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Doing and Being 'Right': Exploring Consumption, Materialism, Culture, and Happiness in India

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In the consumer subjective well-being arena, there is scarce work on understanding how unique cultural values and normative influence impact life satisfaction. We focus on India to study subjective well-being, materialism, social comparison and Karma doctrine. Results show consumers use value based justification to remain happy. Research implications are discussed.

[to cite]:

Fazlul K Rabbanee, Himadri Roy Chaudhuri, and Rajat Roy (2015) , "Doing and Being 'Right': Exploring Consumption, Materialism, Culture, and Happiness in India", in AP - Asia-Pacific Advances in Consumer Research Volume 11, eds. Echo Wen Wan and Meng Zhang, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 225-226.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1018766/volumes/ap11/AP-11>

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The interaction between consumption, life satisfaction and consumers' subjective well-being is a matter of significant discussion in the recent times. Consumption as a practice, in almost every culture, manifests itself in the value and traits of materialism. However, materialism and consumption, despite their universality, are often critiqued for their roles in everyday human life. Veblen's treatment (1899) is one of the classic examples in this regard. Criticisms are mostly related to individual well-being (see Burroughs & Rindfleisch 2002 for details) as well as family structure (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton 1997). Despite its suggested ill effects, there has been continuous effort on the part of an individual to legitimize the consumption process. In this backdrop, this paper explores the antecedents of materialism and examines its relationships with life satisfaction in Indian context.

Past research suggests that consumers can strategically 'manipulate' their consumption experience (Kopalle and Lehman 2001) and they continuously seek for normative approval for consumption (Ashlee 2010). This behavior is culturally situated and context dependent as such that the individual consumption goals are conveniently moderated by extant shared meanings and values (Holbrook 1998). Materialistic people believe that the continued acquisition of possessions leads to greater happiness and satisfaction in life, and the lack of possessions leads to dissatisfaction in life (Richins 1987). Specifically, Belk (1985) suggested that materialistic people are usually possessive, non-generous, and envious. These dispositional factors also indicate a tendency to experience negative emotions. However, often satisfaction with standard of living is determined by the display of monetary value of the material possessions or income, savings, and investments or any other commercially available goods or services. An individual's evaluation of these standards can be perceived as her own evaluation of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with life conditions or concerns within the material life domain. In general, materialistic people value their material possession, attach happiness, success and devote much time and energy to such acquisitions and possession (Richins, 1987, 2004). Hence their life satisfaction is significantly influenced by the material life domain that aggregates a positive experience from acquisition and possession of material goods; material satisfaction influences the overall life satisfaction of a materialist more strongly than a non-materialistic person (Sirgy, Lee, Larsen and Wright 1998).

In the Indian context, the concept of *Karma* promulgates that an individual's current state is determined by what she has done in the past (Kopalle, Lehman and Farley 2010). Past deeds and present work are conveniently correlated using the '*Karma Philosophy*' that is well ingrained in the value system of the Eastern civilization. *Karma* originates in the scriptures of ancient India and preaches natural causation as well as divine intervention in distribution of the consequences of being 'good' and 'bad': however, the concept of 'fruits of hard labor' is also prevalent in the Western Civilization (Chatterjee, Rai, and Chaudhuri 2013). Materialism in Indian perspective involves a context quite different from that of Western culture. There has been an unprecedented opportunity for citizens today to mingle with others from varied diverse cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds often share workplaces set up by multinational

companies. But with its root deep into the caste system and social stratification, there has been always a search for signs and markers of status and class, and successful Indians frequently like to display their affluence through ostentatious displays of the goods they own (Singh, 1982), however such displays have taken more subtle forms (Chaudhuri, Mazumdar, and Ghoshal 2011). Hence we attempt to explain the antecedents of materialism and its relationship with life satisfaction in Indian context, as expressed by acquisition of material goods, not only by mere possession of them.

Data for this study were collected from a total of 250 Indian consumers using a structured questionnaire through convenience sampling. The average age of the respondents is about 32 years earning average monthly income of 28,000 Indian rupees; 55.5% of them are male. The respondents were requested to recall one of their recent materialistic or experiential high involvement purchases and then were asked series of questions covering the scale items of the constructs used in the study viz. social visibility, social comparison, karma, materialism, life satisfaction and happy shopping. The constructs were primarily measured using scale items from the existing literature. We conceptualize Happy Shopping to be a construct expressing the positive emotions related to material acquisition rather than only possession. The four item scale was constructed for happy shopping following the multistage method as suggested by Churchill (1979). The scale exhibited robust psychometric values.

The study found evidence that social visibility, social comparison and karma positively influence materialism which ultimately affects life satisfaction positively. Materialism is not found to affect happy shopping. Materialism is found to fully mediate the relationships of social visibility and social comparison with life satisfaction. Besides, partial mediation of materialism is also found to occur in relationship between karma and life satisfaction. Thus the paper presents a model to establish the relationship between the antecedents of materialism and its effects on life satisfaction. These findings are value driven, culturally accepted and based on belief system. Specifically we argue that motivation to undertake social comparison and gain social visibility may drive materialism in consumers. Further, the doctrine of *Karma* also provides a normative legitimacy to materialism. In a collective society, where material aspiration may create profound psychological tension (Burroughs & Rindfleisch 2002), the consumers' instinctive search for a value based justification plays a crucial role in enhancing life satisfaction and may offer a counterbalance that help offset such negative effects.

Our results support the general feasibility of the relationship among some cultural and individual factors and assessment of their reciprocal impact on consumer behaviour. Advertisers and brand managers can benefit considerably from this research by priming the consumers with relationship between 'cause and effect'. Although our research demonstrates that those who believe in karma in India are satisfied with their life and materialism; however, it could be a fertile ground for research to know how consumers handle life satisfaction if they don't believe in Karma. Future research that makes individuals primed of this 'natural law of causality' could also be of interest.

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