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Affluenza: A Barrier to Psychological Growth of Youth

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ABSTRACT

Affluenza is a rich person's disease which occurs when individuals are confused about what it takes to live a worthwhile life. The psychological dysfunctions of Affluenza within the family are generational, and youth afflicted with affluenza may have serious psychological repercussions. Psychological and emotional growth of a child depends on the varied experiences of success, failure, and frustration, but unfortunately the affluent parents keep their children away from undertaking the expected challenges of childhood and indulge them with materialistic possessions which often create an insulation that makes the children handicap to face any adversity. The present study aimed to study the impact of Affluenza on Psychological Growth of young students. A sample of 200 male and female students ranging from 18-24 yrs from different colleges and departments of Punjab University Chandigarh, were administered Affluenza Scale and Personal Growth Initiative Scale' PGIS. It was hypothesized that i) Affluent youth would score low on Psychological Growth as compared to Non-affluent youth ii) Affluent females would have better Psychological Growth as compared to affluent males. Analysis of variance revealed that affluent and non-affluent differed significantly ($F=981.14^{**}$) on psychological growth. Results also revealed significant gender differences ($F=19.52^{**}$) in psychological growth of affluent participants.

KEY WORDS: Affluenza, Happiness, Gender, Youth.

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INTRODUCTION

A painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more and more stuff is called Affluenza. It is reckoning the lives of young children who are influenced by affluent and hedonistic pleasure seeking values and lifestyles in their culture and have limited potential for becoming productive adults. This non productivity interferes with the well-being of our society as well as of these young people¹. Psychologists argue that our actions are driven by a desire for 'self-completion', that we seek to bring our actual self into accord with our ideal self, or who we wish to be. Today Affluenza, to some degree, attempts to create or renew a concept of self. We complete our-selves symbolically by acquiring things that compensate for our perceived shortcomings. Kasser² summarizes a decade of research into the relationship between materialistic values and our sense of security, our feelings of self-worth and the quality of our relationships, "Materialistic values are both a symptom of an underlying insecurity and a coping strategy taken on in an attempt to alleviate problems and satisfy needs".

Affluent children lack the opportunity to learn first-hand experience and thus give up easily when meet with some difficulty. Parents who privilege their children without demanding performance and raise their children with abundance wealth and indulgence unconsciously make their children vulnerable of greater risk for psychosocial and education problems, stress disorders, depression, neglect, substance abuse, and underachievement at rates exceeding their urban or middle class counterparts³. Studies have shown that upper-class adolescents manifest elevated disturbance in several areas, such as substance use, anxiety, and depression and excessive pressures to achieve and isolation from parents^{4, 5,6,7,8}. Twenty percent of affluent adolescents showed persistently high substance use across time⁹. There is a quantitative relationship between people's emotional experience and their optimal functioning¹⁰. The money they are expected to provide may obscure recognition of their personal abilities, further retarding their psychological growth as a mature and independent individual, thus, hampering the expected progression of undergoing Psychological Growth experiences which increase our capacity for external accomplishment and inner fulfillment^{11, 12}.

Robitschek¹³ has defined psychological growth through her construct of personal growth initiative. Personal Growth Initiative (PGI) is a person's active and intentional involvement in changing and developing as a person. It is a person's global inclination to intentionally improve one's self in different areas of his or her life. It entails both cognitive as well as behavioral components. The

cognitive components comprise of self-efficacy, including beliefs, attitudes and values that support personal growth. The behavioral component refers to implementing these cognitions and going about making the change in different growth domains such as happiness, well-being, and quality of life.

Affluenza causes illness as it prevents the meeting of true psychological needs that are fundamental, conflating them with wants concocted by advertisers and consumerism. Lami¹⁴ has cited insecurity, alienation, feeling of incompetence and inauthenticity as the prominent reasons why the virus of affluenza impairs the meeting of the basic needs. Substantial research suggests that people highly oriented toward the acquisition of wealth and possessions report relatively low levels of psychological growth and well being^{15,16,17,18,19,20,21}. Although the relationships between money, possessions, and psychological growth are complicated²², research over the past few decades indicates that there is a link between materialistic values and a host of problematic outcomes including more negative and less positive affect^{23,24,25}, more depressive symptoms and anxiety^{26,27}, and lower self-esteem²⁸. Overall, respondents higher in materialism tend to report less satisfaction with their lives^{29, 30,31,32,33}. Demonstrating the deleterious consequences of having money as an important guiding principle in life, it can be avowed that those individuals, for whom accumulating wealth was a primary aspiration, were associated with less Self-Actualization, less vitality, more depression and more anxiety¹⁷.

Keeping in mind the serious nature of problem of affluenza and the pace at which it is spreading, the present study was carried out aiming at the psychological growth of affluent youth. It was hypothesized that i) Affluent youth would exhibit poor Psychological Growth as compared to non-affluent, ii) Affluent females would have better Psychological Growth Experiences in comparison to affluent males.

EXPERIMENTAL SELECTION

The study was conducted in different colleges and departments of Punjab University, Chandigarh after obtaining permission of their respective Heads and Principals'. A total of 623 subjects between the ages of 18 and 24 years, with the mean age of 21 years, were approached. The study group comprised of 200 affluent (100 Male and 100 females, who scored high on Affluenza Scale) and 200 Non-Affluent (100 Male and 100 females, who scored low on Affluenza Scale) was screened out with Affluenza Scale³⁴ (Oliver James, 2007). 223 individuals were not included in the study as they scored average on affluenza. For Psychological growth experiences, all screened 400 participants were administered Personal Growth Initiative Scale' PGIS³⁵ (Robitschek, 1998) to know

their personal growth. Written informed consent was taken from each participant. Incidental sampling was used for data collection.

Data Analysis

In the light of stated hypotheses, means, standard deviations and analysis of variance were computed. Two way analysis of variance was used to see the effect of two levels of affluenza (Affluent & Non-Affluent) and two levels of Gender (Males & Females) on Psychological growth. The data were tested for homogeneity of variance before subjecting to Analysis of Variance. The results are described in a tabular form in Table No.1 to Table No. 4. Graphical representation is depicted in Figure 1.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Psychological Growth scores in relation to Gender and Affluenza

Variables	Levels	Means	SD	F-ratio
Gender	Males	29.28	5.59	19.52**
	Females	31.75	5.60	
Affluenza	Affluent	21.74	5.81	981.14**
	Non-Affluent	39.29	5.38	

Table shows Means, Standard Deviations along with F-ratios for personal growth initiatives as a function of Affluenza and Gender. As shown, Affluent scored low on personal growth initiatives (M = 21.74, SD = 5.81) as compared to non-affluent (M = 39.29, SD = 5.38). The difference between these two groups was found to be statistically significant {F (1,396) = 981.14, p<0.01}, which implied that individuals high on affluenza were found to have less personal growth than those who were low on affluenza. These findings support the first hypothesis that non-affluent would score higher on personal growth initiative scale as compared to affluent. It can also be observed that females scored higher on personal growth (M = 31.75, SD = 5.60) as compared to males (M = 29.28, SD = 5.59). Significant difference was found in both groups {F (1,396) = 19.52, p<.01}, females showing higher personal growth in comparison to males, accepting second hypothesis that females would score higher on personal growth initiatives as compared to males.

Table 2
ANOVA summary of gender and affluenza on PGIS

Source of Variation	SS	DF	MS	F
Gender (A)	612.56	1.00	612.56	19.52**
Affluenza (B)	30782.70	1.00	30782.70	981.14**
AB	254.40	1.00	254.40	8.11**
Error	12424.27	396.00	31.37	

Table No. 2 represents ANOVA summary for personal growth initiatives as a function of Affluenza and gender. Besides the main effect of Gender and Affluenza, the interaction between both the factors i.e. affluenza and gender was good enough to reach to the significant level {F (1,396) = 8.11, p<.01}. This trend could also be observed in Figure 1. Personal growth initiative scores differ significantly in both the levels of affluenza and gender. Simple effects were further calculated on each level of Affluenza and Gender (Table No. 4 & 5).

Figure 3
Graphical representation of interaction between gender and affluenza.

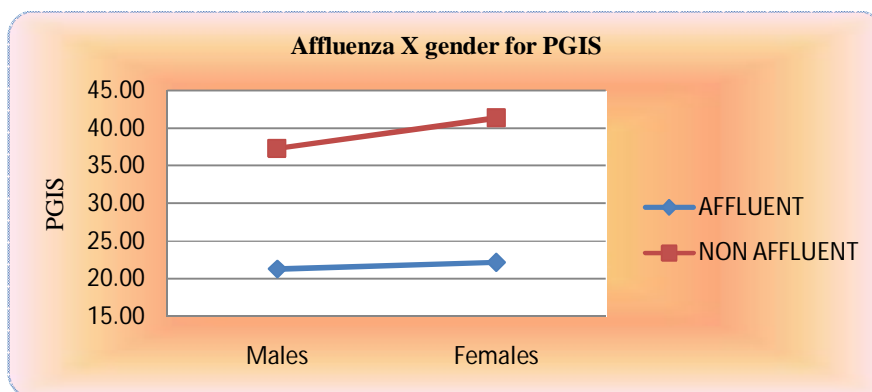


Table 4
Simple effects of gender on affluent and non-affluent individuals

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio
A FOR B ₁	38.72	1.00	38.72	1.23ns
A FOR B ₂	828.25	1.00	828.25	26.40**
Error	12424.27	396.00	31.37	

Ns-Non Significant, **p<0.01
A- Gender (Males & females), B₁- Non-Affluent, B₂- Affluent

In Table No. 4, it has been seen that simple effect of A for level b₁ is not significant {F (1,396) = 1.23 ns}, indicating that males and females in non-affluent category do not differ significantly on personal growth initiatives. However, the observed value of F in respect to simple effect of A for level b₂ far exceed the critical value {F (1,396) = 26.40, p<.01}, which means that affluenza

significantly influences personal growth. For affluent level (b_2), the personal growth initiative scores are found to be better for females in comparison to males indicating better personal growth of females in comparison to males.

Table 5
Simple effects of affluenza of males and females

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio
B FOR A1	12720.13	1.00	12720.13	405.43**
B FOR A2	18316.98	1.00	18316.98	583.82**
Error	12424.27	396.00	31.37	

** $p < 0.01$

B- Affluenza, A₁- Females, A₂- Males

Table No. 5 presents the summary of analysis of variance for the simple effects of B (Affluenza) on factor A. It has been shown that the observed value of F in respect to simple effect of B for level A1 {F (1,396) = 405.43, $p < .01$ } & A2 {F (1,396) = 583.82, $p < .01$ } far exceeds the critical value. This means that for both the levels of gender (A₁ & A₂), the personal growth initiative scores are better for non affluent females and males in comparison to affluent females and males. Non affluent showed better psychological growth than affluent individuals.

This study aimed to understand the impact of affluenza on psychological growth among Indian youth aged 18 to 24. **The purpose of the study was to assess the differences between affluent and non-affluent on psychological growth of young males and females.** Results of the present study supported first hypothesis that *Affluent youth will score low on Psychological Growth experiences as compared to Non-affluent.* The support for the present study comes from previous researches^{15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21}. Research over the past few decades indicates that there is a link between materialistic values and a host of problematic outcomes including more negative and less positive affect^{23, 24, 25}, more depressive symptoms and anxiety^{26, 27}, and lower self-esteem^{28, 19}. Overall, respondents higher in materialism tend to report less satisfaction with their lives and poor psychological growth^{15, 24, 30, 31, 19, 35, 36}. It can be inferred from the studies that individuals possessing high materialistic orientation tend to experience anxiety, negative affect, depressive symptoms and less satisfaction in their lives.

The findings of the study can be explained within the framework of Wicklund and Gollwitzer's³⁷ theory of self-completion as the act of judging one's self-worth in terms of competences in some self-identified domains. This process is termed as self-definition. Self-definition may expose self-discrepancies which Dittmar³⁸ defines, as the disparity between how an individual sees her/himself (actual self) and how s/he would ideally wish to be (ideal self). Individuals who perceive

shortcomings in their self-concept or a sense of incompleteness in a self-identified domain are motivated to compensate. One of the strategies that individuals use to compensate for self-discrepancies could be the acquisition and usage of material goods that symbolize those aspects of self felt to be lacking³⁹. Such individuals have a greater tendency to accumulate more material goods which they believe would compensate for their inferiorities. Lami's⁴⁰ concept of sudden wealth syndrome can explain the debilitated or unhealthy relationship with money or wealth or the pursuit of it. In terms of sudden-wealth syndrome, it is when abruptly 'an individual wake up one morning and they realize they don't have to work again, and after the excitement wears off they're thrust into an early identity crisis'. Affluent youth never get an opportunity to manifest themselves because of the vigor and life lard impact of 'old' diseases. This rationale can be applied to the emergence and identification of affluenza as a general condition during the 1990s. This condition arguably only acquired a clear identity because of the explosion in the number of people that became the recipients of huge amounts of wealth. "Material possessions cannot replace our own innate desire for love, appreciation and acceptance". Thus, affluent youth know how to make money, but don't know how to live with it. Affluenza can turn them into an egomaniac. Wickland and Gollwitzer³⁷ articulated materialism's relation to identity in their symbolic self-completion theory, which argued that affluent people buy products that, symbolize who they are or who they want to be. Another possible mechanism by which wealth may result in poor psychological growth and lower well-being is through interference with people's ability to savor the good things. Researchers found that money impaired people's ability to savor positive emotions and experiences, and wealthier individuals reported lower savoring ability⁴¹.

The main effect of gender on psychological growth also found to be significant indicating that affluent females exhibited better psychological growth initiatives than affluent males supporting our second hypothesis. The results could find explanation in gender differences in materialism. Females' greater interest in people and males' interest in objects⁴² are giving researchers the idea that males might be more materialistic than females. Browne and Kaldenberg⁴³, Eastman et al⁴⁴, Flouri⁴⁵ and Segal and Podoshen⁴⁶ all support the suggestion by their findings that men are more materialistic than women. According to Roberts and Clement⁴⁷, men equate material possessions to happiness and psychological growth than women. When women are however uncertain about their self-concept, they score higher than men in materialism³⁹. The female youth with high happiness level are seeking to minimize their incongruence through endorsement of affluent values, as they perceive that the acquisition of products that are congruent with their ideal self will help them reduce the difference between their actual and ideal self. They are comfortable with who they are and therefore do not

need to compensate for perceived personal deficiencies. Churchill and Moschis⁴⁸ conducted a study among adolescents to examine the relationship between male and female and whether they differed in their materialistic value. The result revealed that male exhibited stronger expressive orientation towards consumption (materialistic attitudes). Females displayed lower materialistic orientations than did males.

In conclusion, the current study indicates that materialistic pursuits pose a barrier to the good life among youngsters aged 18 to 24. The more people aspire to materialistic goals, the less satisfied they are with life, and the more at risk they are for developing psychological disorders. The present research has implications for youths' adaptive functioning and adjustment. Humans can train themselves to change or eliminate their faulty cognitions. People have vast untapped resources for actualizing their personal and social destiny, but because of their dysfunctional beliefs and attitudes, affluent individuals are not able to assess different situations accurately resulting in personal and social maladjustment. This study would also be of use to psychologists as affluenza is clearly a social phenomenon that harms our environment, encourages an extreme of excess resulting in deadly deprivation for some, and usurps the resources from future generations. If youth are encouraged to hold onto and value those connections we could begin to stem the tide. Finding ways to do that and enlightening teachers, parents, and adults in general to see the benefits of this could prove to be a rather big challenge.

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