

SYMPOSIA SUMMARY

Having vs. Doing: Materialism, Experientialism, and the Experience of Materiality

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SESSION OVERVIEW

The overwhelming majority of consumer research literature focuses on consumers perceiving, choosing, purchasing, and using objects. While researchers often examine consumers' experiences with these objects, the consumption of experiences and activities that leave a low material trace such as vacationing, attending sporting events, and arts participation, remains under explored.

Philosophers and social scientists often present a moralizing dichotomy between the acquisition of the material and the acquisition of experiences, placing *'the doing'* of experiences on a higher moral and spiritual plane than *'the having'* (Belk 1985; Sartre 1956; Sirgy 1998; Van Boven 2005). This is reinforced in the materialism literature, which finds that materialism, the belief that the acquisition of objects can bring happiness, leads to negative psychological states such as dissatisfaction with life (Sirgy 1998), social anxiety (Schroeder and Dugal 1995), deficit disorder, conduct disorder and narcissism (Cohen and Cohen 1996). From Packard (1957) to Ewen (1976/2001), to Klein (2000), Ritzer (1993) and Schor (1998; 2004), a sociological cottage industry is devoted to the proposition that consumer materialism is a degrading outcome of untrammelled marketing power. Other research into the relationship between experientialism, materialism, and happiness has begun to emerge in psychology; however much theoretical work remains to be done on the types of people who value the experiential, the sociocultural impact of their valuation of the experiential, and the interrelationship between materialism and experientialism.

This session drew noted scholars together to explore the role that consumption experiences should play in our theoretical and empirical conceptualizations of materialism. Through retrospective examinations of research on experiences and revisiting the materialism scale with an eye towards experiences, a rich dialog surrounding this important and underdeveloped component of consumption emerged. The presentations were provocative rather than definitive reports in order to facilitate discourse on the topic during the third part of the session and throughout the conference.

The goals of the session were to increase thoughtful, scholarly investigation into the role of experiences in contemporary consumer culture, to further dimensionalize the materialism construct, and to begin the development of an organizing framework for the concepts presented. Each paper drew on the considerable expertise of the presenter(s), bringing together social psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists to deeply reflect on how materialism and experientialism are similar and different, and the implications of experientialism for well-being.

In the first presentation, Marsha L. Richins discussed and reflected on the underlying data that led to the creation of her materialism scale (Richins and Dawson 1992). She began by explaining the creation of the object-centered materialism scale. In this presentation, for the first time she reflected on the original exclusion from the scale of experientially-oriented items. She further discussed the role that consumption of experiences might play in the materialism construct. As the developer of the most widely used materialism scale and an expert on the materialism construct, Professor Richins' insights and reflections helped to provide a common base of understanding for discussion amongst session participants and attendants.

In the second presentation, Michelle F. Weinberger examined the centrality of material and experiential consumption in contemporary society, and identified cultural values undergirding this valuation. Weinberger's background in cultural sociology and her current research on consumption experiences provided another disciplinary perspective on the topic. Using data from depth interviews and ethnographic participant-observation, she discussed the role that experiences play for consumers of different social classes, and suggested that across status groups, consumers strategically collect experiences and objects in different ways to display cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). This perspective raises questions about differences between materialism and experientialism as currently conceived, and suggests new dimensions for evaluating the conceptual relationships among materialism, experientialism, social class, and well-being.

Finally, Eric J. Arnould and Linda L. Price put forward a new approach to considering materialism and experience. Professor Arnould's anthropological perspective and Professor Price's social psychology background as well as their research on extraordinary experiences provide substantial expertise for the session. Through examining the concept of well-being and consumers' use of marketplace resources for its creation, they presented a three dimensional matrix as an organizing framework for thinking about the interrelationships between well-being, materiality, and culture.

Taken together, the presentations provided a solid conceptual platform for discussion on the interrelationship between the experiential and the material and the implications of experiential acquisition for materialism research. During this last part of the session, the discussion was led by Professor Melanie Wallendorf whose own research into materialism (Wang and Wallendorf 2006) and consumption experiences (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991) uniquely suited her for this role. Rather than just discussing the papers, she facilitated a discussion and brainstorming session between participants and the audience on the belief that material possessions or experiences are essential in producing happiness.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"The Nature of Materialism"

Marsha L. Richins, University of Missouri

This special session was intended to provide a dialog between scholars with interests in experientialism and those studying materialism. This portion of the session was intended to provide a selective overview of the construct and measurement of materialism, with a particular emphasis on those aspects most relevant to experientialism.

The presentation began with an overview of the nature of materialism as it has been studied in recent years in the field of consumer behavior and related social sciences. Materialism research in consumer behavior began with the pioneering work of Russ Belk, who carried out an extensive program of inquiry into the nature of materialism (e.g. Belk 1985; Ger and Belk 1996). His conceptualization of materialism treated it as a personality trait characterized by envy, nongenerosity, and possessiveness.

Building on Belk's (1985) work, Richins developed a slightly different characterization of materialism based in a person's values rather than one's personality. Her work in material values included the development of the Material Values Scale (Richins and Dawson 1992), which is widely used to measure materialism in consumer behavior and other fields. After briefly reviewing the early work on materialism in consumer behavior, this presentation explored in more detail the development of the Material Values Scale. Particular attention was paid to the reasoning and the qualitative research that informed the definition of materialism advanced by Richins and Dawson (1992) and the decision to exclude experiences from both the construct definition and the measurement scale.

The second part of this presentation explored the relationship between experience and materialism by examining the role of consumer goals or motivations. A central element of materialism is the belief that the acquisition of possessions is essential to life satisfaction and well-being; thus, the desire for happiness is the ultimate motivator for much acquisitive or otherwise materialistic behavior. Empirical evidence, however, consistently shows that materialists' beliefs in a causal linkage between acquisition and well-being are unfounded; a number of studies have shown that increases in income or the acquisition of desired objects rarely improves personal happiness for more than a brief period (e.g. Frederick and Loewenstein 1999). This portion of the presentation will highlight some of the current thinking about how specific motivations may influence the causal connection (or lack thereof) between materialism and well-being (e.g. Carver and Baird 1998; e.g. Srivastava, Locke, and Bartol 2001). It also explored the implications of these findings for experientialism and for possible relationships between experience and well-being.

“Experiential and Material Consumption: A Cultural Perspective on Materialism Experientailism”

Michelle F. Weinberger, University of Arizona

The concept of materialism has fascinated scholars for hundreds of years, as possessions and objects have grown to occupy a focal position in both the process of social stratification and in the ideological conventions of developed nations (Belk 1985). Over the past twenty-five years, consumer research literature has paid significant attention to understanding both what materialism is (Belk 1985; Richins and Dawson 1992) and how a focus on objects influences individuals' lives and society as a whole (c.f. Belk 1985; Sirgy 1998). The term *materialism* has become negatively valenced and meaning laden as anti-materialism scholars have blamed an object orientation for feeding the capitalist system (Smelser 1973) to promoting spiritual vacancy.

The literature frequently conjures up the work of Sartre (1956) and Fromm (1976), by describing a moral ranking where the concepts of *having*, *doing*, and *being* are an ordered hierarchy (Belk 1985; Sirgy 1998; Van Boven 2005). These works describe *having* as the parent of materialism with its focus on accumulation, while *doing* is thought of as connected to experiences and lifestyle and is therefore deemed morally superior. The *doing* component includes consumption experiences that are less durable and less object-centric, such as dining out, traveling, and participating in activities.

While research within consumer behavior has associated materialism with *having*, research within psychology has begun to investigate experientialism, how people's valuation of *doing* rather than *having* impacts happiness and subjective well-being. In this stream, an experiential purchase involves the intention of acquiring a life experience and is contrasted with material purchases where one's intention is to acquire a material object (Smith and Lutz 1996; Van Boven 2005; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). However, the experientialism research has not truly questioned the boundaries of

where materialism and experientialism crossover or the underlying reasons why people might value experiences and objects differently. Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) speculate that experiences make people happier because they are more open to positive reinterpretation, they are more central to one's identity, and experiences have greater social value. However, it is still unclear what about experiences makes people happier and if all experiences have the same effect.

This paper unpacks the centrality of experiences and objects in creating human happiness by conceptualizing them in terms of the economic and cultural capital that consumers gain through them. It provides a cultural explanation for the dichotomy and examines how different types of experiences and objects are mined by consumers.

Bourdieu's perspective on economic and cultural capital is employed to articulate the difference between material objects and experiences. Economic capital (expressed by converting money or assets into goods and services) can be exchanged monetarily in the market, but cultural capital (the knowledge, skills, and tastes that one tacitly develops) cannot be transferred directly (Bourdieu 1983). Certainly *what* people consume is important; but *how* they consume, the cultural capital they exhibit through their consumption, is what creates status groups and classification. Holt's (1997) research on cultural capital finds that those with lower cultural capital value and consume with a taste for necessity, preferring items that are more practical, functional, and durable. Often, even when purchasing more expensive items, they consume widely accepted symbols of abundance, such as expensive cars and boats. On the other hand, those with high cultural capital can be more anti-materialist since material deprivation has never been an issue for them. As such, they reject an orientation towards abundance and instead exhibit a taste for the exotic, unique, and authentic. Their orientation is towards gaining a different type of cultural capital through the consumption of objects and experiences. These differences in taste mean that people with different levels of cultural capital purchase in different ways, and even when they are consuming the same things, the meanings behind their consumption is different.

Interestingly, the taste of those with lower cultural capital leads toward expenditures considered by Sartre (1956) and Van Boven (2005) as being in the realm of *having* associated with materialism. By way of contrast, the taste of those with higher cultural capital leads toward expenditures considered to be in the realm of *doing* or *being*. Such expenditures are elevated in a moral sense, exempt from the critique of materialism. Using data from depth interviews and ethnographic participant observation, this perspective raises questions about the scholarly vantage point from which a difference between materialism and experientialism is currently conceived, and suggests new dimensions for evaluating the conceptual relationships among materialism, experientialism, social class, and well-being.

“Material, Experience, and Materiality”

Eric J. Arnould, University of Wyoming

Linda L. Price, University of Arizona

“Proper materialism...recognizes the irreducible relation of culture, which through production...creates persons in and through their materiality” (Miller 2005 p. 17). Implicit here is the idea that dividing consumption into goods-based consumption associated with materialism and a *having* orientation, and experience-based consumption associated with a *doing* orientation, may not be optimal for addressing issues of materialism and materiality in consumer research. In this presentation we consider the relationship between materialism, materiality and experience and introduce a

new conceptual model for understanding the interplay of materiality and experience.

Miller (1987) argues that society at a macro-level and consumers at an individual level are created in and through the material forms they project into the world through market mediated consumption activities. Everything from Klingon language and clothing, to river rafting adventures, to virtual financial instruments are forms humans create according to emergent strategies of action and knowledge and enacted through the dispositional order of the habitus (Miller 1987 p. 154). In turn, making, interacting with and consuming such forms produces consumers as “Klingons,” Xtreme tourists, or on-line stock traders (Kozinets 2001; Zwick and Dholakia 2006a, 2006b).

Elaborating on Douglas (1992) and Vargo and Lusch (2004), market resources are fundamentally service vehicles. A critical service that both material objects and experiences provide is communication about the particular social position individuals occupy relative to the (narrative) self and socially relevant others. Thus well-being is determined by the capacity for self-creation that is enacted through the appropriation of market provided resources including goods, services and experiences (Miller 2005, p. 20). Lifestyle experiences and consumption practices that produce “authentic” selves or “authoritative” traditions (Arnould and Price 2000) may be viewed as practices of materiality, the consumption fuelled reappropriation of differentiated selves and social worlds, and not as mere vulgar materialism (Miller 1987 pp. 191-193). Moreover, objects, experiences and materialism are in a fundamentally unstable relationship; object and experiences move in an out of the focus of “materialistic” practices (Kopytoff 1986).

We posit a novel approach to materialism and experience via a 3 dimensional matrix which includes a material (object)-immaterial (experience) dimension, an elaborated-unelaborated dimension and an explicit-tactic cultural model dimension. All are envisioned as continuums without sharp boundaries and any example could move onto any space in the matrix depending on consumer action (Kopytoff 1986). The first dimension posits a conventional continuum between consumer goods and consumption experiences that is then problematized by the introduction of the other two dimensions.

The second dimension refers to the degree of imaginative consideration consumers devote to phenomena (Joy and Sherry Jr 2003; MacInnis and Price 1987). Examples include a household furnace (material) and everyday practices of frugality (immaterial), e.g., how people get the last drop of ketchup out of the bottle. Both are instances in which people tend not to provide elaborated accounts of their attitudes, feelings and experiences. The distinction between *having* and *doing* may be most persuasive in this unelaborated space where indexical and iconic meanings are not layered onto objects and experiences (Grayson and Shulman 2000). The concept of an assortment of objects or experiences whose value for happiness is available at market prices and may be highly substitutable with objects and experiences of similar value is consistent with this envisioned space. Research using the materialism construct might be adapted to examine experiences located in this unelaborated portion of the continuum.

In the elaborated space of this continuum, material objects and experiences contribute to happiness, but consumers’ imaginative resources singularize and distance objects from commodity value. The heirloom table with knife marks put there by grandchildren is viewed as a source of happiness, but does not conform to conventional ideas of materialism (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004). The experience and immaterial value materialized in a wedding dress similarly varies from our ideas of materialism.

The third dimension refers to the nature of the cultural model in which the meaning of things and experiences are inscribed. We find informants who can tell us intricate, imaginative stories and can provide an explicit moral linked to a common set of cultural values (cultural model) associated with cherished possessions (material). River rafting (immaterial) guides provided both elaborate stories about nature, river magic and the like, and linked these stories to varied cultural models of nature and wilderness (Arnould, Price, and Tierney 1998). Many families practice elaborate Thanksgiving celebrations (immaterial) and often enact elaborate scripts and associated stories, but at the same time, rely on tacit cultural models in creating the annual feasts (e.g. we do and have the same thing as everybody else) (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

This matrix brings a number of issues into play. First, as suggested by the dashed arrow pyramid, consumer research has focused on some parts of the consumer-material interface, but not others. This raises questions about where and how current materialism constructs, measures, antecedents and consequences apply. Additional meaningful distinctions might center on the valuing of commodified versus singularized objects and experiences (Kopytoff 1986), on the extent to which the firm’s value proposition is modified in consumer ownership and use, or other measures and constructs that capture the imaginative resources consumers layer onto objects and experiences (Arnould, Price, and Mahlshe 2005). The third dimension, tacit-explicit cultural models, has received little attention in terms of impact on materialism, experience and materiality. Nevertheless, the reflexivity of consumers in considering their possessions and experiences as against other cultural models may be central for interpreting the antecedents and consequences of materialism. This analysis could help us reconcile the consumer with a vast array of consumer objects and a low materialism score with the consumer who has few objects of value but a high score on materialism (Ger and Belk 1996).

Second, this matrix suggests we do not have theoretically elaborate models in consumer research for what drives movement along these axes. We know that expertise, memory and pleasure may drive consumers along the axis from unelaborated to elaborated, but many research questions remain. We also know that cultural contact, oppositional experiences, life transitions, unfamiliar experiences, and collision between social units (e.g., families with difference traditions) may drive consumers along the tacit to explicit cultural model axis. Researchers have argued that material surfeit drives consumers along the material immaterial axis, but this does not point to which consumers, and in which contexts, nor the plethora of possible consumption experiences consumers may adopt.

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