Developing a New Measure of Materialism

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A new instrument was developed to measure three dimensions of materialism: happiness (the belief that material possessions bring happiness to life), success (the belief that possessions symbolize achievement and success, which in turn generate social recognition and status), and distinctiveness (the belief that possessions make people feel distinctive from others, which in turn promote self-importance). The validity and reliability analyses suggested that this new measure makes a contribution to consumer behavior literature related to materialism.

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Richins and Dawson (1992) defined materialism as “the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states.” What are these goals? We believe that people value material possessions for three reasons: (1) they may believe that these possessions bring happiness to their lives (Richins and Dawson, 1992; Belk, 1984); (2) these possessions symbolize achievement and success, which in turn generate social recognition and status (Richins and Dawson, 1992), and (3) possessions make people feel distinctive from others, which in turn promote self-importance. The existing measures of materialism do not capture these three dimensions comprehensively. Therefore, we set to develop a new measure of materialism to capture these three dimensions of materialism.

We developed 75 items based on the literature and our construct definitions. After reviewing the items, some of them were deleted because of heavy wording problems and the total number was reduced to 60: 20 items for each of the three dimensions (i.e. happiness, success, and distinctiveness). These items reflected four sub-dimensions: value, affect, belief, and behavior. The measure was administered to 324 students enrolled in a marketing class at a major east coast university.

Initial reliabilities were assessed for both individual subscales and the materialism scale as a whole and six items were deleted because of low corrected item-to-total correlations. For each of the dimensions, an Exploratory Factor Analysis was conducted employing principal axis factor extraction and oblique rotation. A four-factor solution was achieved for happiness, explaining 45% of the variance. Factor analysis results indicated three-factor structure for success, explaining 49% of the variance. The first factor included all “affect” items. The second factor was composed of all “behavior” items and one “value” item and the last factor included all “belief” items and one “value” item. Two factors were extracted for distinctiveness. The first factor included all “behavior” and “affect” items whereas the second factor included all “belief” and “value” items. This structure explained 57% of the variance. Because of high cross-loadings and low communalities, two items were deleted, leaving 52 items.

Convergent validity was assessed by employing Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS 7.0 (Arbuckle, 2007). Two nested models were tested for each dimension: a first-order model that did not include the four subdimensions (value, belief, affect, and behavior) and a second-order model that included the four subdimensions. For each dimension, the second-order model fitted the data better than the first-order model. After deleting some of the items that did not load highly on the expected subdimensions, the selected number of items for each dimension was as follows: 13 for happiness, 10 for success, and 12 for distinctiveness.

Two more CFAs were conducted to see whether these dimensions represented the underlying conceptual structure. The first-order model included materialism as the only latent variable, whereas the second-order model included both dimensions and materialism. By using 35 items, both models did not fit the data well. After some of the items with low loadings were deleted, the second-order model with 14 items provided a better fit with \( \chi^2 (74, N=324)=296.541 (p<.001), TLI = .905, CFI = .933, \) and \( RMSEA = .096. \)

The final selected items for happiness are “Acquiring valuable things is important for my happiness”; “Having luxury items is important to a happy life”; “To me, it is important to have expensive homes, cars, clothes, and other things. Having these expensive items makes me happy”; “Material possessions are important because they contribute a lot to my happiness.” There are four items for success: “I love to buy new products that affect status and prestige”; “I like to own expensive things than most people because this is a sign of success”; “I feel good when I buy expensive things. People think of me as a success”; “I would pay more for a product if people think of it as a sign of success.” The distinctiveness dimension includes six items: “My material possessions are important because they make me stand out from the crowd”; “I enjoy owning expensive things that differentiate me from other people”; “I enjoy buying unique and expensive things, because they make me feel different”; “I enjoy owning expensive things that make people think of me as unique and different”; “I usually buy expensive products and brands to make me feel unique and different”; “I usually buy expensive things that make me look distinctive.”

Final reliability values were high with Cronbach’s Alphas equaled to .882 for happiness, .881 for success, .921 for distinctiveness, and .946 for materialism.

The purified measure was further examined to check whether it performed as expected in a nomological network. Consistent with the literature, we hypothesized that both dimensions and the materialism as a whole would be negatively correlated with life satisfaction (Cole et al., 1991; Richins and Dawson, 1992). Life satisfaction was measured by a single item (Cantril, 1965). Bivariate correlations related to materialism supported the hypothesis with Pearson correlations equaled to -.168 for happiness, -.189 for success, -.238 for distinctiveness, and -.226 for overall materialism scale (\( p<.01 \)).

Both reliability and validity assessments suggest that this new measure of materialism makes a contribution to the consumer behavior literature related to materialism.

References