (Schudson, 1991; Twitchell, 1999) and some empirical works have found positive qualities and effects of materialism, for example, elevating moods and warding off threats to basic needs such as belonging (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012; Shrum et al., 2014).

issue. Two exceptions are Muncy and Eastman (1998) and Lu and Lu (2010) who each found in different cultural contexts that higher materialists tended to have lower ethical standards. Beyond them, no consumer researchers to our knowledge have explored the role of retailing in materialistic buying, or particularly the intersection of retailing with moral perspectives on materialism.

Americans themselves are also acutely apprehensive about materialism, and they show little reluctance to calling it morally shameful. In a multipart investigation of Americans' thoughts on the nature and extent of consumption in their country, participants in the study's focus groups widely agreed on the term "materialism" to encapsulate their overall serious concerns, and to specifically express their lament about an American society that "carries things to excess, that wants too much" (Harwood Group, 1995, p. 3). Similar public charges have surfaced in open nonresearch forums. For instance, a Wall Street Journal story about designer clothes-closets for children (Dizik, 2017) drew numerous comments that were not only negative and sarcastic but also fiercely moralistic, for example, "Beyond ridiculous"; "I can't help but wonder what this type of thing does to these little children's minds and spirits"; and "Shameful and embarrassing excess." Thus, consumer materialism, especially in its higher degrees in America, is regarded by the mainstream public as a dark cultural shadow that deserves to be called out for its shameful. Such broad-scale indignation is underscored by the psychologist Dov Cohen (2003), who asserts that shamefulness is ever-present in Americans' discussions of morality or lack of it in their hyper-consumption society.

2.2 | Shamefulness in moral psychology

According to theory in moral psychology, shamefulness, and other moral sentiments derive from an interlocking system of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, and psychological mechanisms that are chiefly meant to regulate selfishness (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). Selfishness, as indicated earlier, is a focal point in admonitions against materialists. Haidt (2003) also contends that shamefulness judgments in Western cultures are elicited by the appraisal that there is something wrong about the core self, generally due to a failure to measure up to standards of morality, aesthetics, or competence, among which include the standard of moderation. In the case of materialism and its excessiveness, an emphasis on self-presentation, status, and violations of moderation are central to shamefulness judgments of consumer behavior comprised of indulgences versus needs and more versus less. However, whereas the inadequacy of the primary self has been a common motif in the materialism literature (e.g., Belk, 1983, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 2004), the role of shamefulness has rarely been alluded to, let alone examined empirically. The sole relevant academic project is Watson's (2015) survey that linked higher individual materialism to higher shame. However, his work is correlational only and did not consider shamefulness judgments of materialistic buyers or what role marketing might play in that context, especially retailing. Overall then, we establish as our foundational hypothesis the following:

H1: *A purchase of a self-presentational, nonessential product—such as certain clothing, jewelry, or fashion accessories of the sort that materialism theory focuses on—by a consumer who fits a higher (lower) materialism profile will be judged as more (less) shameful.*

2.3 | American historical trends, sales promotions, price deals, and smart shopping

According to Cohen (2003), there have been two compelling trends that often oppose each other in the American saga. The first is the effort to make and sustain the United States as a profoundly moral country. This trend is detailed by many historians of America, which includes the arrival of staunchly religious immigrants fleeing persecution, and it is also revealed in current times by the continuing public condemnations of materialism, as highlighted earlier. The second trend is the historical emphasis on freedom and individualism as reflected in the colonialists' self-motivation and self-reliance as they pursued happiness in their new land of opportunity. A detailed discussion of these trends is beyond the scope of our work here, but readily available in multiple sources, among them Cross (2000), Harwood Group (1995), Schudson (1991), and Twitchell (1999).

For our purposes, we turn now to what is arguably among the most extensive and most enticing contexts of marketing within which consumer independence and self-reliance energetically unfold, namely, the partaking of consumer retail sales promotions (see, e.g., Blattberg, Briesch, & Fox, 1995; Gedenk, Neslin, & Ailawadi, 2006; Sinha & Smith, 2000). These divide into two broad categories: price promotions (e.g., temporary price reductions, multi-item promotion packs) and nonprice promotions (e.g., sampling, contests). In general, consumer sales promotions serve two main objectives for the marketer/retailer. The first is to improve consumer evaluations and loyalty directed toward stores and brands, and the second is to drive actual sales and sales volume that might not otherwise occur.

Of course, consumers benefit as well from sales promotions. The most obvious advantage is the practical consequence of cost savings, especially in the category of price promotions (Sinha & Smith, 2000). But there is more significance than that. Perhaps foremost—keeping in mind the individualistic nation that America has long been—is the revelation from retailing theory and research in America that its consumers unhesitatingly take personal credit (for themselves) and project personal credit (to other consumers) for both the economic and the psychological benefits obtained through price promotions (Schindler, 1989). According to Schindler's work, price promotions generate excitement that has an ego-expressive aspect resulting in the smart-shopper attribution. He argues and shows that when people incur less cost when buying a new item based on price promotion, they commonly ascribe the augmented value they receive to their own personal shopping efforts and savviness. In turn, this self-concept enhancement is accompanied by a sense of accomplishment and pride, which represent nonmonetary motives and benefits that go well beyond the cost savings. When they do, American consumers appear to experience a self-motivated and self-reliant

accomplishment that is consistent with their cultural heritage. Replications and elaborations of the smart-shopper phenomenon can be found in Bicen and Madhavaram (2013), Mano and Elliott (1997), and Schindler (1998). Theory and research underlying this phenomenon demonstrate that smart shopping is sought and fulfilled by consumers across a wide swath of backgrounds. Overall, Americans know how to be, and how to appreciate, a smart shopper.

The confluence of materialism, shamefulness judgments, retail price promotions, and the smart-shopper attribution is an intriguing mixture of complementary as well as counteractive forces in the marketplace that has yet to be investigated. Preceding theory and research across these forces intimate that the harsher shamefulness judgments of higher materialistic buyers might be neutralized when the buying occurs via a favorable price promotion and its attendant smart-shopper attribution. Logically also, it seems unlikely that this same course would unfold in the context of lower materialistic buyers because they are judged less shamefully in the first place (per implication in Harwood Group's 1995 report). In short, it is considered bad to be a higher materialistic buyer, but it may be considered less bad when the buying is based on an advantageous price promotion. Following on these insights, our second hypothesis is a proposed moderator effect and our third hypothesis is a proposed mediational effect.

H2: *The greater (lesser) perceived shamefulness of a purchase by a buyer of a self-presentational, nonessential product (cf. H1) who fits a higher (lower) materialism profile will be reduced (unaffected) by a favorable price promotion (versus a less favorable price promotion or a regular priced no-promotion option).*

H3: *The smart-shopper attribution will mediate the effect of a more favorable price promotion on the perceived shamefulness of a purchase of a self-presentational, nonessential product (cf. H1) by a higher materialistic buyer.*

3 | METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

We focused on American society and its consumers in this initial examination of the hypotheses articulated above. The reasons are straightforward, namely, that America is among the most materialistic societies in the world and most of the insights on materialism, price promotions, and the smart-shopper attribution have ensued from prior research conducted on US consumers.

We also adopted a psychological scenario approach to testing our hypotheses since research on moral judgments such as shamefulness as well as research on the smart-shopper phenomenon have both used written scenarios for conveying situations toward which the subjects respond (e.g., Christensen & Gomila, 2012; Schindler, 1998). This approach enabled us to concentrate on judgments from a third-party observer's perspective on the moral shamefulness of a materialist's buying behavior in the context of a price promotion. It also enabled us to avoid documented biases in judgments about oneself, and in comparison to others. Earlier research has shown that

people generally see themselves as being more moral than they actually are (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011) and they often deem their own related lapses as less distasteful than the same by other persons (Valdesolo & Desteno, 2008). We sought to avert these biases by focusing instead on observers' judgments of materialistic buying.

Across the studies, we operationalized a relatively higher versus lower materialism value in the buyer by including information in the scenario about his or her attitudes and lifestyle, per Richins and Dawson's (1992) widely adopted three-dimensional conceptualization of materialism. This included a stronger (weaker) centrality of acquisition in life, a more (less) intense use of acquisitions to pursue happiness, and a stronger (weaker) inclination to define success through possessions. Given also prior emphases on the level of ownership (excessiveness) that higher materialists tend to maintain (Clugston 2007; De Graaf, Wann & Naylor, 2001; Harwood Group, 1995), in two studies we also included information in the scenario about the quantity of current ownership of the given item being purchased.

4 | STUDY 1: EFFECT OF TWO LEVELS OF PRICE PROMOTIONS ON SHAMEFULNESS JUDGMENTS OF A PURCHASE BY A HIGHER VERSUS LOWER MATERIALISTIC BUYER

4.1 | Participants and design

Participants were recruited from MTurk ($n = 709$, 47% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 32$ years, standard deviation = 11.9, all in the United States). Each was randomly assigned to one cell of a 2 (buyer materialism: higher vs. lower) \times 2 (price promotion: higher savings vs. lower savings) between-subjects design (see Appendix A for the experimental scenario). Buyer materialism was manipulated through different lifestyle and attitudinal information included about the buyer in the purchase scenario, as described above. For the price promotion manipulation, we used two levels of cost savings: "Buy One, Get One 25% Off" and "Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off," each of which is a customary price promotion, with the latter being obviously a more substantial cost savings.

4.2 | Procedure

Participants read about a buying scenario involving a consumer named Christine purchasing two watches, and then they filled out a three-item perceived shamefulness scale, with statements such as "I really feel that Christine's choice in the scenario was shameful" (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$, see full scale in Table 1). As a manipulation check, participants assessed the extent of Christine's materialism value on an 11-point sliding scale from -5 ("Not at All Materialistic") to 5 ("Extremely Materialistic"). The study concluded with an attention check (to ensure that participants were diligent in processing the scenario), and demographic questions.

TABLE 1 Measurement of study construct in Study 1

Construct and items	Loadings
Perceived shamefulness (reliability = 0.93, AVE = 0.88)	
I really feel that Christine's choice in the scenario was shameful	0.96
Christine in the shopping scenario should feel ashamed	0.96
I would feel embarrassed if I made the same choice as Christine	0.90

Note: All p values were $<.001$.

Abbreviation: AVE, average variance extracted.

Across the total sample, 52 (7.3%) failed the attention test that asked them to recall the number of watches Christine owned after her purchase, and they were subsequently dropped from the analyses reported below (the results remained consistent whether these participants were included or not).

4.3 | Results

4.3.1 | Manipulation check

As expected, participants viewed Christine as much more materialistic in the higher buyer materialism condition than in the lower one ($M_{\text{higher buyer materialism}} = 4.39$ vs. $M_{\text{lower buyer materialism}} = -2.30$, equal variances not assumed, $t(524) = 50.91$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 3.90$).

4.3.2 | Effects of buyer materialism and price promotions

We performed analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the shamefulness judgments of the purchase, with buyer materialism and price promotions as between-subjects factors. Descriptive statistics for shamefulness judgments across all studies are presented in Appendix B. There was a significant main effect of buyer materialism in the scenario on perceived shamefulness. Participants judged Christine's purchase as more shameful in the higher materialistic buyer condition than in the lower condition ($F(1, 653) = 221.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.25$), thus supporting H1. There was also a significant main effect of price promotions on perceived shamefulness (1 = both 50% off, 0 = one 25% off; $F(1, 653) = 18.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), with higher cost savings leading to lower shamefulness judgments.

Most importantly, there was a significant interaction between buyer materialism and price promotions ($F(1, 653) = 7.00$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$). In support of H2, post hoc analysis showed that the more favorable price promotion (higher savings) significantly reduced the shamefulness judgments of the higher materialist's purchase ($F(1, 653) = 22.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), but had no effect on those same judgments of the lower materialist's purchase ($F(1, 653) = 1.49$, $p = .22$, see Figure 1). People judged a higher materialist's purchase as less shameful based on how much she saved via the more substantial price-reduction promotion, but not when the buyer was a lower materialist.

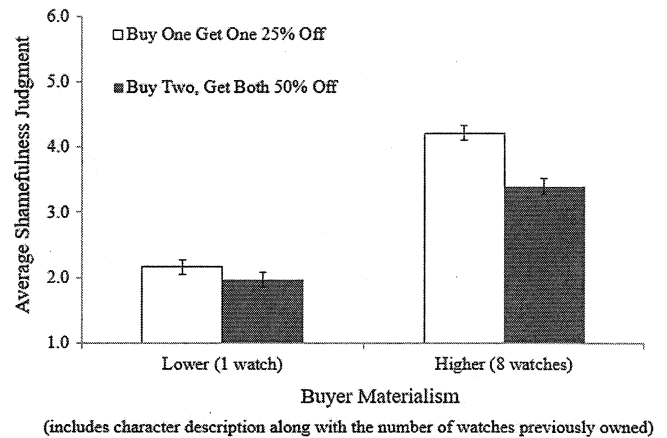


FIGURE 1 Effects of buyer materialism and price promotions on perceived shamefulness, Study 1

4.3.3 | Discussion

Study 1 confirmed H1, that a purchase of a self-presentational, nonessential product by a consumer who fitted a higher (lower) materialism profile would be judged as more (less) shameful. It also supported our moderator hypothesis (H2), namely, that the greater (lesser) perceived shamefulness of a purchase by a buyer of a self-presentational, nonessential product who was a higher (lower) materialist would be reduced (unaffected) by a more favorable price promotion (vs. a less favorable price promotion). The first finding conforms to sociohistorical attitudes and polling results showing that a preponderance of Americans denounces materialism. The second finding corresponds to sociohistorical attitudes and retailing theory that emphasize Americans' penchant for championing self-motivation and self-reliance, and for seeking advantageous economic deals that provide nonmonetary benefits (via the smart-shopper attribution) on top of the monetary savings. When higher materialists do so in a given purchase event, the purchase is judged less morally shameful (and, by implication, more permissible), despite the fact that the public has expressly disdained higher materialists.

While our initial study supports our first two hypotheses, it provides only indirect evidence for the role of the smart-shopper attribution in the effect of price promotions on shamefulness judgments, especially in the retail setting with a higher materialistic buyer. In Study 2 we do so directly, by measuring the smart-shopper attribution and using it as a mediator in path analysis. Also, in Study 2 we focus only on a purchase by a higher materialistic buyer since the prior study verified our complementary expectation that a purchase by a lower materialistic buyer was much less subject to shamefulness judgments and, thereby, those judgments were less subject to reduction due to a favorable price promotion. In addition, in our first study, we compared two levels of price promotion, with no regular price or reference price to serve as a baseline control condition, which is technically more consistent with the smart-shopper literature. Hence, in Study 2 we incorporated a purchase based on a favorable price promotion versus a purchase based on a regular price (no promotion). Finally, in our first study, we not only

profiled the buyer as higher or lower in terms of their materialism based on Richins and Dawson (1992), we also included how much of the to-be-purchased-item that the buyer already owned (more or less for a higher versus lower materialist respectively). Although consistent with materialism theory, it is possible that the ownership volume issue activated other ways for the subject to interpret the retail buying scenario, and if so, that could muddle the primary causal explanation due to the materialism profile. For example, a higher volume of ownership could signal that the buyer is an enthusiastic collector of the said item, not just (or not so much) a definite materialist. Thus, the pattern of results might be explainable from different perspectives. To address this concern, in Study 2 we removed the reference to how much the materialistic buyer previously owned of the new item being purchased.

5 | STUDY 2: EFFECTS OF A FAVORABLE PRICE PROMOTION VS. REGULAR PRICE AND THE SMART-SHOPPER ATTRIBUTION ON SHAMEFULNESS JUDGMENTS OF A PURCHASE BY A HIGHER MATERIALISTIC BUYER

5.1 | Participants and design

We recruited 202 US-based participants from MTurk (40% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.7$ years, standard deviation = 9.95). Participants read a scenario about a higher materialist named Scott who purchases a pair of jeans (see Appendix C). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two price promotion conditions: a 50% off price promotion versus no promotion (regular price). Both conditions were based on the same pair of regular-priced jeans at \$49.99, thus equating the reference prices in each case. The same measures of shamefulness from Study 1 were then implemented. Immediately after, subjects completed four anagrams to clear their short-term memories, as a preparation for a follow-up measure of the smart-shopper attribution. Next then, subjects were asked to reread the same buying scenario about Scott they had previously, and then they answered a two-item smart-shopper attribution scale, with statements including “In buying his new jeans now, Scott was a smart shopper to make that choice” and “Scott was being intelligent to purchase another pair of jeans in this situation” (Strongly disagree = 1, Strongly agree = 7, $r = 0.83$).

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Effect of price promotion on shamefulness

We performed ANOVA on the shamefulness judgments of the purchase, with price promotion (yes or no) as a between-subjects factor. Consistent with Study 1, there was a significant main effect of price promotion (vs. no promotion) on perceived shamefulness ($F(1, 200) = 5.86, p = .02, \eta^2 = 0.03$). As expected, and consistent with H2, the price promotion (vs. no promotion regular price) significantly reduced the shamefulness judgments of the higher materialist's

purchase. See Appendix B for the associated descriptive statistics. We note too that this finding emerges from a scenario that, unlike Study 1, did not mention how much of the to-be-purchased-item that the buyer already owned. Hence, it does not appear that that issue is a concern or confound in interpreting support for our foundational hypothesis (H1).

5.2.2 | Mediation analysis with the smart-shopper attribution

To test whether perceived smartness mediated the effect of price promotion (yes or no), we mean-centered the smart-shopper scores before performing bootstrapping analyses based on 5,000 samples (Model 4 in Hayes, 2013). There was a significant indirect effect of smart-shopper attribution ($a \times b = -0.61$, 95% confidence interval [CI; -1.01 to -0.27]) mediating the effect of price promotion on shamefulness judgments, in support of H3. In the indirect path ($a = 1.76, p < .001$), a unit increase in price promotion (from no promotion to 50% off) increased smart-shopper attribution by 1.76 units. Holding constant price promotion, a unit increase in smart-shopper attribution reduced the shamefulness judgment by 0.35 units ($b = -0.35, p < .001$). The total effect of smart-shopper attribution on shamefulness judgments was significant ($c' = -0.58, p = .01$). Since the direct effect was not significant ($p = .91$), this is an indirect-only mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010), meaning that smart-shopper attribution completely mediated the effect of price promotion on shamefulness judgments in the context of a high materialist's purchase.

5.3 | Discussion

The results show that a price promotion (a 50% off price), as compared to a regular price (no promotion), reduced perceived shamefulness and increased the smart-shopper attribution. Moreover, the findings support the theoretical-process account constructed earlier, namely, that the smart-shopper attribution would mediate the effect of favorable price promotion on the shamefulness judgments of a highly materialistic buyer.

To extend the findings of the prior two studies, and particularly advance the smart-shopper literature as it could apply to the moralism of materialism, we pivoted to another prevalent and captivating price promotion which, in this case, is not solely monetary. Since it openly uses a particular adjective (“free”) that evokes a deep cultural theme within America, we suspected that it could notably resonate with Americans in their moral judgments of materialistic buyers, though it has not been studied in this circumstance before. This distinctive price promotion is the ubiquitous and so-called “zero-price” promotion that is encapsulated in the offer of a free product, namely, “Buy One, Get One Free” (Shampanier, Mazar, & Ariely, 2007). Crucially, prior research by Chandran and Morwitz (2006) has shown that a zero-price promotion is more salient than equivalent monetary promotions. In addition, Shampanier et al., (2007) have further demonstrated that a zero-price promotion also induces nonmonetary benefits beyond the cost-saving. In

fact, they argue that “in some sense, people value free things too much” and they “overreact” to free products (Shampanier et al., 2007, p. 743). Taken together, the American historical trend in regard to freedom and individualism, along with the prior studies on a zero-price, free-product promotion, suggest that this special type of promotion has nonmonetary benefits that may go beyond those accruing from basic price-reduction promotions observed in prior smart-shopper research. Support for this possibility of new knowledge could be investigated by equating the total price in a zero-price offer (“Buy One, Get One Free”) with a substantial discounted offer (50% off each of two products, which was the more favorable and superior offer in Study 1), and then seeing whether the zero-price, free-product promotion outperforms the equivalent and substantial discounted offer with respect to reducing shamefulness judgments of a highly materialistic buyer.

In the context of a free-product promotion, we note also that evidence of shamefulness mitigation, along with a mediational analysis involving the smart-shopper attribution, would offer a novel extension to the smart-shopper literature. Up to now, the smart-shopper attribution has been limited to focusing on comparisons of a regular/reference price to a discounted price, with the latter being clear cost savings. What has not been considered is whether in some circumstances a specific type of price-promotion framing such as “Buy One, Get One Free” could provide an enhanced smart-shopper attribution over a standard but substantial price-reduction promotion (“Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off”), even though both promotions have the identical total price.

6 | STUDY 3: EFFECTS OF A ZERO-PRICE, FREE-PRODUCT PROMOTION AND THE SMART-SHOPPER ATTRIBUTION ON SHAMEFULNESS JUDGMENTS OF A PURCHASE BY A HIGHER MATERIALISTIC BUYER

6.1 | Participants and design

Participants were recruited from MTurk ($n = 331$; 41% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 30.7$ years, standard deviation = 10.3, all in the United States). They were randomly assigned in a between-subjects design to one of two promotion conditions (“Buy One, Get One Free” vs. “Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off”). The second condition was chosen for being monetarily equivalent to the first condition. The second condition, we should stress, is also the same one used in Study 1 that represented the more favorable and substantial price promotion, and it was ultimately the more potent one for mitigating shamefulness judgments. Hence, by employing this same price-promotion condition in Study 3, the test of the possible superiority of the monetarily equivalent free-product promotion is arguably more stringent.

Participants read a scenario involving a highly materialistic consumer named Christine who was buying two new watches (as in Study 1). The same measures of shamefulness and smart-shopper attribution as before were implemented.

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Effects of a zero-price, free-product promotion

Supporting the logic underlying H2, there was a significant effect of the price promotions on shamefulness judgments of the buying event (1 = zero price, 0 = both 50% off; $F(1,329) = 16.37$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$). In particular, the zero-price, free-product promotion (vs. the discount price promotion) led to lower shamefulness judgments, despite the two promotions offering identical savings. Thus, the second price promotion condition (two products at 50% off), which was notably successful in Study 1, was superseded in Study 3 by the first condition, that is, a free-product promotion framing that had an identical cost saving.

6.2.2 | Mediation analysis of smart-shopper attribution

Repeating the same bootstrapping mediation analyses based on 5,000 samples (Model 4 in Hayes, 2013) as in Study 2, we find that there was a significant indirect effect of smart-shopper attribution ($a \times b = -0.28$, 95% CI [-0.51 to -0.06]) mediating the effect of the zero-price, free-product promotion (vs. equivalent discount price promotion) on shamefulness judgments, in support of H3. In the indirect path ($a = 0.47$, $p < .001$), a unit increase in the zero-price promotion (from the equivalent discount price promotion) increased the smart-shopper attribution by 0.47 units. Holding constant the zero-price promotion, a unit increase in the smart-shopper attribution reduced the shamefulness judgment by 0.61 units ($b = -0.61$, $p < .001$). The total effect of the smart-shopper attribution on shamefulness judgments was significant ($c' = -0.74$, $p = .01$). Since the direct effect was significant ($c = -0.46$, $p < .01$), this is a complementary mediation (Zhao et al. 2010), meaning that smart-shopper attribution partially mediated the effect of the two different price promotions on shamefulness judgments in the context of a high materialist's purchase.

6.2.3 | Discussion

In Study 3 we showed that a zero-price, free-product promotion (“Buy One, Get One Free”) reduced the shamefulness judgments of a high materialist's buying behavior. Furthermore, this effect went beyond the monetarily-equivalent, price-off deal represented by the sizeable discount promotion of “Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off.” Study 3 also demonstrated that the zero-price promotion effect was mediated by the smart-shopper attribution. This is the first time that this phenomenon has been tied to and demonstrated within a price-promotion context that does not depend on a lower cost consequence for evoking the smart-shopper attribution.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Materialism—as a value and lifestyle of acquiring more things to attain happiness—has been criticized for centuries as a morally deficient and shameful manner of living. Contemporary consumer researchers, however, have hardly considered the moralism of materialism. And while they

have produced some valuable insights on several of the causes or facilitators of materialism (e.g., family and peer influences, fear of death), surprisingly none has considered the role of price promotions that not only impel buying behavior, but also empower a smart-shopper attribution that reflects positively on the buyer's ego, savviness, and personal responsibility for sealing the deal.

In retrospect, such past-proven outcomes of the use of price promotions seem relatively straightforward. However, it is less obvious as to whether such promotions might impact the shamefulness judgments of materialistic buyers. Drawing from literatures on materialism, moral psychology, American history, and retailing (the smart-shopper phenomenon particularly), we hypothesized and showed across three studies that favorable price promotions do diminish the shamefulness judgments of American buyers who fit a strong materialistic profile. These price promotions included typical discount cost savings (Studies 1 and 2) and a zero-price, free-product (Study 3), and each of these was consequential to an observer qualifying his or her moral-shamefulness judgments of the buyer. Moreover, we demonstrated that the aforesaid effect is mediated by the smart-shopper attribution. Considering the implications of these findings from a macro-level viewpoint, our project intimates that price promotions and the smart-shopper attribution may serve as a consistent manner by which consumers can feel justified, perhaps even exonerated, for sustaining fervent purchasing behavior that they otherwise morally fault.

Our project provides new substantive insights as it is the first of its kind to yoke materialism research with moral psychology, price promotions, and the smart-shopper attribution. Together the insights reveal the knowledge value of considering materialism more intently from a moral psychology perspective and considering simultaneously how retail promotions can influence materialism judgments and buying behavior. In terms of theoretical advances, we proposed and confirmed a mediational-process role for the smart-shopper phenomenon as price promotions influenced shamefulness judgments of highly materialistic buyers. In addition, our Study 3 extended theoretical understanding of the zero-priced, free-product promotion as an extra and orthogonal dimension by which people reduce their shamefulness judgments of materialistic buying behavior, over and above how much the buyer strictly pays at check-out. Indeed, the "Buy One, Get One Free" deal was superior for reducing shamefulness judgments in Study 3 over a monetarily-equivalent, substantial discount price promotion ("Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off") that previously in Study 1 outperformed a lower discount price promotion. The combined findings indicate that the advantage of the zero-price, free-product promotion was due to the meaning of "free" as well as participants' tendency to overvalue that promotion accordingly, and not because they were getting a better deal in terms of cost savings per se.

Study 3 also advances theory related to the scope of the smart-shopper attribution. It now appears that that attribution is not exclusive to cases where a lower cost is achieved by the buyer, but also when the more favorable price promotion is based on an enticing framing, such as "Buy One, Get One Free." As a whole, these varied insights provide several vistas for future theory and research.

Our preliminary focus was on the US society, as were our samples, because America is among the most materialistic nations and it is where

the past relevant background research to our project has been conducted. It is where materialism and moralism seem especially to collide, and where consumer coping via retail price promotions seems prominent and effective. Whether different results would appear in an Eastern culture or in a society less economically developed than the United States wait to be determined.

Secondly, we concentrated in this project on retail price promotions. Other promotions remain to be examined as to whether they similarly mollify shamefulness judgments of materialists. These include alternative types of price promotions such as loyalty discounts, coupons, and rebates, as well as nonprice promotions such as premiums, sweepstakes, and contests (Gedenk et al., 2006).

The buyer's financial health may also play a role that deserves specific attention. Shamefulness judgments about a materialist's purchase may depend also on whether he or she can afford without difficulty the new item(s) being bought. Less affordability may make judgments more negatively severe. This rationale is congruent with Olson, McFerran, Morales, and Dahl (2016) finding that purchasing organic food or renting an environmentally friendly car was judged less moral if the buyer was receiving government assistance, as compared to being an income earner. How this issue plays out in moral judgments of a materialistic buyer who uses a price promotion remains to be seen.

Social networks are also worth pondering. A higher materialist's purchase might be judged more approvingly if it is known that the buyer has friends or family members who themselves already possess the kind or the quantity of the item(s) that the materialist is newly buying. Ownership factors among peers are likely to provide normative comparisons for moral acceptability that could also moderate observers' shamefulness judgments of the buyer.

Future research could provide more refined understanding about zero-price, free-product offers. One interesting direction would be to determine whether the added value of the "free" theme is scalable and, if so, up to what point. That is, some retailers offer two, three, or even more free items of equal or lesser value when an initial item is bought at regular price. Future research could examine whether the perceived shamefulness of the materialist's purchase is lower yet as the number of free items in a retail offer rises. At some point, though, the number of free items may seem exorbitant and the buyer may seem piggish, and then shamefulness judgments could reverse course and get worse.

Examining these possibilities above could enhance theory and consumer education pertaining to materialism and retailing influences. Our current findings and future related ones may help to improve training in schools and online to sensitize young and adult consumers to (a) recognize what values they hold about material things and buyer behavior (cf. Huber et al., 1997) and (b) enhance their skills to live out those values and preferences in the marketplace. For example, it is yet unsubstantiated whether and how people can learn to defy the lure of retail promotions due to their own efforts, in the vein of transforming a smart-shopper attribution when buying on deal into an equally or perhaps more fulfilling attribution of smart-shopper-resistance. It is conceivable that tailored internet apps, mindfulness training (Bahl et al., 2016), or multiple media guidance on consumer wisdom (Luchs & Mick, 2018; Mick & Schwartz, 2012) can curtail the hurried and unreflective

materialistic buying that retail promotions are commonly designed to kindle. Research and new programs on such practical and proconsumer support are much needed.

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APPENDIX A

Watches Buying Scenario in Study 1 and in Study 3 (using higher buyer materialism condition only).

Higher buyer materialism condition

Christine is a person who attaches a high degree of importance to the things she buys and owns. In fact, products and possessions are at the center of her daily life. This includes her car, clothing, household items, jewelry, new technologies, sports equipment, and so forth. In Christine's eyes, owning things is essential to happiness in life. And the things she owns, she believes, show how successful she is. In terms of jewelry, for example, Christine currently owns 8 watches of different styles, and they are all well-known brands.

Lower buyer materialism condition

Christine is a person who attaches a low degree of importance to the things she buys and owns. In fact, products and possessions are not at the center of her daily life. This includes her car, clothing, household items, jewelry, new technologies, sports equipment, and so forth. In Christine's eyes, owning things is not essential to happiness in life. And the things she owns, she believes, do not show how successful she is. In terms of jewelry, for example, Christine currently owns one watch, and it is not a well-known brand.

[The rest of the scenario continued as follows for both conditions]

Recently, Christine was at a local mall and passing by a store that sells jewelry and personal accessories. She sees a sale sign and some attractive watches on a display table. She walks in, looks over the watches, and notes the sign which says, "Buy One, Get One 25% Off" ("Buy Two, Get Both 50% Off"). Christine looks over the watches more. She thinks about what she already owns back at home. Christine then picks out 2 new watches from the display, each priced at \$59.95.

APPENDIX B

Descriptive Statistics for Shamefulness Judgments by Condition

Study/purchase category	Buyer materialism	Promotion	Shamefulness judgments
1 Watch	Higher	25% off	4.22 (0.12)
		Both 50% off	3.40 (0.12)
	Lower	25% off	2.16 (0.11)
		Both 50% off	1.96 (0.11)
2 Jeans	Higher	50% off	2.56 (0.17)
		Regular price	3.12 (0.17)
3 Watch	Higher	Buy one, get one free	2.91 (0.13)
		Both 50% off	3.65 (0.13)

Note: Standard errors of the means are presented in the parentheses.

APPENDIX C

Jeans Buying Scenario in Study 2

Scott is a person who attaches a high degree of importance to the things that he buys and owns. In fact, products and possessions are at the center of his daily life. This includes his car, clothing, household items, new technologies, sports equipment, and so forth.

In Scott's eyes, owning things is essential to happiness in life. And the things that he owns, he believes, show how successful he is.

In terms of clothing, for example, Scott currently owns numerous pairs of jeans of different styles, and they are all well-known brands.

Recently, Scott was at a local mall and passing by a store that sells jeans. He sees a variety of jeans stacked on a display table. He walks in, looks over the jeans, and notes the sign that says "\$49.99 each at a regular price" ("\$49.99 each [but now \$24.99—50% Off!]") Scott looks over the jeans more. He thinks about the jeans that he already owns back at home.

[Price Promotion] Scott then picks out 1 new pair of jeans at the discounted price of \$24.99.

[No Promotion] Scott then picks out 1 new pair of jeans at the regular price of \$49.99.