Exploring the Relationship Between Types of TV Programs, Advertising, and Materialism: a Cultivation Theory Perspective

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This research examines, by using a US national sample, the cultivation effect of certain types of TV programs (such as awards shows, films/movies, news, and sports programs) related to materialism. The mediating effect of paying attention to advertising on the relationship between materialistic TV viewing and materialism is also revealed.

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Extended Abstract

Because materialism has important negative consequences, it is important to understand what causes materialism. Television viewership is one of the most examined antecedents of materialism. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. 1977) suggests that television programs present a distorted reality and heavy exposure to that distorted reality makes people believe that the real world is similar to what they see on television. For instance, television programs tend to portray a more affluent (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997) and violent (Gerbner et al. 1980b) world full of with doctors and lawyers (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1994).

Many television programs also portray a luxurious lifestyle, making heavy viewers have higher estimates of ownership of luxury products by average people (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997). Moreover, those programs show how people in those programs are happy with their expensive clothes, large homes, luxury cars, and other expensive possessions. Because materialism is a belief that acquiring possessions brings happiness and signals status and success (Belk 1984; Richins 2004) and because TV programs portray people with many possessions as being happy and successful, heavy viewers of TV tend to be more materialistic.

According to the cultivation theory, TV viewing leads to distorted perceptions of reality regardless of the TV program types (Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch 2004). However, it is also suggested that the cultivation effect might be program-specific (Gunter 1994). For instance, crime-related reality programs might affect people’s perceptions of crime rates while family dramas might affect people’s perceptions of family relationships. Therefore, in order to examine the cultivation effect of TV viewing, it is important to consider the differences between TV program types (Weimann, Broisus, and Wober 1992).
This research proposes that different kinds of TV programs have different effects on materialism. As suggested by Holt (1995, pg. 13), “materialism can be conceptualized as the consumption style that results when consumers perceive that value inheres in consumption objects rather than in experiences or in other people.” Accordingly, it can be argued that TV programs that emphasize acquiring objects over sharing experiences and portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle will be more associated to materialism: (H1a) People who generally watch TV programs that portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle will be more materialistic than people who do not generally watch those TV programs; (H1b) People who generally watch TV programs that do not portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle will not differ from people who do not watch those TV programs in terms of materialism.

It can also be argued that different specials of a certain TV program type are more related to materialism than others. For instance, some sports specials, such as golf or tennis tournaments, might be associated with materialism because those sports are more related to affluent people, thereby implying a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle. However, we believe that a broader definition of a TV program type will be a better determinant of materialism because specials still reflect the nature of certain TV program types: (H2a) People who watch TV specials related to genres that portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle will be more materialistic than people who do not watch those TV specials; (H2b) People who watch TV specials related to genres that do not portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle will not differ from people who do not watch those TV specials in terms of materialism.

It is also possible that people who watch certain types of programs might report higher levels of materialism because of the commercials that air in those programs. TV commercials might make people believe that possession of products promoted in advertisements is important to obtain desired qualities, such as happiness, beauty, uniqueness, and success (Pollay 1986). Impact of advertising on materialism is also expected to be stronger when people pay more attention to commercials. Accordingly, paying more attention to commercials aired in favorite TV programs might mediate the relationship between TV viewing and materialism. However, this mediation effect will hold only for the TV programs that portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle (H3a). Because one of the conditions of mediation (i.e., a significant relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable; Baron and Kenny 1986) is not satisfied for TV programs that do not portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle, there will be no relationship to be mediated by paying attention to commercials (H3b).

To test the proposed hypotheses, data from a national survey conducted by Universal McCann-Ericson in 2005 were used. The survey was completed by 5,508 adults aged 18 and over in 2005.

The results of independent samples t-tests showed that people who generally watch TV programs that portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle (i.e., awards shows, celebrity interviews, films/movies, financial/stock market analysis, and reality programs) are more materialistic compared to people who do not generally watch those TV programs. In contrast, there is no significant difference between the materialism level of people who generally watch TV programs that do not portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle (i.e., biographies, documentary/nature, do-it-yourself shows, history, news, and sports) and the materialism level of people who do not generally watch those TV programs. Both H1a and H1b were confirmed.

Two different TV specials were used to test for H2a and H2b: one portraying a luxurious lifestyle (i.e., awards specials), and one not portraying a luxurious lifestyle (i.e., sports specials). The results demonstrated that people who watch awards specials on TV are more likely to be materialistic than people who did not watch awards specials, regardless of the type of the awards special, supporting H2a. In contrast to what was proposed in H2b, however, significant differences were found for two sports specials. People who watched March Madness basketball and people who watched the US Open Tennis Tournament on TV are more materialistic compared to people who did not watch those specials. Therefore, H2b was partially supported.

To test the mediating effect of paying attention to commercials (“attention”), blocked multiple regression analyses were conducted for each of the independent variables: Watching TV programs that portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle (i.e., materialistic TV viewing), and watching TV programs that do not portray a luxurious, materialistic lifestyle (i.e., nonmaterialistic TV viewing). In each of the analyses, TV viewing was entered in the first step and attention was entered in the second step. The results showed that paying attention to commercials in favorite TV programs partially mediates the relationship between materialistic TV viewing and materialism. H3a and H3b were confirmed.

This study, to our knowledge, is the first attempt to reveal the TV program types that are more related to materialism. However, our findings do not contradict with the cultivation theory. Instead, they emphasize that not all TV programs present the same message and heavy viewing of different TV programs or TV specials might lead to different distorted realities. In fact, focusing on program types (as opposed to total amount of time spent in TV viewing) might increase the effectiveness and validity of the cultivation theory by providing more concrete results.

References


**Exploring the Antecedents and Consequences of Physical Appearance Concern**

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**Extended Abstract**

In today’s Westernized and competitive environment, both women and men experience increasing pressures of physical appearance. For most people, the discrepancy between ideal body image and actual body image enlarges as the media continually endorses “thinner” and “sexier” bodies. For instance, previous studies demonstrated that heavy TV viewers are more likely to perceive unrealistic thin female bodies as a standard (Hendriks 2002) and have biased perceptions of body images (Eisen and Möller 2006).

The idealized images conveyed by media vehicles also create a sense of displeasure in consumers with their current personal appearance (Hirschman and Thompson 1997), which in turn affects their consumption behaviors. For instance, as people become more concerned with their physical appearances, they become more interested in clothes and apparel (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994), their likelihood of purchasing apparel online decreases (Rosa, Garbarino, and Malter 2006), their attitudes toward cosmetic surgery becomes more positive (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994), their usage of cosmetics increases (Netemeyer, Burton, and Lichtenstein 1995), and their usage of tanning salons increases (Burton, Netemeyer, and Lichtenstein 1994).

Physical appearance concern can also affect health-related behaviors. For instance, excessive physical appearance concern might lead to excessive exercise (Tiggemann and Lynch 2001) or unhealthy eating behaviors (Armstrong and Mallory 1992). However, it can also be argued that some types of healthful behaviors are practiced because people are concerned with their appearance as much as their health (Hayes and Ross 1987). Moreover, people who are highly concerned with their concern might want to be look healthy.

In this study, we explore the relationship between media consumption, physical appearance concern, cloth/apparel consumption, and health-related behaviors. It is hypothesized that people who read certain magazines (e.g. InStyle, People, and Vogue) and watch particular types of TV programs (e.g., awards shows, celebrity interviews, and news magazine shows) will be more likely to be concerned with their physical appearance (H1). High physical appearance concern, on the other hand, will be associated with both negative outcomes (related to cloth/apparel consumption—H2: amount of money spent on clothes, apparel, and luxury items; and frequency of cloth/apparel shopping) and positive outcomes (health-related behaviors—H3: healthy food consumption; consumption of foods that help weight-management; and frequency of exercising).

To test the proposed hypotheses, data from a national survey conducted by Universal McCann-Ericson in 2005 were used. The survey, called *Media in Mind*, is conducted each year and focuses on lifestyles, media consumption, and other consumption related attitudes and opinions. Of 4,990 adults who completed the survey, 40% were male, 50% were older than 50-years-old, 83.5% were White, and 65% were married. Measures related to media consumption (TV programs that portray thin and sexy body images, and favorite magazines that are related to fashion and celebrities), physical appearance concern, amount of money spent on clothes/apparels and luxury items, frequency of cloth/apparel shopping, and consumption of healthy food, consumption of food that help weight-management, and frequency of exercising were used to test proposed hypotheses. Also, because there is a significant difference between men (Mean=3.36) and women (Mean=3.65; t=12.830, p<.001) in terms of physical appearance concern, gender was treated as a control variable in all analyses.

To test the impact of media consumption on physical appearance concern, a blocked multiple regression analysis was conducted by entering gender in the first step and entering media consumption variables in the second step. The inclusion of media consumption variables in the regression model resulted in a significant F change (F_{increment}=190.503; df=2, 4983; p<.001; ΔR^2=.07). The predictors explained 10% of the variance in physical appearance concern in the second step (F=186.044; df=3,4983; M_{Res}=.561; p<.001; R^2=.101; adjusted R^2=.100). Both media consumption variables have positive and significant effects on physical appearance concern, meaning that as people watched more TV programs that portray thin and sexy bodies (β=.138, t=9.480, p<.001) and as people read more fashion-related magazines (β=.138, t=9.480, p<.001), they become more concerned with their physical appearances. Therefore, H1 was confirmed.