Special Session Summary  the Positive and Negative Consequences of Materialism: What Are They and When Do They Occur?

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The Positive and Negative Consequences of Materialism: What Are They and When Do They Occur?

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SESSION OVERVIEW

This session explored how materialism, defined as the value placed on material wealth and possessions, results in poor outcomes for the individual, and why, nonetheless, this value persists. In the first paper, Shaw et al. developed and tested a model based on judgment theory to explain how materialism results in reduced life satisfaction and emotional well-being. According to judgment theory, the gap between an individual’s current standard of living and his or her reference standards may be presumed to have a direct effect on satisfaction with standard of living. However, little research has sought to determine whether individuals readjust their expectations for standard of living over time or how this process is influenced by materialism. In the second paper, Wang and Wallendorf sought to test how materialism affects the re-setting of product expectations and other reference standards, thus influencing the duration of satisfaction with purchases. The third paper (Bhojwani and Frost) examined how culture may moderate the effect of materialism on compulsive behaviors, including hoarding.

This session provided an interdisciplinary forum for the evaluation of materialism’s outcomes. The authors included scholars from fields such as marketing, communications, pharmacy, and psychology. The target audience included researchers interested in materialism and its consequences; those working on macro-level issues; those interested in values, consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction, consumer culture, and cross-cultural issues; and those interested in consumer behavior’s broader consequences.

Taken together, the results of these papers provide the foundation for a discussion of recurring puzzles, such as how and when materialism persists in individuals and in societies despite many negative physical, emotional, consumption, and social outcomes. O’Guinn has suggested that the paradoxical persistence of materialism is due in no small part to the construct itself being a product of modernist critiques of market capitalism. Stepping outside of that 150-year old perspective may allow us to better understand why materialism is much more than the problematized “–ism” of the therapeutic ethos.

“The Effect of Materialism on Emotional Well-Being and Life Satisfaction: An Application of Multiple Discrepancies Theory”

James W. Shaw, Ada Leung, and Melanie Wallendorf, The University of Arizona

Materialism has been defined as an orientation that reflects the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. Belk (1985) and others have suggested that it is a manifestation of psychological traits such as envy, non-generosity, and possessiveness. However, Richins and Dawson (1992) have argued that materialism is better characterized as a value that guides people’s choices and conduct in a variety of situations. According to these researchers, it is the value that an individual places on the acquisition and possession of material goods. Most recent studies, in addition to this work, have adopted the value concept of materialism over earlier trait-based concepts.

According to Belk (1984, 1985), the three traits that best characterize materialism (i.e., envy, possessiveness, and non-generosity) bear weak to moderate negative correlations with happiness and life satisfaction. Others using Belk’s definition have reported materialism to be negatively correlated with material satisfaction (Dawson 1988) and positively correlated with social anxiety (Schoeber and Dugal 1995) and measures of depression (Wachtel and Blatt 1990). Studies that have treated materialism as a value as opposed to a negative trait (e.g., Richins 1987; Richins and Dawson 1992) have generally yielded similar findings.

Most researchers have reported a direct empirical relationship between materialism and subjective well-being. However, a direct association seems theoretically implausible if one defines materialism as a value instead of a trait. Guided by the work of Michalos (1985, 1991), a model was developed using multiple discrepancies theory (MDT) to explain why materialistic individuals report high levels of depression and anxiety as well as dissatisfaction with life. Consistent with the concept of vertical spillover, this theory posits that material well-being (i.e., an individual’s happiness or satisfaction with his or her standard of living) has direct effects on life satisfaction and emotional well-being. Material well-being is influenced by the individual’s evaluation of his or her perceived standard of living against set aspirations. These aspirations, in turn, are a function of evaluations of perceived standard of living against social referents and perceived needs. It is argued that materialists evaluate their standard of living poorly due to unreasonably high goals and expectations. This leads to reduced material well-being, which exerts negative effects on emotional well-being and life satisfaction.

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect data to test the model. Ninety students enrolled in an undergraduate marketing class at The University of Arizona administered a questionnaire battery to a quota sample of community respondents living in Tucson, Arizona. The sample was stratified by sex (male, female), age (21–40, 41–65), and social class (working, middle, upper middle).

The measures included in the questionnaire were selected or developed after a careful review of the extant literature. Materialism was assessed using Richins and Dawson’s (1992) Material Values Scale. Emotional well-being was measured using the 18-item RAND Mental Health Inventory (Veit and Ware 1983). Life satisfaction was assessed using the five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985). A suitable measure of material well-being could not be found in the literature. Ergo, a new measure (the Material Well-Being scale) was constructed to assess positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction related to standard of living. Perceived discrepancies between current standard of living and eight reference standards were assessed using modified versions of items employed by Michalos (1985, 1991) in validating MDT. Social support and self-esteem, which were treated as mediators in the model, were measured using the six-item Social Support Survey (Sarason et al. 1987) and four items from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965), respectively.

A total of 737 questionnaires were completed, of which 405 (55%) were checked for data integrity. The structural model was tested using a generalized method of moments instrumental variables estimator. Materialism, material well-being, emotional well-being, life satisfaction, social support, and self-esteem were treated as latent variables. The variables were centered prior to estimation to reduce multicollinearity and to facilitate the interpretation of the coefficients.
The quota sampling approach appeared to work as expected. The mean (SD) age of respondents was 38 (12.4) years, and 55.8% of the sample was <41 years of age. Females comprised 51.4% of the sample. The distribution of respondents among social classes was fairly even, with 28.2% working class, 33.4% middle class, and 38.4% upper middle class. The Material Well-Being scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha of 0.90) and bore expected correlations with materialism ($r=-0.39$, $p<0.001$), emotional well-being ($r=0.50$, $p<0.001$), and life satisfaction ($r=0.59$, $p<0.001$).

Materialism was found to be negatively related to evaluations of standard of living against social references and perceived needs. These evaluations were positively related to material well-being. Material well-being was positively related to emotional well-being and life satisfaction, and the latter two constructs were also positively correlated. However, there continued to be a negative association between materialism and global measures of quality of life even after controlling for a direct relationship with material well-being.

While most of the model’s hypothesized associations were validated, the results of this investigation suggest that MDT does not fully explain the relationship between materialism and global measures of quality of life. The authors’ findings suggest that other theories, such as value conflict, should be used to supplement judgment theory when attempting to explain the materialism/quality-of-life relationship.

“The Influence of Materialism on Product Satisfaction”
Jianfeng Wang and Melanie Wallendorf, The University of Arizona

In the past two decades, materialism has become a widely-studied concept in the marketing field (e.g., Belk 1985; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Richins and Dawson 1992). Materialism has been connected to many constructs both as causes and as consequences (e.g., Fournier and Richins 1991; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997; Sirgy 1998). In the consumer research realm, materialism has been defined as a personality trait (Belk 1985) or a value (Richins and Dawson 1992). The present paper treats materialism as a value and proposes that materialism impacts consumers’ reasoning in evaluating their purchases, and thus impacts their post purchase satisfaction.

Consumer satisfaction has been defined as “the consumer’s fulfillment response” (Oliver 1996, p. 13). A dominant theory of consumer satisfaction is expectancy disconfirmation (e.g., Oliver 1980; Oliver and DeSarbo 1988), which states that consumers’ satisfaction/dissatisfaction is judged by whether the actual performance is better/worse than their a priori expectations (Oliver 1980). Spreng, MacKenzie, and Olsavsky (1996) argue that, in addition to expectations of products prior to purchase, the extent to which a person’s desires are fulfilled by products is also important in evaluating satisfaction. It implies that satisfaction is not simply the result of comparisons of attributes or effects of ongoing emotions, but may also involve persistent individual values (e.g., materialism). The current paper integrates materialism, a crucial individual value, into the consumer satisfaction process in order to see its effects on consumer satisfaction over time. More specifically, we examine the extent to which materialism influences the duration of product satisfaction.

It has been suggested that although acquisitions enhance individuals’ satisfaction temporarily, the pleasure derived from such improvements may wane quickly such that one’s satisfaction reverts to its previous level (Richins and Rudmin 1994). Materialistic individuals have been found to have lower levels of satisfaction with their lives in general and with their standard of living in particular (Richins 1987, Sirgy 1998). It is hypothesized in the current paper that consumers’ satisfaction with purchased possessions wanes more quickly as materialism increases. It is not because they are dissatisfied in the beginning (right after the purchase), but because they have high (unrealistic) desires and thus expect more from the products. That is to say, high levels of materialism lead consumers to keep searching for products to bring them happiness and manifest their success. However, it becomes difficult for such consumers to remain satisfied with products over the long term due to their consciousness and awareness of the “better” ones that can optimally manifest their success and prestige.

Two hypotheses are proposed in this article. For products whose public meaning highly represents social and financial status, high-materialistic consumers’ satisfaction with formerly purchased products should be significantly lower than that of low-materialistic consumers. However, the satisfaction difference should not be significant for recently purchased products. On the other hand, for products whose public meaning hardly represents social and financial status, there should be no significant difference between high-materialistic and low-materialistic consumers’ satisfaction with either recently purchased or formerly purchased products.

A pretest was first conducted to find out what product categories should be used for this study. 54 undergraduate students were asked to evaluate to what extent the given 14 product classes have the ability to form impression of owners, tell owner’s discretionary income, and show owner’s social status. From the results of this 7-point scale, sunglasses (M=5.14, SD=1.24) and jeans (M=4.60, SD=1.34) are selected as “high status” product categories and sweatshirt (M=2.81, SD=1.21) is chosen as “low status” product category.

The material values scale developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) is selected for the current research. In the consumer behavior context, Richins and Dawson’s (1992) definition of materialism (i.e., a life value) is more applicable than Belk’s (1985) one in that materialism can be viewed as a value that consumers place on their acquisition and possession of material objects (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). Oliver’s (1980, 1996) universal product/service consumption satisfaction scale is used in the current research due to its high reliability and applicability to various product categories.

The study consists of 211 undergraduate students who did not participate in the pretest. For the product categories with high-status signaling capabilities (i.e., sunglasses and jeans), materialism has a marginally negative relationship with product satisfaction ($\beta=-.065$, $p<.07$). More interestingly, the interaction of materialism and duration of possession has a significant impact on product satisfaction ($\beta=-.261$, $p<.01$). The interaction of materialism and standardized price also has a significant impact on product satisfaction, but in a different direction ($\beta=-.136$, $p<.01$). The interaction effects demonstrate that the (moderately) negative relationship between materialism and product satisfaction is amplified by longer the possessions or by lower the price paid. In contrast, for the low-status product category (i.e., sweatshirts), only the interaction of materialism and duration of possessions has a significant impact on product satisfaction ($\beta=-.170$, $p<.01$).

The results clearly manifest different patterns of satisfaction with high-status versus low-status product categories. Product meanings derived from high-status products may share differently with consumers of different materialistic beliefs. In comparison, low-status products’ satisfaction may mostly come from utilitarian values that are evaluated similarly by consumers across materialistic measures.
“The Relationship of Materialism to Compulsive Hoarding and Indecisiveness in Indian and American College Students”  
Kaamna R. Bhojwani, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Randy O. Frost, Smith College

Research on the construct of materialism has increased substantially in the last decade (Graham 1999). Much of this research has focused on two conceptualizations, the first by Belk (1985a, 1985b) and the second by Richins and Dawson (1992). Belk (1985a) views materialism as an object-oriented construct in which possessions are considered as means to self-enhancement. According to Belk, materialism manifests itself in three traits: possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy. He defines possessiveness as “the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one’s possessions” (Belk 1985a, p. 291). Nongenerosity refers to “an unwillingness to give possessions to or share them with others” (Belk 1985a, p.291), while envy is “an interpersonal attitude involving displeasure and ill will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation or possession of anything desirable” (pg. 292). The Belk Materialism Scale was developed to measure these dimensions and is arguably the most widely used measure for that purpose (Ger and Belk 1990).

In contrast, Richins and Dawson (1992) define materialism as an organizing, central value leading to value orientations of three types: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Acquisition centrality occurs when people place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives. Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness suggests that acquisition is carried out for pleasure or self-satisfaction. Richins and Dawson (1992) explain that individuals are always in the pursuit of happiness. The pursuit of happiness by way of acquisition rather than any other means constitutes this aspect of materialism. Finally, possession-defined success refers to the tendency to judge one’s own and others’ success in terms of the quality of possessions had.

In order to understand the nature of materialism, the investigators sought to explore its relationship with another construct that also has the possession and acquisition of goods at its center. Compulsive hoarding, the acquisition of and failure to discard possessions that appear to be useless or of limited value (Frost and Gross 1993), has been found to be a significant subtype of obsessive-compulsive disorder in the United States (Leckman et al. 1997).

Several studies suggest that materialism exists throughout the world and that it is related to life satisfaction and general well-being (Dawson and Bamossy 1991; Keng et al. 2000; La Barbera and Gurhan 1997; Richins and Dawson 1992; Swinyard et al. 2001). However, the measurement of the construct of materialism in different countries has posed a problem. Similarly, few studies of hoarding behavior exist outside of the United States. This study sought to explore the relationship between materialism and compulsive hoarding in the United States and India, two large consumer societies. A construct related to hoarding, indecisiveness, was also studied in relation to materialism.

Two hundred one college students from India and 130 from the United States completed the Belk Materialism Scale (Ger and Belk 1996), the Savings Inventory-Revised (SI-R; Frost et al. 2002), and the Frost Indecisiveness Scale (FIS; Frost and Shows 1993). The Materialism Scale had low to moderate reliability in both samples (alphas ranging from 0.57-0.65). The SI-R and its four subscales—clutter, difficulty discarding, acquisition problems, and interference—as well as the FIS were internally consistent in both samples (alphas ranging from 0.50 to 0.89). All scale scores were standard-ized to reduce multicollinearity. An interaction term was created by multiplying the overall materialism score by nationality (dummy coded) to determine whether the relationship of materialism with hoarding and indecisiveness varied by culture. The authors elected not to include nationality as a main effect in their regression models since they were unsure that the absolute numbers would mean the same thing in India as in the United States. The poor reliability of the materialism scale reinforced this.

Regression analysis revealed significant associations of materialism with the hoarding scale and its four subscales as well as with indecisiveness. There were, however, no significant interactions, indicating that the relationship did not vary by country. These findings suggest that materialism in India relates to important constructs in the same way that it does in the United States. Further research on the development of a more reliable materialism scale as well as its relationship to other constructs in India is warranted.

REFERENCES


