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## Conceptualizing materialism: A critical review

### Introduction

The main point stressed by Kline, et al (1990) is straight forward, that is advertising is not just business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the stock shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and preferences back through the networks of social interactions. This venture is unified by the discourse through and about objects, which bonds together images of persons, products and well-being.

Thus the influence on social values and one's perception on things and life is tremendous. People, now as consumers inevitably define oneself through the products and services advertised. The advertising discourse especially national advertising has communicated socially throughout the country and reached the consumer across the board.

Shudson (1993) acknowledged the role of advertising in shaping values and patterns of life. He added that America (the hub of world advertising activity) has long been a nation of salesman and then "shoeshine and a smile" that were Willy Loman's stock-in-trade are now the tools of politicians and religious evangelists and hospital administrators as much as of advertising agents and public relation directors. The promotion culture (the advertising culture<sup>1</sup>) has waded its way into what we read, what we care about, the ways we raise our children, our ideas of right and wrong conduct, our attribution. Of

significance to "image" in both the public and private life.

Advertising is prevalent, influential and for sure, link to the development of materialism value. The link is usually associated with the encouragement of materialism value.

Then, does advertising really create materialism or merely encourage materialist, whilst materialism is actually there ingrained in our values and attitudes. There are other socio-cultural forces which are in play and more relevant to its emergence and its strong footing in our value system.

In this instance, it is useful to ponder seriously Mary Gardiner (1969) argument then, that advertising, especially Television advertising is a contributing force. Is it still applicable today?

"The conscious appeal in the television commercial ... is essentially materialistic. Central to the message of the television commercial is the premise that it is the acquisition of things which will gratify our basic and inner needs and aspirations. It is the message of the commercial that all of the major problems confronting and individual can be instantly eliminated by the application of some external force – the use of a product. Externally derived solutions are thus made the prescription of life's difficulties. Television gives no recognition to the individual's essential responsibility for at least a part of his condition or to the importance to the individual of proving his own capacity to deal with life's problems. In the world of the television commercial all of life's problems and difficulties, all of our individual yearnings hopes – and fears – can yield instantly to a material solution and one which can work instantly without any effort, skill or trouble on our part."

This kind of content which is generally representing advertising is repetitively exposed and skillfully managed (Leckenby and Wedding, 1982, Aaker et al, 1992, Nylén, 1993) to the consumer. And the exposure is continuous and ongoing, in accordance to the circular model of production-consumption economy. Consequently, over time a new form of culture is formed. A new value set in, none other than the materialism value.

In mid 80's and throughout 90's, more and more researchers showed interest to understand what constitute materialism. A study by Belk propelled others to pool resources to conceptualize materialism objectively. Even

though the conceptualization of materialism had started earlier, but greater and serious attention were given after Belk conceptualization. To date, materialism scale developed by Belk and Richins and Dawson are widely used.

In light of the existence of scientifically accepted scale, more research are being conducted relating materialism to other scales. Among others are:

Materialism and consumer ethics (Muncy and Eastman, 1998)

Identity and material culture across borders (Ger,1998)

Materialism and debts: a study of current attitudes and behavior (Watson, 1998)

Gender, materialism and tatto consumption (Watson, 1998)

Materialistic values and susceptibility to influence in children (Achenreiner, 1997)

Conspicuous consumption, materialism and self (Wong, 1997)

Materialism as a coping mechanism. An inquiry into family disruption (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 1997)

The role of possessions for self definition (Sayre and Horne, 1996)

The role of possessions in creating, maintaining and preserving one's identity. Variation over the life course (Gentry at al, 1995)

These few research articles demonstrated to us the wide spectrum of interest as reflected by the variables studied in relation to materialism scale. It confirms the relevancy of materialism to understand human behavior. It provides new information and insight to various aspects of behavior that are directly or indirectly related to materialism.

Then, what's next?

Now, let us examine the existing selected materialism scale.

## Conceptualization of materialism

### Materialistic attitudes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978)

#### *The concept*

It is defined as orientations emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress. This materialistic attitudes is composed of 6 Likert-type items scored on a 5-point disagree-agree basis. The items are then summed to represent the overall materialistic attitudes index.

#### *The items*

It is really true that money can buy happiness  
My dream in life is to be able to own expensive things  
People judge others by the things they own.  
I buy some things that I secretly hope will impress other people.  
Money is the most important thing to consider in choosing a job.  
I think others judge me as a person by the kinds of products and brands use.

#### *The validity level*

It was reported that the coefficient alpha reliability of the scale to be 0.6. In terms of relationship, it was reported that it related significantly to measures of social utility in regression analysis, as well as peer communication.

### Materialism-Post materialism scale (Inglehart, 1981)

#### *The concept*

It defines materialism by delineating materialism from post materialism. Materialism gives top priority to physical sustenance and safety, while post materialism emphasizes belonging, self-expression and the quality of life. This delineation or separation is based on a value shift from materialism to post materialism form World war 11 to the early eighties. This value shift has conceptual roots in two key hypothesis, namely:

Scarcity hypothesis: an individual's priorities reflect the socioeconomic environment, one places the greatest subjective

value on those things that are in relatively short supply.

Socialization hypothesis: The relationship between socioeconomic environment and value priorities is not one of immediate adjustment – a substantial time lag is involved, for, to a large extent, ones basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's pre adult world.

The scale composed 12 items, 6 of them are designed to represent materialism and the remaining 6 to represent the post materialism. Respondents are asked what they consider personally the most important goals among the 12 items and then are classified as exclusively materialist, exclusively post materialist, or a "mixed" type, that is the combination of the two. Scores are then reported as percentage of respondents falling into each category across a number of cross-classification variables.

*The items* ( the first 6 representing materialism and the remaining 6 representing the post-materialism)

Maintain order in the nation.  
Fight rising prices  
Maintain a high rate of economic growth  
Maintain a stable economy  
Fight against crime  
Make sure the country has strong defense forces  
Give people more say in the decisions of the government  
Protect freedom of speech  
Give people more say in how things are decided at work and in their community  
Try to make our cities and countryside more beautiful.  
Move toward a friendlier, less impersonal society  
Move toward a society where ideas count more than money

*The validity level.*

The materialism-post materialism scale showed evidence of discriminant validity. At the first stage of analysis, principal components analysis was used and revealed two distinct dimension as the 6 items to represent materialism loaded on one factor ant the other 6 items to measure post materialism loaded on another factor. At the second stage of analysis these

cross classification variables, those respondents who gave top priority to one materialist goal also gave top priority to other materialist items, and likewise, those respondent who gave top priority to one post materialist goal also gave top priority to other post materialist items.

### **Materialism (Belk, 1984,1985)**

#### *The concept*

Materialism here is defined as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest level of materialism, such possessions represent a central place in a person's life and is believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This trait based definition of materialism indentifies three subtraits of materialism, namely,

Possessiveness, which is defined as the inclination and tendency to retrain control or ownership of one's possessions

Nongenerosity, which is defined as an unwillingness to give possessions or share possessions with others.

This materialism scale, also known as Belk,s materialism scale is composed of 24 statements designed to measure the threee subtraits . The items are scsdored on 5-point Likert scales from agree to disagree. Items are summed within each subtrait to form an overall score for each subtrait, and all 24 item can also be summed up to form an overall index of materialism. The scales consist of 9 items for possessiveness, 7 items for nongenerosity, and 8 items for envy.

#### *The items*

##### Possessiveness

Renting or leasing a car is more appealing to me than owning one

I tend to hang on to things I should probably throw out

I get very upset if something is stolen from me, even if it has little monetary value

I don't get particularly upset when I lose things

I am less likely than most people to lock things up

I would rather buy something I need than borrow it from

someone else  
I worry about people taking my possessions  
When I travel, I like to take a lot of photographs  
I never discard old pictures or snapshots.

Nongenerosity  
I enjoy having guest stay in my home  
I enjoy sharing what I have  
I don't like to lend things, even to good friends.  
It makes sense to buy a lawnmower with a neighbor and share it  
I don't mind giving rides to those who didn't have a car  
I don't like to have anyone in my home when I am not there  
I enjoy donating things to charity

Envy  
I am bothered when I see people who buy anything they want  
I don't know anyone whose spouse or steady date I would like to have as my own  
When friends do better than me in competition, it usually makes me happy for them  
People who are very wealthy often feel they are too good to talk to average people  
There are certain people I would like to trade places with  
When friends have things I can not afford it bothers me  
I don't seem to get what is coming to me  
When Hollywood stars or prominent politicians have things stolen, I really feel sorry for them.

*The validity level*

A number of reliability and validity tests were documented for this scales. For the reliability test, coefficient alpha estimates for the possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy subscales were 0.68, 0.72 and 0.80 respectively. The overall summed scale had an alpha of 0.73. For a larger sample (n=338), these estimates were 0.57, 0., 0.58 and 0.64 respectively. The summed items registered 0.66. In validation, the measures demonstrated adequate convergent and discriminant validity. Also, all three materialism measures were found to be negatively correlated with measures of happiness and satisfaction in life.

Possession satisfaction index (Scott and Lundstrom 1990)

*The concept*

The idea of possession satisfaction is derived from the constructs of materialism and attitude toward money. It is believed that possession satisfaction is composed of aspects of these two concepts.

This scale is composed of 20 Likert-type statements scored on 5-point strongly disagree – strongly agree formats. The scale is further composed of five factors assessing various aspects of possession satisfaction. Scores on the factors are derived by summing individual item scores within factors. And overall scale score can be obtained by summing across all 20 items.

*The items*

Money makes life a lot easier  
I would rather own property than rent  
People with a lot of charge cards are important  
Wealthy people are respected  
Business has commercialized many meaningful holidays, such as Christmas.  
Happiness is more important than money  
When I shop, I usually make a purchase  
Money isn't every thing  
The more I have the better I feel  
Given a choose between a well known brand and a store brand, I would take the store brand  
It isn't important to own a nice car  
It is very important to me how people perceive me  
I would take a job for less money if it were more self satisfying  
People enjoy showing others their new possession  
Being a success means making a lot of money  
It is really true that money can buy happiness  
Most of the people I look up to are wealthy  
The more I have, the more I want  
In general, wealthier people are happier than poor people.

Item 1 through 4 comprise the what possessions can do factor, items 5 through 10 comprise the what possessions can not do factor; items 11 through 14 comprise the public image factor; item 15 through 18 comprise the success equal



possessions factor; and items 19 and 20 make up the more is better factor.

*The validity level*

The initial factor analysis and a multi-trait matrix analysis, it was found that the 9 items relating to money and the 11 items relating to material possessions were not distinct. Thus all 20 items were combined to form one overall scale. A second factor analysis on the 20 items revealed 5 factors: namely what possession can do; what possessions cannot do; public image; success equals possessions, and lastly, more is better. Overall coefficient alpha for the scale was 0.80 (alphas for the five factors were not reported). No other estimates of validity were offered.

**Richins' materialism measure (Richins 1987)**

*The concept*

It focuses in terms of its role in consumer culture. Materialism, then is defined as the idea that goods are a means to happiness by possession and interaction with goods. This scale is a 6-item, 2-factor measure. The items are scored on a 7-point Likert format from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Item scores are summed within factors to form indices for each factor.

*The items*

It is important to me to have really nice things  
 I would like to be rich enough to buy anything I want  
 I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things  
 It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I want.  
 People place too much emphasis on material things  
 It really true that money can buy happiness

(item 1 through 4 comprise the personal materialism factor, and items 5 and 6 represent the general materialism factor)

*The validity level*

By using factor analysis, it revealed that the first four items tapped a personal materialism factor. It registered coefficient alpha of 0.73. And the remaining two items tapped a general

materialism factor, that is registering coefficient alpha of 0.61. These two materialism factors also were found to be correlated with measures of perceived realism of TV ads, media exposure, and life satisfaction. The resulting correlations show modest support for the validity of the measure.

Material values (the improved version of Richins' materialism measure) (Richins and Dawson 1992)

*The concept*

Materialism is viewed as a consumer value. It involves beliefs and attitudes so centrally held that they guide the conduct of one's life. The scale identifies three themes which reflect the values consumers place in material goods and the roles these goods play in their lives, namely;

Possession as defining 'success' - the extent to which one uses possessions as indicator of success and achievement in life, both in judging themselves and others.

Acquisitions "centrality" - the extent to which one places possession acquisition at the center of one's life, that is lends meaning to life and guides daily endeavors.

Acquisitions as the pursuit of "happiness" - the belief that possessions are essential to satisfaction and well-being in life.

This material values scale consists of 18 items encompassing the three factors, that is 6 items for "success", 7 items for "centrality" and 5 items for "happiness". The items are scored on a 5-point Likert format from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Item scores are summed within dimensions to form indices for each dimension, and can be summed overall to form an overall materialism score.

*The items*

Success

I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes  
Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions

I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects  
people own as a sign of success.  
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life  
I like to own things that impress people  
I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people  
own

*Centrality*

I usually buy only the things I need  
I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are  
concerned.  
The things I own aren't all that important to me  
I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical  
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure  
I like a lot of luxury in my life  
I put less emphasis on material things than most people I  
know

*Happiness*

I have all the things I really need to enjoy life  
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have  
I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things  
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things  
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy  
all the things I'd like

*The validity level*

Through factor analysis and reliability test, three factors  
predominantly emerged. Over the last three samples,  
coefficient alpha estimate for the factor ranged from 0.71 to  
0.75 for centrality, 0.74 to 0.78 for the success factor, and 0.73  
to 0.83 for the happiness factor. Alpha for the overall 18-item  
scale ranged between 0.80 to 0.88. Test-retest reliability over  
a 3 week interval (n=58) was 0.82, 0.86, 0.86, 0.82 and 0.87 for  
the centrality, happiness, success and overall scales,  
respectively. For validation, the materialism factors were also  
correlated with measures of life satisfaction, values, self  
esteem, self-centeredness, and voluntary simplicity in some or  
all of the samples to examine the validity of the scales. Across  
samples, the patterns of correlations showed that the  
materialism factors exhibited construct validity. For example,  
the correlation between the overall scale and an item assessing

voluntary simplicity was 0.21; the correlation between the overall scale and Belk's nongenerosity scale was 0.25, and the correlation between the scale and a measure of self-esteem was 0.12.

To recap the conceptualization of materialism, each of them provides different views in terms of what constitute materialism. Interestingly, it is believed that materialism is value oriented. Thus, as a result, it is beneficial to developed our own scale as opposed to using the scale developed by other culture. But with the coming of globalization, and the current elemen of "universalism" a scale developed is adequate due to the scientific procedure adhered to.

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