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Perhaps It Would Be Better If Materialistic Birds of a Feather Did Not Shop Together: Materialism, Accountability, and Luxury Brand Attitudes & Consumption Emotions

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Materialism is associated with many negative outcomes. Therefore, it is important to identify factors that moderate the expression of materialistic values. This study examines the influence of accountability. Results show that when participants were accountable to a materialistic peer, materialism amplified the experience of positive emotions from the purchase of luxury brands. In contrast, when participants were accountable to a non-materialistic peer, materialism attenuated the experienced positive emotions. Brand attitudes were unaffected by accountability. This pattern of results suggests that materialists' expectations regarding status enhancement from product consumption may play a key role in regulating the expression of materialistic values.

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We conclude that considering prior opinions about a brand is vital for marketers since the same response process (i.e. reason-generation) may lead to the opposite result depending on the prior preference for the target brand. With a prior positive attitude, consumers tend to perceive the subjective experience as diagnostic, whereas for a less-liked brand, consumers tend to rely more strongly on the generated cognitive content. In both cases we may be observing an updating of consumers' preferences reflecting contrast effects caused either by the unexpected difficulty of the task to generate a high number of reasons favoring a highly liked brand or by the accessibility of a long list of reasons favoring an a priori less-liked brands.

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Perhaps it Would be Better if Materialistic Birds of a Feather Did Not Shop Together: Materialism, Accountability, and Luxury Brand Consumption Experiences

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Introduction

Considerable scholarly effort has been directed toward understanding the causes and consequences of materialism. For example, prior work suggests that family dynamics (Rindfleisch et al. 1997) as well as television programming (Shrum et al. 2005) and advertising (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2003) contribute to the development of materialistic values. Extant research also links the possession of materialistic values with compulsive consumption and reduced well being (Rindfleisch et al. 1997; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002).

As materialistic values tend to result in negative consequences for consumers, an important transformational research question is: to what extent do situational factors encourage (or discourage) the expression of materialistic values? If factors that encourage (or discourage) the expression of materialistic values can be identified, then it may be possible to devise efficacious tactics for improving consumer welfare. Drawing on accountability theory from psychology (Sedikides et al. 2002; Tetlock 1999), we posit that the expression of materialistic values will be moderated by expectations about the conveyance of social status by others.

Conceptual Framework

Materialism has been defined as "the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states," (Richins 2004, p. 210). For materialistic individuals, product consumption provides a path for obtaining happiness and status (Richins and Dawson 1992). Based on this conceptualization, materialistic individuals can be expected to exhibit greater positive emotions as a consequence of acquiring luxury brands than non-materialists, as materialists should be more likely to perceive themselves as obtaining affluence and elevated social status from luxury brand consumption.

The notion that materialistic individuals perceive the consumption of luxury brands as a means for status enhancement suggests that status enhancement expectations will play a key role in the expression of materialistic values. It also suggests that situational factors that affect such expectations may moderate expressions of materialism. Based on this rationale, we sought to identify factors with the greatest potential to impact status enhancement expectations. One such factor is accountability.

Sedikides et al. (2002, p.592) define accountability as "the expectation to explain, justify, and defend," and also show that it deters self-enhancement through identifiability. To predict how accountability will affect status enhancement expectations, it is important to note that status is a social construct. In other words, status must be conferred by others. Therefore, if a materialist believes that others will be impressed with the purchase of a luxury brand and validate its status-elevating properties, then he or she should anticipate a wellspring of positive emotions. On the other hand, if a materialist believes that others will view his or her attempt to gain status through luxury brand consumption as invalid, then he or she should expect a muted consumption experience. Based on this logic, we hypothesize:

H1a: As materialistic values increase, accountability to a like-minded peer will amplify positive emotions generated from luxury brand consumption.

H1b: As materialistic values increase, accountability to a non-materialistic peer will attenuate the experience of positive emotions generated from luxury brand consumption.

Methods

A two-part study was utilized to test our hypotheses. In part I, participants (N=95) completed a survey that included a measure of materialism (Richins and Dawson 1992), and several unrelated measures. In part II, participants completed an ostensibly separate computer-based experiment. The experiment utilized a simple one-factor design, including three levels of accountability (accountable to a materialistic peer, accountable to a non-materialistic peer, and a no accountability control condition).

To provide a plausible cover-story for manipulating accountability, all participants were asked to describe themselves in terms of their group memberships, favorite activities, and career aspirations. Those in experimental conditions were then told they had been randomly matched by the computer with a peer and given a description that suggested that the peer was materialistic (e.g., they wanted to be an investment banker or consultant) or non-materialistic (e.g., they wanted to do economic development in Africa). They were also informed that they would have to “explain, discuss, and defend” their subsequent responses to the peer at the end of the experiment.

Participants in all conditions were asked to indicate the extent to which they would expect to experience positive emotions if they had just purchased two luxury brands—Prada and Gucci (4 items, α 's=.90 and .93). After completing these measures, participants in the experimental conditions were informed that they would not be required to actually justify their decisions “due to insufficient time.”

Results

Manipulation check. Peer impressions items were included in the experimental conditions as manipulation checks. As desired, the description of a materialistic peer produced perceptions of an interaction partner who was more career-oriented and caring about money and image than the non-materialistic partner ($M=6.01$ v. 3.02 , $p<.01$). In contrast, the non-materialistic partner was seen as more concerned about the environment and making the world a better place ($M=6.50$ v. 4.44 , $p<.01$).

Main study. Regression analyses were utilized to examine the effects of materialism and accountability on luxury brand consumption emotions. Scores for the two brands were summed to serve as dependent variables. Dummy coding of experimental conditions was utilized, with the control group serving as the reference group. Interaction terms were mean centered.

The analysis of positive emotions detected a significant main effect of materialism, qualified by significant interactions with both the materialistic peer ($p<.05$) and non-materialistic peer justification conditions ($p<.05$). Inspection of the interaction coefficients revealed support for H1a and H1b, as materialism was positively related to the experience of positive emotions in the materialistic peer accountability condition and negatively related to the experience of positive emotions in the non-materialistic peer condition.

Discussion

Consistent with the notion that status elevation expectations play an important role in the expression of materialistic values, we find that the relationship between materialism and the experience of positive emotions from luxury brand consumption is moderated by accountability. When participants believed that they would be accountable to a materialistic peer, materialism enhanced the expectation of experiencing positive emotions from the purchase of luxury brands. In contrast, when participants believed that they would be accountable to a non-materialistic peer, materialism reduced the expectation of experiencing positive emotions. One potential implication of our findings is that who a materialist goes shopping with may make the difference between unbridled spending and relative thrift. Shopping with a like-minded (dissimilar) other seems likely to encourage (discourage) the expression of materialistic values.

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