

Cultural Identity and Materialism: The Mediating Role of Meaning in Life

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Introduction Identifying strategies to mitigate individuals' endorsement of materialistic values is crucial, given the negative consequences associated with them. Cultural identity could influence how individuals perceive or understand their lives, as well as the goals or values they prioritize. Chinese culture encourages self-transcendence, emphasizes restraint in desires, and generally prioritizes morality over material gains. Therefore, this study aimed to examine whether cultural identity predicts reduced materialism and to explore the potential underlying mechanisms. Given that emerging adulthood is characterized by identity exploration and instability, which may present a critical period for examining how identities shape values, Chinese emerging adults were thus selected as the target group.

Methods A cross-sectional survey was conducted using a convenience sampling approach. Data were collected through a series of measures assessing cultural identity, materialism, the search for meaning, and the presence of meaning. A total of 984 emerging adults were included in final analyses, with an average age of 19.264 years ($SD = 1.296$). Of the participants, 334 (33.9%) were male, and 650 (66.1%) were female. Pearson's correlation analyses and mediation models were employed to test the proposed hypotheses.

Results Pearson's correlation analyses revealed that cultural identity was positively associated with both the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, and negatively associated with materialism. Mediation analyses indicated that the presence of meaning, along with a sequential combination of the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, mediated the relationship between cultural identity and materialism, while the search for meaning alone did not. Furthermore, when accounting for the indirect effects mentioned above, the direct effect of cultural identity on materialism remained statistically significant.

Discussion These findings suggest that the presence of meaning may serve as a more proximal factor than the search for meaning in linking cultural identity to materialism. This study advances prior research by exploring the predictors of materialism through the lenses of cultural identity and meaning in life. The findings have practical implications, suggesting that programs aimed at mitigating materialism and alleviating its associated maladaptive outcomes, such as compulsive buying and excessive consumption, may focus on strengthening individuals' cultural identity and/or cultivating a deeper sense of meaning in life.

Key words Cultural Identity; Meaning in Life; Search for Meaning; Presence of Meaning; Materialism

Introduction

Materialism refers to a value orientation that reflects the extent to which individuals prioritize the acquisition of wealth and material possessions as a means to achieve important life goals and happiness (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Materialistic individuals tend to value possessions and their acquisition more than other life goals, such as interpersonal relationships, experiences, or achievements (Kasser, 2016). However, despite believing that happiness and satisfaction can be attained through material possessions, the fulfillment gained from acquiring new items tends to fade rapidly, prompting a continual desire for more (Kasser, 2016). This “more” is insatiable and difficult to meet, often leading to a perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction and discontent (Richins, 2017; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Considerable evidence has shown that materialists are more likely to report lower levels of life satisfaction (Richins & Dawson, 1992), poorer quality friendships, and reduced personal well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014; Kasser, 2016). Given the many detrimental outcomes, researchers have increasingly sought to identify strategies targeted at reducing materialism (Kasser, 2016).

Cultural Identity as a Protective Factor

Culture is considered a means to enhance human survival at both individual and collective levels (Yap et al., 2019). It permeates various aspects of human life (Baumeister, 2005) and provides shared perceptions and interpretations that help individuals navigate and understand various issues. During the socialization process, acquiring the necessary skills to function within a cultural group and developing psychological connections to that culture are essential. Furthermore, the relationship between culture and the psyche is believed to be mutually constructive (Morling, 2016). Culture is shaped and transformed through individuals’ interactions with their environment, while their psychological processes are influenced by cultural elements (Morling, 2016).

Cultural identity refers to an individual’s sense of belonging and connection to a specific cultural group or community (Phinney, 1992). It encompasses factors such as language, traditions, values, beliefs, and customs shared by a group of people. Cultural identity plays a crucial role in shaping an individual’s perception of themselves, as well as their attitudes and behaviors toward others (Phinney, 1992; Phinney, 2013; Tajfel, 1974). Despite living in a culturally similar environment, people’s subjective feelings and judgments about that culture can differ from one person to another. The stronger an individual’s identification with their cultural group, the more likely they are to experience a sense of affiliation and attachment to that culture.

Although acknowledging material needs, traditional Chinese culture promotes self-transcendence, emphasizes restraint in desires, and generally prioritizes morality over material gains (Li & Guo, 2012). To some extent, the pursuit of self-transcendence and spiritual goals advocated by Chinese culture may conflict with or even contradict materialistic goals. For example, one study found that the coexistence of traditional Chinese Confucian values and materialistic values can lead to mental conflict among Chinese

college students (Li & Guo, 2012). However, recent evidence suggests an increasing trend of materialism among younger generations in China, with a notable rise observed from 2007 to 2020 (Su et al., 2025). Similarly, growing literature highlights that China has become a dominant force in global luxury consumption. For instance, Chinese consumers accounted for approximately 22%–24% of global luxury spending in 2023 (Lannes & Xing, 2023), and projections indicate that by 2030, China's share of the luxury market could reach 35%–40% (Deloitte, 2023; Sgueglia, 2024). Moreover, materialism has been identified as a key driver behind the rising trend in luxury consumption (Islam et al., 2021). In this context, examining the relationship between cultural identity and materialistic values among Chinese individuals is crucial. Given that identification with one's surrounding culture may influence how individuals perceive their lives and prioritize goals and values, this study hypothesized that individuals with a stronger identification with Chinese culture may place less emphasis on materialistic pursuits.

Meaning in Life as a Potential Mediator

Meaning in life is built on individuals' understanding and interpretation of the interconnections among different aspects of life (Steger, 2012). It refers to a sense of purpose and significance that one experiences when contemplating the fundamental nature of existence (Steger et al., 2006). Having a sense of meaning is generally regarded as an important aspect of human life, and those who report a higher sense of meaning tend to be better off than those who do not (Heintzelman & King, 2014; King & Hicks, 2021).

Several studies have suggested that cultural identity can be positively associated with the sense of meaning in life (Bi et al., 2022; Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Theoretically, obtaining a sense of meaning is a fundamental need (Heine et al., 2006), through which individuals can perceive and understand the self, the world, and the relations between the self and the world (Steger, 2012). Feelings of meaningfulness can arise from people's everyday experiences (Heintzelman & King, 2014). If one's sense of meaning is tied to reliable interdependence and interconnections in the environment, this sense would connect the person to the environment in a significant way (Heintzelman et al., 2013). Empirically, studies have suggested that positive affect, social connections, belief structures, a sense of connection to the self, and belongingness can help people cultivate feelings of meaningfulness (King & Hicks, 2021; Lambert et al., 2013).

Furthermore, humans are generally immersed in certain cultures that provide a shared reality (King & Hicks, 2021). Within this reality, there exists a common set of shared information, such as knowledge, understandings, practices, values, beliefs, and rules, which help people interpret why things happen, how things are interconnected, and what behaviors or thoughts are appropriate or approved in a given circumstance. In other words, people's subjective judgments and feelings are typically understood within the scope of a shared reality, and this shared reality is a significant part of their culture. Accordingly, cultural identity may function as a motivator, empowering people to comprehend, appreciate, and embrace the information that is shared within a cultural group. Through this shared information, individuals can communicate and cooperate more effectively,

earn social acceptance, and achieve consensus and harmony with other members of their culture, which might ultimately lead to a sense of consistency, predictability, and order (Heine et al., 2006). When life is perceived as coherent and reliably associated, an enhanced sense of meaningfulness is likely to emerge (Heintzleman et al., 2013). Thus, cultural identity might help people make sense of the lives they live.

Previous literature has indirectly suggested an association between meaning in life and materialism. Specifically, individuals with a diminished sense of meaning appear to be more inclined to prioritize material desires and needs. This speculation is primarily based on two points. First, a sense of meaningfulness is sometimes treated synonymously with a sense of core goals or purpose (Martela & Steger, 2016). Moreover, purposeful goal pursuits are often aligned with core aspects of identity, and the formation of identity and the development of purpose can mutually support and reinforce one another (Bronk, 2011). According to the meaning maintenance model, threats to meaning in life, particularly through self-related constructs, may trigger individuals' motivations to reaffirm or regain meaning in other, unrelated domains (Heine et al., 2006). Second, earlier evidence has shown that when the self is threatened, insecure, or unstable, individuals may place a high value on acquiring wealth and material possessions to repair or enhance the self. For example, some studies suggest that lower self-concept clarity and higher self-ambivalence are associated with higher materialistic values and compulsive buying (Frost et al., 2007; Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014; Reeves et al., 2012). Individuals experiencing uncertainty about themselves or society may turn to materialism to cope with these insecurities (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014), with materialists using connections with material possessions to alleviate existential insecurity (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Drawing on these insights, it can be presumed that individuals with a higher sense of meaning in life may attach less importance to materialistic strivings. Together with the premise that cultural identity might inspire people to construct and experience more meaning, this study further posited that meaning in life might act as a mediator between cultural identity and materialism.

Typically, the concept of meaning in life is understood as comprising two components: the search for meaning and the presence of meaning (Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008). Prior literature has demonstrated that these two components are relatively distinct and can be assessed separately (Newman et al., 2018; Steger et al., 2006; Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008; Steger et al., 2011). The search for meaning is commonly defined as the extent of one's desire and efforts to increase their understanding of the purpose, significance, and meaning in life (Steger et al., 2011), while the presence of meaning refers to the degree to which one perceives or experiences meaning (Newman et al., 2018). Based on this framework and the preceding arguments, it was hypothesized that the search for meaning and the presence of meaning may function as explanatory mechanisms linking cultural identity to reduced materialism.

Relationship between the Search for Meaning and the Presence of Meaning

Theoretically, the search for meaning could function like a schema that enhances the salience of meaning-related information and directs attention toward such information (Steger et al., 2011). This, in turn, could facilitate its application when individuals construct or experience meaning. Furthermore, the motivation to seek meaning is positively correlated with certain personality traits, such as openness, curiosity, and a passion for solving complex issues (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008). By actively pursuing meaning, individuals could expand their focus to aspects of life that are relevant to meaning, increasing the likelihood of perceiving or attaining a sense of meaning in life. Thus, the search for meaning may allow individuals to broaden or refine their understanding of meaning, and when this search is successful, individuals are more likely to experience a greater sense of meaning. Empirical evidence has supported this notion, showing that individuals who engage in a search for meaning on one day tend to experience more meaning the following day (Newman et al., 2018). Accordingly, it was hypothesized that the search for meaning may lead to an increase in the presence of meaning.

Briefly, it is hypothesized that cultural identity might encourage individuals to search for and perceive more meaning in life, which may, in turn, reduce the likelihood of adopting materialistic values. Additionally, it is proposed that cultural identity may reduce materialism through the sequential mediating pathway involving the search for meaning and the presence of meaning. In other words, cultural identity may facilitate the search for meaning, which subsequently enhances the presence of meaning, ultimately leading to lower levels of materialism, thus establishing a sequential mediation model.

A Focus on Emerging Adults

Emerging adulthood, typically defined as the period from ages 18 to 25 (Arnett & Mitra, 2018), provides a unique context for individuals to actively explore and shape their identities. This stage is characterized by several distinct psychological and social features, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, a sense of being “in-between,” and a perception of abundant possibilities (Arnett, 2023; Nelson, 2020; Reifman & Niehuis, 2022). These characteristics can be particularly relevant for examining the relationship between cultural identity, materialism, and meaning in life. In particular, cultural identity provides a framework through which individuals interpret their experiences and make sense of their place in the world. Moreover, emerging adulthood is often marked by frequent transitions, contributing to instability that may influence materialistic values (Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014; Su et al., 2025; Zhang & Hawk, 2022). Given these features, emerging adulthood represents a critical period for exploring how cultural identity shapes values and perceptions of meaning in life. As such, this study focuses specifically on emerging adults.

Goals and Hypotheses

To summarize, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between cultural identity and materialism among Chinese emerging adults and explore whether the search for

meaning and presence of meaning, two distinct dimensions of meaning in life, could sequentially and doubly mediate this relationship. Based on prior research, it was hypothesized that cultural identity might positively correlate with the search for meaning (H1a) and the presence of meaning (H1b), and negatively correlate with materialism (H1c). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that the relationship between cultural identity and materialism might be mediated by three indirect pathways: the search for meaning pathway (H2), the presence of meaning pathway (H3), and a sequential combination of both (H4). In addition, prior research has documented the effects of demographic factors on materialism (Antinienè et al., 2021). For example, gender differences in materialism have been found to be inconsistent across studies (Zhang & Hawk, 2022), and materialism has been shown to follow a curvilinear trajectory over the course of a lifetime (Jaspers & Pieters, 2016). Thus, in line with Zhang and Hawk (2022), demographic factors, such as age and gender, were included as control variables in this study.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

This study was conducted from December 2020 to January 2021. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, with an online survey link generated via the Questionnaire Star platform. Prior to participation, participants were informed about the principles of anonymity, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. Those who consented to participate completed all the required measurements. After data collection, 61 participants were excluded for being under the age of 18 years or for failing to provide attentive responses. Specifically, participants were excluded if they provided identical responses to all items, or if their answers to the following two items were inconsistent: “My life has no clear purpose” and “My life has a clear sense of purpose.” Namely, responses indicating either both 1 (*strongly disagree*) or both 7 (*strongly agree*) on these two items were considered inattentive and were therefore excluded. An additional 23 participants, aged over 26 years, were also excluded from the sample. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 984 participants. The average age of participants was 19.264 years ($SD = 1.296$), with ages ranging from 18 to 25. Of these, 334 (33.9%) were male and 650 (66.1%) were female. The average age for males was 19.183 years ($SD = 1.315$), while for females, it was 19.306 years ($SD = 1.285$). The majority of participants were college students, comprising 95.3% (938) of the sample, while 4.7% (46) were employed full-time.

Measures

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity was assessed using the 10-item Cultural Confidence Inventory developed by Zhou and Bi (2020). Participants were instructed to rate their level of agreement with each statement, which reflected their appreciation for and pride in their culture. A sample item is “Culture serves as the fundamental basis for personal growth and social development.” Each item was rated using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly*

agree). The mean score across all items was used as the indicator, with higher scores indicating greater levels of cultural identity. Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.975.

Search for Meaning and Presence of Meaning

Search for meaning and presence of meaning were assessed using the Chinese Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Wang & Dai, 2008). It is a 10-item self-report questionnaire, adapted from the original Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006). Two subscales were included: Search (5 items) and Presence (5 items). The Search subscale evaluates the extent to which participants engage in searching for meaning in their lives, and the Presence subscale assesses how much participants understand the significance and purpose of existence. Sample items include "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful" for the Search subscale and "I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful" for the Presence subscale. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.908 for Search and 0.775 for Presence.

Materialism

Materialism was assessed using the 13-item Chinese Material Value Scale (Li & Guo, 2009), adapted from the Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism Scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Consistent with the original version, the Chinese adaptation includes three dimensions: possession-defined success, acquisition and possession centrality, and taking possessions as the pursuit of happiness. Although the original Chinese version was validated among college students (Li & Guo, 2009), several studies have demonstrated its good psychometric properties, extending to broader demographic groups (Ni, 2021; Sun et al., 2020). A sample item is "My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have." All items were rated along a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Items with negative wording were reverse-scored, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of materialism. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.813.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlational analyses were conducted with SPSS 21.0. Pearson's correlation analyses were employed to compute the correlations between the studied variables. The hypothesized mediation model was assessed using Model 6 of the Hayes (2016) PROCESS macro, with cultural identity included as the independent variable, materialism as the dependent variable, and the search for meaning and presence of meaning as the first and second mediators, respectively. Age, gender, and educational and employment status were included as covariates. In this mediation model, the indirect effects of (a) the search for meaning, (b) the presence of meaning, and (c) the sequential combination of the search for meaning and the presence of meaning, as well as the direct and total effects of cultural identity on materialism, were assessed simultaneously. The significance of hypothesized indirect effects was examined using the bootstrapping resampling method, with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence

intervals. If confidence intervals did not include zero, the indirect effect was considered statistically significant. Results were reported to three decimal places.

Results

Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

As seen in Table 1, all study variables were significantly interconnected in the expected directions. The correlation between cultural identity and the search for meaning was positive and statistically significant ($r = 0.217, p < 0.001$), as was the correlation between cultural identity and the presence of meaning ($r = 0.199, p < 0.001$). Additionally, the correlation between cultural identity and materialism was negative and statistically significant ($r = -0.114, p < 0.001$). Thus, hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c were supported.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Cultural identity	6.109	1.166			
2. Search for meaning	5.123	1.127	0.217***		
3. Presence of meaning	4.752	1.013	0.199***	0.593***	
4. Materialism	2.849	0.418	-0.114***	-0.109***	-0.207***

Note. $N = 984$, *** $p < .001$.

Mediation Analyses

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, the results of the mediation analyses indicated that the indirect effect of the presence of meaning ($\beta = -0.016, 95\% CI [-0.029, -0.005]$) and the serial mediation via the search for meaning and the presence of meaning ($\beta = -0.026, 95\% CI [-0.043, -0.013]$) were statistically significant, as the confidence intervals for both effects did not include zero. Thus, Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported. In contrast, the mediating role of the search for meaning alone was not supported, as the confidence interval for the effect included zero ($\beta = 0.007, 95\% CI [-0.015, 0.030]$), thereby failing to confirm Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, when accounting for indirect effects, the direct effect of cultural identity on materialism remained statistically significant (direct effect = $-0.084, p = 0.009$), and the total effect was also significant (total effect = $-0.119, p < 0.001$).

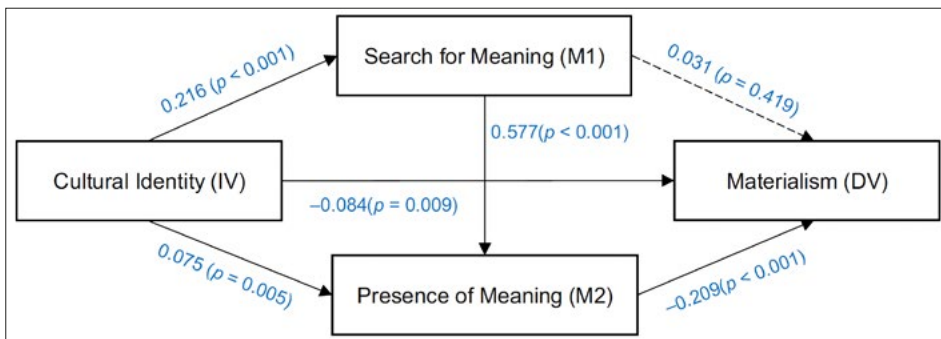


Figure 1 Multiple mediating paths between cultural identity and materialism

Note. All regression/path coefficients were reported in standardized forms.

Table 2 Results of mediation analyses

	Effect	BootSE	Bootstrap 95%CI	
			LL	UL
Total Indirect Effect	-0.035	0.010	-0.055	-0.017
CI → SFM → Materialism	0.007	0.011	-0.015	0.030
CI → POM → Materialism	-0.016	0.006	-0.029	-0.005
CI → SFM → POM → Materialism	-0.026	0.008	-0.043	-0.013

Note. CI = Cultural identity; SFM = Search for meaning; POM = Presence of meaning.

Discussion

The current findings suggest that cultural identity may serve as a buffer against materialistic values, and that the presence of meaning, along with the sequential indirect pathway involving the search for and the presence of meaning, partially accounts for this relationship. Therefore, this study provides an evidence-based contribution to the existing literature by highlighting the protective role of cultural identity and feelings of meaningfulness, as well as investigating the antecedents and underlying mechanisms of materialism.

The Role of Cultural Identity

The results of correlational analyses suggest that individuals with higher cultural identity are more likely to seek meaning and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning in their lives. These individuals also tend to place less emphasis on material possessions and luxury consumption. This finding partially supports the notion that Chinese culture encourages self-transcendence and prioritizes spiritual pursuits over financial and material gain (Li & Guo, 2012). As previously noted, culture plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret and interact with the world. The shared information network within a culture could provide valuable insights, guiding individuals' understanding of themselves and their surroundings. Moreover, culture may influence materialism by dictating societal values related to possessions and consumption, and cultural norms may shape how individuals interpret and prioritize material goods, potentially translating into specific materialistic attitudes and behaviors (Antiniené et al., 2021). Thus, culture may serve as a crucial framework for individuals to make sense of their lives, with cultural identity potentially functioning as a motivational driver in this process. Individuals with stronger cultural identity may be more motivated to seek meaning, have greater access to resources conducive to meaning-making, and are less likely to define happiness through material possessions. In contrast, those who derive their self-worth from external validation or possessions are more likely to pursue material goods to reinforce or signal their self-worth. Existing evidence indicates that individuals who base their self-worth on external factors, such as personal appearance, are more likely to endorse materialistic values (Zhang et al., 2020), suggesting that reliance on external validation for self-worth may contribute to an increase in materialism.

Furthermore, the present study revealed that participants rated their levels of cultural identity, search for meaning, and presence of meaning above the midpoint of rating scales,

which aligns with previous findings (Bi et al., 2022; Heintzelman & King, 2014; Zhou & Bi, 2020). Thus, it appears that the majority of Chinese emerging adults appreciate and take pride in Chinese culture, actively seek meaning, and perceive their lives as relatively meaningful.

The Mediating Role of the Search for and Presence of Meaning

The results of this study suggest that the presence of meaning could partially account for the relationship between cultural identity and materialism. Specifically, cultural identity may enable individuals to perceive or experience their daily lives in a more meaningful way, which, in turn, could reduce their focus on materialistic concerns. As noted earlier, by adhering to shared cultural realities, individuals can adapt more effectively to the environment around them. Conversely, deviating from this shared reality may lead to adverse outcomes, such as social exclusion and the loss of essential resources. Consequently, individuals with weaker cultural identity may be more vulnerable to daily threats, experiencing heightened internal and external conflicts that could undermine their self-concept or cause psychological discomfort. This discomfort may lead them to perceive their lives as meaningless. Given that having a sense of meaning is essential for human functioning (Steger et al., 2006), individuals who feel a lack of meaning may turn to symbolic objects, such as material possessions and luxury products, to restore or reaffirm their sense of life's meaningfulness.

Moreover, the present results indicate that the association between cultural identity and lower materialism can be sequentially mediated through the search for and presence of meaning. This finding is consistent with prior literature, which suggests that seeking meaning may function like a schema, making meaning-related information more salient (Steger et al., 2011) and facilitating the use of such information in constructing a sense of meaning. Thus, individuals with higher levels of cultural identity may be more likely to actively seek an understanding of their world, and therefore, more meaning can be constructed or perceived. This process might, in turn, lead them to place greater value on intrinsic goals, such as personal growth and health, rather than temporary, externally driven gratifications, such as materialistic consumption.

However, the present results did not support the mediating role of the search for meaning. Accordingly, merely seeking meaning may not be sufficient to explain the association between cultural identity and lower materialism. Similar findings were reported in a previous study, which suggested that people were satisfied with their lives if they actively sought and found meaning, but dissatisfied if they sought meaning and failed to find it (Steger et al., 2011). Taken together, these results suggest that the relationship between seeking meaning and materialism is complex. Individuals who search for but have not found meaning may still prioritize material desires, and only by increasing the perceived meaning in life would these meaning searchers show less inclination to pursue material gain. Combined with the finding that the presence of meaning can act as an independent mediator, it can be tentatively speculated that the presence of meaning may operate at a more proximal psychological level than the search for meaning in linking cultural identity to lower levels of materialism. However, this speculation requires further investigation.

Practical Implications

The current findings have significant practical implications. For instance, community workers and educators could design and implement programs aimed at reinforcing cultural identity, promoting engagement in meaningful activities, and cultivating the experience of meaning in life. These programs could potentially reduce materialistic values and mitigate related psychological outcomes, such as compulsive buying and excessive consumption. At the societal level, policymakers might support initiatives that strengthen connections to cultural heritage, history, and community, or encourage participation in meaning-making activities that foster fulfilling life experiences. Such efforts may, in turn, reduce individuals' endorsement of materialism. The development of these programs and policies can be particularly critical in societies where materialism is prevalent, especially among individuals in emerging adulthood, a developmental stage characterized by intensified identity exploration and the formation of life priorities.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present findings should be interpreted with the following limitations. First, given the nature of cross-sectional designs, the observed results cannot permit causal inferences regarding the study variables. Thus, the relationships between the variables may reflect correlations or associations, rather than causality. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to establish temporal sequences and assess whether the current findings are maintained over time, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Second, the present findings might be limited by subjective ratings based on self-reports, which are susceptible to response biases. Specifically, the perception of meaning is a desirable sense, and its absence can lead to psychological discomfort. As a result, participants' ratings of meaning in life might be inflated due to desirability bias (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Therefore, future studies can consider alternative measurement approaches to validate the findings. Third, the current results are based on data collected from emerging adults, with a sample predominantly composed of college students. Future research should include a broader and more diverse sample to assess the generalizability of the findings. Fourth, the cultural context of this research should be considered. Cultural norms, values, and societal expectations could play a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes toward possessions, success, and happiness, which can influence materialism (Antiniené et al., 2021). This study was conducted in China, a society characterized by interdependent cultures. In such cultures, individuals tend to prioritize relationships, social harmony, and group goals over personal aspirations (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, individuals from independent cultures, such as those in the United States and Canada, are more inclined to value individual autonomy and personal success (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Furthermore, the dialectical model of meaning in life (Steger, Kashdan, et al., 2008) suggests that individuals from interdependent cultures may place a greater emphasis on the search for meaning, as it aligns with values prioritizing process over outcome and emphasizing self-improvement. Therefore, future research could adopt cross-cultural designs to explore whether the findings of this study are more relevant to

interdependent cultures than to independent ones. Finally, it is important to note that human cultures are neither homogeneous nor static; rather, they are diverse and continuously evolving (Varnum & Grossmann, 2017). Moreover, existing literature suggests that the meaning of materialism varies across economic status: in wealthier countries, aspirations for financial success are more closely linked to material possessions, such as clothing, whereas in poorer countries, these aspirations are more often related to survival (Kasser, 2016). Therefore, further studies should account for these factors and examine whether the current findings hold over time and across economic contexts.

Conclusion

In summary, this study demonstrated that cultural identity was negatively associated with materialism, with the sense of meaning in life serving as the underlying explanatory mechanism. Specifically, both the presence of meaning and the sequential combination of the search for and presence of meaning mediated the relationship between cultural identity and materialism, whereas the search for meaning alone did not. These results suggest that the presence of meaning may play a more proximal role in linking cultural identity to reduced materialism, while the search for meaning may serve as a more distal factor. The present findings have practical implications, suggesting that programs and policies designed to strengthen cultural identity and foster a deeper sense of meaning during emerging adulthood may help individuals mitigate materialistic values and alleviate the associated psychological consequences.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest: The authors report no declarations of interest.

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Consent to Participate: Informed consent from the participants was obtained upon explanation of the study.

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