MATERIALISM THROUGH A MAGNIFYING GLASS: A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THREE FACETS OF MATERIALISM

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ABSTRACT

Materialism, the importance that people attach to possessions that become central to their lives (Richins and Dawson 1992), has recently received renewed attention in the media and in the public discourse in the wake of the global economic crisis. Materialism is viewed as a system of personal values with possessions and acquisitions as the main personal goal that dictate one's way of life (Richins and Dawson 1992). For materialists, possessions and their acquisition are *central*, providing meanings and structure to their lives, are essential to their satisfaction with life, well-being and *happiness*, define *success*, and project desired images of themselves. Materialism is perceived as the "dark side" of consumer behavior due to the motives related to its pursue as well as the behavioral and cognitive consequences that are an outgrowth of this quest. For example, research found materialism was positively related to a lack of happiness, depression, anxiety, negative emotions, and low self esteem (e.g., Chang and Arking 2002; Christopher and Schlenker 2004; Kasser 2002; Kasser and Ahuvia 2002; Saunders and Munro 2000; Solberg et al. 2004). In addition, materialism was found to be related to a number of consequences such as a lack of overall life satisfaction (e.g., Ahuvia and Wong 2002; Belk, 1985; Mick 1996; Richins and Dawson 1992), exploitation of natural resources (Banerjee and McKeage 1994; Saunders 2007), time spent shopping (Fitzmaurice and Comegys 2006). Previous studies mainly examined these relationships by viewing materialism as an overall construct. Using Richins and Dawson's (1992) conceptualization of materialism, this study places happiness, centrality, and success—facets of materialism—as individual-level characteristics in the center of a model with several antecedents (i.e. depression, anxiety, self-esteem, and negative affect) and consequences (i.e., time spent shopping, environmentalism, innovativeness, and life satisfaction). This closer look into materialism facets, its antecedents and consequences provides a fine-grained model for understanding materialism. Thus, some domains are more associated with specific drivers and consequences, but not others.

Survey data were obtained from a convenience sample of 568 adults from a large Southeastern metropolitan area in the U.S. All constructs were measured using previously validated five-point Likert scales. Scales' reliability measurement exceeded .70. The survey also included demographic questions.

The structural model was tested with a path analysis model (LISREL et al. 1993). Overall fit indices showed a good fit between the data and the model ($\chi2$ =166.21, df=29, Normed $\chi2$= 5.73; GFI=.96; CFI=.96; NFI=.95; TFI=.96; RMR=.03). Results indicate that the relationship between the antecedents and consequences and the three materialism facets is complex. Specific facets had more weight than others, depending on the nature of needs individuals sought to fulfill through possessions, or their resulted behaviors and cognitions. For example, Negative affect was associated with the happiness facet only (β=.13), and low self esteem was negatively related with success (β=-.15) and centrality (-.08). Happiness showed to be negatively related to overall life satisfaction (β=-.44), while centrality and success showed to be positively related to this consequence (β=.21; β=.11 respectively). Finally, the centrality facet was positively related to innovativeness (β=.29), while happiness was negatively related to this consequence (β=-.31). Finally, age was negatively associated with all materialism facets: Success (β=-.23), centrality (β=-.29), and happiness (β=-.25), while income was positively associated with success (β=.07), and centrality (β=.14). Education was found to be negatively associated with happiness only (β=-.08).

While the results are generally in line with the notion of materialism as a coping mechanism for dealing with unsatisfied needs (Kasser 2002), looking at materialism as an overall construct can potentially obscure important information inherent within each of its domain. Individuals vary with regard to the domain that is most pronounced in their materialistic value system depending on the need they seek to satisfy through materialism or the nature of consequence predicted by materialism. Implications for marketers related to the design of communication messages that facilitate responsible consumption rather than create unrealistic associations between consumption and happiness or self-worth.

References available upon request