The Instrumental and Detrimental Role of Materialism in the Development of Networks

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009172/volumes/v39/NA-39

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Materialism is the dispositional view towards consumption of objects and possessions as an important part of achieving higher goals, such as self-definition and self-enhancement (Chaplin and John 2007). For example, Richins and Dawson (1992, p. 304) state that “it is the pursuit of happiness through acquisition rather than through other means (such as personal relationships, experiences, or achievements) that distinguishes materialism.” In other words, materialism is the importance that people place on consumption relative to other values, such as relationships, as a means by which to achieve certain goals (Richins and Dawson 1992).

Research has shown that there are positive and negative consequences of materialism (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Chaplin and John 2007; Dittmar, Long, and Bond 2007; Fitzmaurice 2008; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Overall, research in marketing, for the most part, has depicted materialism as a destructive trait; Hirschman (1991) refers to materialism as one of the “dark sides” of consumer behavior. For example, materialism has been associated with negative personal outcomes, such as social ineptitude (Richins 1987) and narcissistic behavior (Cohen and Cohen 1996), which can hinder an individual’s motivation and ability to effectively form social relationships and networks. If materialism is, in fact, negative and destructive, why are we witnessing the rising levels of materialism among consumers (Goldberg et al. 2003; Chaplin and John 2010)?

Perhaps there is a brighter side to materialism. Past researchers have shown that materialistic behavior is associated with positive personal outcomes, such as attaining a higher standard living (Richins and Rudmin 1994) and attaining desirable characteristics (e.g., cultured, sophisticated) (Christopher and Schlenker 2004). This debate about the nature of materialism leads to the main research question: Is materialism instrumental or detrimental to an individual’s social network development?

Findings from a longitudinal field study from an emerging social network (Study 1) reveal that materialism is instrumental to an individual’s social network development (i.e., more materialistic people made more social connections over time). However, a caveat is that this benefit is perceptual, not actual. That is, there appears to be a discrepancy between consumers’ perceptual social network versus their actual social network, a phenomenon coined here as the perceptual network fallacy. Materialistic individuals overestimated the number of friends they had in their social network in two separate time-periods (early and later stages of network development). This finding is important to consumers because materialistic individuals are accustomed to acquiring material goods in response to their belief that possessions will enhance their social standing (e.g., they will become more popular/central in a network). However, the findings of this research suggest that this belief is merely perceptual.

Moreover, in support of this theory, the findings from Study 2 reveal that conversing about product possessions is what primes materialistic individuals to overestimate their friendship desirability. While previous research has noted the negative impact of discussing possessions with others (Van Boven et al. 2010), the current research goes one step further to show that this effect is even stronger for materialistic individuals. In support, the data show that materialistic individuals were rated less desirable by others when they were first given the opportunity to converse about product possessions. Interestingly, the data also show that materialistic individuals rated themselves higher on friendship desirability. Thus, materialistic individuals perceive that conversing about product possessions enhances their self-value, although this was clearly not the case. Materialistic individuals continue to purchase and talk about products that elevate their social image because they mistakenly perceive that doing so will benefit them socially (Bagwell and Bernheim 1996). Unfortunately, they are oblivious to the detrimental effects, a condition that explains why the magnitude of perceptual network fallacy grows over time. As networks mature, materialistic individuals gain more opportunities to talk about their product possessions with others. As a result, such conversations continue to contribute to the growing gap between these individuals’ out-degree and in-degree ties over time, thus magnifying their erroneous perception of their position within the network.

In conclusion, this research provides another lesson to consumers regarding the dangers of materialistic consumption. Growing levels of materialism among teenagers have raised concerns among parents and educators alike (Chaplin and John 2010; Goldberg et al. 2003). Adolescents purchase certain objects (e.g., cell phones, MP3 players, brand-name clothing) because they perceive that material possessions will help them gain a desirable status (e.g., popularity) in their social network. However, it must be recognized that these are erroneous perceptions. Indeed, materialistic individuals do not gain more friends over time. They only believe that they will. Therefore, consumers could be warned that their efforts to use material consumption in order to gain favorable network positions may not be successful.

REFERENCES


