

MATERIALISM: A GENERAL HIERARCHICAL MODEL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Materialism as used in common language often is accompanied by negative connotations. Some people might view being materialistic as akin to being greedy or overtly possessive. It is a construct that has received considerable attention in various fields. It is an acknowledged fact that materialism has come to denote an individual's need or desire for material objects (Richins and Dawson 1992). Richins and Dawson (1992) have even argued that at higher levels of materialism, an individual might be putting themselves at a certain level of risk. Belk (1984) suggests that for highly materialistic people, their possessions often determine extreme levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. There are numerous other examples in extant literature where materialism has been viewed in a negative light.

On the other hand, there is a separate stream of literature that views materialism in a more positive sense. For example, Mowen (2000) views materialism as arriving from our basic human need for material resources. This is definitely a much more positive view, as it suggests that materialism, apart from being a basic need, might not be something that can be easily controlled, much like our need for food and shelter. There is also the argument that materialism helps one set and achieve goals (Micken and Roberts 1999), however this is dismissed by Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) who argue that materialism is detrimental to an individual's well being.

Keeping these viewpoints in mind, I, however, argue that this construct might have deeper underpinnings that espouse more positive attributes. But then the question arises, is Materialism a value. Many have argued within the realm of consumer research and consumer behavior that Materialism is indeed a value. Richins and Dawson (1992) view the construct as being a value, on the other hand Belk (1984, 1988) and Mowen (2000) essentially view materialism as being a trait. There are other examples in the literature where the definition of materialism 'flip-flops' as either a trait or value. In order to tackle this issue we need to first understand what is a trait and what is a value. This would have important implications as to how materialism is measured in consumer behavior settings.

An important goal of the current study is to examine in detail how extant research has defined materialism – in terms of trait or value. This also gives us insight to the various methods that have been employed to measure materialism. For example, Belk (1985), Mowen (2000) and Richins and Dawson (1992) have all developed scales to measure materialism.

The second goal of the study is to apply materialism to the General Hierarchical Model (GHM) (Mowen and Voss 2008). This model is profound in that it would not only establish a clear definition and provide a good scale development tool, but would help establish the boundaries of the construct's domain. Mowen and Voss (2008) argue that the GHM allows one to test a construct within a nomological net, define and test dimensionality of the construct, and allow for us to place the construct in a hierarchical system. It has to be noted that the GHM is an extension of the 3M Model (Mowen 2000) and provides clear definitions of the hierarchical levels.

I contend that by applying materialism within the GHM, I should be able to eliminate many of the fundamental questions that still surround the construct – is it positive or negative, is it a value or a trait etc. This would undoubtedly have important implications to consumer behavior research and the normative recommendations that we make to managers. A study is proposed.

References available upon request.