

Materialism: Construct Conceptualisation And Operationalisation

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GENESIS

The concept of materialism as an inherent constituent of consumer lifestyle is a profoundly dialectical construct. The issue has been of interest to a range of *homo-sapiens*-from the dilettante who have dabbled in its aura to the prophets whose homilies have castigated it as a source of retrogression towards spiritual bankruptcy. Materialism is indeed an eclectic notion which finds a mention in an entire gamut of disciplines. The bouquets and brickbats notwithstanding, the issue is a livewire and deserves profound investigation. In this era of glasnost and perestroika in India, and given the chronologically conspicuous conundrum that materialism has been in Indian culture, this was an opportune moment to explore the conceptualization and operationalisation of the construct materialism.

The appropriateness of time to explore the ostensible undercurrents of materialism may be justified on two counts. On the one hand, India is being described as a “rising elephant” owing to its growing economic clout post-liberalization (according to a World Bank survey, in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), India ranks fourth in the world next only to USA, China and Japan). While on the other hand, the Indian consumers are reciprocating an enhanced confidence towards consumption (AC Nielsen, 2006), leading to a strong one million consumers for luxury goods, which is greater than even the adult population of several countries (The Knowledge Company, 2006). It is supplemented by the fact that India is home to the youngest population in the world, where 50% of the population is under the age of 25, and 85% of the population is below the age of 50. The median age of the population is a mere 24 years while there are over 100 million Indians in the 17-21 year age bracket (CII & Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2005). If consumers are exhibiting an inclination towards materialistic tendencies and the economic ambience is supporting it, can marketers afford to remain far behind in understanding the tenets of materialism? This research paper attempts to be an exhaustive source of information on myriad vistas of the construct materialism which influences consumer's behaviour towards products and services.

MATERIALISM IN INDIAN CULTURE

The text book definition of materialism states that, “it is a personalitylike trait which distinguishes between individuals who regard possessions as essential to their identities and their lives and those for whom possessions are secondary” (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2005, p. 157-158). In Indian culture, materialism has been a widely debated issue, with both proposing and opposing schools of thought. However, the oral tradition of passing on knowledge from one generation to another has resulted in poor documentary evidence. Chatterjee and Datta (1984) explained that, “though materialism in some form or other has always been present in India, and occasional references are found in the *Vedas*, the Buddhist literature, the epics as well as in the later philosophical works, we do not find any systematic work on materialism, nor any organized school of followers as the other philosophical schools possess. But almost every work of the other schools states, for refutation, the materialistic views. Our knowledge of Indian materialism is chiefly based on these.”

The significance of materialism in Indian culture cannot be fully imbibed without referring to the *Bhagvad Gita* which is highly revered and adhered to within the Indian society. In course of his conversation with the mighty warrior Arjuna, Lord Krishna explains that, “by developing purity of intention, passions directed towards mundane objects die, producing tranquility of mind, which in turn gives rise to the inward silence, in which the soul begins to establish contact with the Eternal from which it is surrendered, and experience the presence of the Indwelling God” (Radhakrishnan, 2006). The emphasis is on emancipation and assimilation with the Almighty through renunciation. Any form of predilection towards mundane objects is thought of as an obstacle in the path leading to the God. The reason for this absolute disdain towards fulfillment of desire has been conveyed in the following lines, “whatever

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pleasures are born of the contacts (with material objects) are only sources of sorrow, they have a beginning and an end, O son of Kunti (Arjuna), no wise man delights in them” (Radhakrishnan, 2006). Thus, the *Bhagvad Gita* advocates detachment from desires as proof of wisdom.

However, the Indian culture is not without its share of critiques of this meta-physical perspective of materialism (see <http://www.wikipedia.org / materialism>). In ancient Indian philosophy, materialism developed around 600 BC with the works of Ajita Kesakambali, Payasi and the proponents of *Charvaka* School of philosophy. The *Charvaka* system of Indian philosophy, also known as *Lokayata*, was very brazen in its advocacy of materialism. An important contributor to the *Charvaka* philosophy was Brihaspati who enunciated the principle

“Yavvajivet sukham jivet; Rinam kritvaa ghritam pibet;
Bhasmibhutasya Dehasya; Punaraagamanam kutah.”

(See <http://www.wikipedia.org / Charvaka>). This may be translated as:

As long as you live, live happily; Take a loan and drink *ghee*;
After a body is reduced to ashes; Where will it come back from?

The *Charvakas* adopted and disseminated the idea that good living, symbolised by *ghee* (Clarified butter), was the route to self-fulfillment. The existence and development of such contradictory beliefs only contributed towards the significance of materialism in Indian culture.

MATERIALISM-SIGNIFICANCE IN MARKETING

A metaphorical expression to illustrate the relationship between marketing and materialism can be that they are like Siamese twins who are mutually dependent. O Shaughnessy and O Shaughnessy (2002) believe that it was widespread prosperity which fuelled the emergence of both marketing activity and consumerist behavior, simultaneously. For last two and a half decades, researchers in Marketing have exhibited tremendous interest in the construct of materialism (e.g. Belk, 1984; Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Richins and Dawson, 1992) and its causes and consequences (e.g. Larsen, Sirgy and Wright, 1999; Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton, 1997; Sirgy *et. al.* 1998). The consumer researchers have studied materialism as a personality trait (Belk, 1984; 1985), as a consumer value (Richins 1987; Richins and Dawson, 1992), as a consumer attitude (Campbell, 1969), as an orientation towards money and possessions (Moschis and Churchill, 1978), as a way of life (Daun, 1983; Steiner, 1975), as an acquisitive ideology (Bishop, 1949) and Holt (1998) raised an important question as to whether materialism is more about “how” one consumes rather than about “what” one consumes.

R.W. Belk (1983, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991) has been a major contributor to the study of materialism. Belk has been very original and innovative in his explanation and interpretations of materialism. Belk has defined materialism through worldly possessions (1983), through materialistic traits (1984, 1985) and even through comic characters like Richie Rich, Uncle Scrooge, Archie etc. (1987). Belk (1985) interpreted materialism as a consumer orientation which reflects the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. Belk (1987) defined materialism as, “the tendency to believe that consumer goods and services provide the greatest source of satisfaction and dissatisfaction in life.”

On the other hand, Pollay (1986) defined materialism as “the belief that consumption is the route to happiness, meaning, and the solution to most personal problems.” Richins' (1987) definition of materialism was an adaptation and assimilation of the conceptual information provided in the definitions of Belk (1987) and Pollay (1986). She defined materialism as, “the tendency to view worldly possessions as important sources of satisfaction in life.” The definition given by Ward and Wackman (1971) was a predecessor to all the above interpretations. They had defined materialism as, “the orientations emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress.”

There is an element of commonality in all the above definitions which needs to be highlighted. All the above definitions emphasised upon the instrumental role of various aspects related to materialism-consumption / possession (Belk, 1987), consumption (Pollay, 1986; Richins, 1987; Ward and Wackman, 1971) towards attainment of a greater goal viz. satisfaction (Belk, 1987; Richins, 1987), happiness (Pollay, 1986; Ward and Wackman, 1971), solution to personal problems (Pollay, 1986) and social progress (Ward and Wackman, 1971). The acquisition, possession and consumption of goods and services have, thus, become a means to a greater end. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) have termed this phenomenon as “instrumental materialism” which “involves cultivation of objects as essential means for discovering and furthering goals.” It is different from “terminal materialism” which is defined as

reduction of ultimate goals to the possession of things (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). The definitions that have been analysed make an obvious attempt to define the “good materialism” (Richins and Dawson, 1992) in which objects act “as essential means for discovering and furthering personal values and goals of life” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

The second commonality, which is an offshoot of the first one, is that materialism has been portrayed in a positive and optimistic light even though historically, materialism has been treated as a negative value connected to possessiveness, envy, lack of generosity, greed and jealousy (Belk, 1983; 1984). The positive paraphrase merits attention because of the ocean of literature highlighting the negative consequences of materialism pertaining to arguments stating that relationships with things alienates us from relationships with people (Wachtel, 1983), that material desires cause property crime (Coleman, 1992), and that this planet is suffering a general degradation because of materialism (Seabrook, 1978).

An investigation of the literature in Marketing, pertaining to the construct materialism, revealed that the two contributions that have revolutionized the way we think about materialism are those by Belk (1984) who interpreted materialism as a reflection of certain personality traits and Richins and Dawson (1992) who conceptualized materialism as a value. Belk (1984) defined materialism as a consumer orientation which reflects the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. It is an all encompassing definition which transcends the dichotomy of “terminal” and “instrumental” materialism. This “orientation” is based upon the presence or absence of the three materialistic traits of possessiveness, non-generosity and envy.

Richins and Dawson's (1992) conceptualization of materialism as a value was a major shift in the direction of defining the “materialism” construct. They defined materialism as “a value that guides peoples' choices and conduct in a variety of situations but not limited to consumption arenas.” The construct is based on three “orienting values” acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession defined success.

However, the desire to possess material things is present in most cultures (Mukerji, 1983) and it could be because such a desire is a basic human characteristic (Rubin, 1986). It raises a very important question as to how does one differentiate the “materialistic” from the “mundane”. The available research indicates towards the following differentiating criteria:

1. A strong belief that possessions give pleasure which leads to seeking pleasure through possession rather than through other means such as personal relationships, experiences and achievements (see Richins and Dawson, 1992). For materialists, the pursuit of possessions becomes a religion and possessions become an object of worship (Bredemeier and Toby, 1960). Fournier and Richins (1991) contend that materialistic consumers may think it impossible to achieve end states without having sufficient or appropriate possessions.

2. Purchase decisions by consumers are not solely dependent upon the utilization value of the product or service. Chandon *et. al.* (2000) suggested that there are two dimensions of consumer value-utilitarian and hedonic. The utilitarian perspective is based on the assumption that consumers are rational problem solvers (Bettman, 1979) whereas hedonic consumption designates those aspects of consumer behaviour that relate to the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one's experience with products (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). The present author believes that a materialistic consumer is more of a “Homo Ludens” (a man guided by his senses and wants) than a “Homo Economicus” (utility calculator or a man influenced only by the utility derived out of a product). This statement stands substantiated by the findings of Richins (1994a) that socially visible products signaling social status or prestige are valued more and have greater importance for materialistic consumers than do less socially visible products, since they express socially embedded meanings for the owners. The reason may be attributed to the fact that materialistic consumers use socially sanctioned objects to either announce their status or arouse audience reaction (Fournier and Richins, 1991). However, precisely because of this intense desire for better possessions in product categories, with higher potential for status signaling, makes the materialistic consumers feel less satisfied with their possessions (Wang and Wallendorf, 2006). It is this dissatisfaction which sends the materialistic consumer into an endless quest and unfulfilled longing for products with greater hedonic value, thus ending up as Alice in Wonderland.

OPERATIONALISATION OF THE MATERIALISM CONSTRUCT

Marketing academicians have been making an attempt to empirically measure materialism construct by operationalising it. The various approaches to measure materialism can be broadly categorized into two types. The

researchers who have adopted the first approach believe that materialism is a multi-dimensional construct and, therefore, may be inferred by measuring the related constructs. It required construction of separate scales for each related construct or dimension consisting of multi-item Likert-type statements. The materialistic tendencies of an individual respondent may be inferred by obtaining the summation of scores on each sub-scale, representing one of the dimensions. Some of the researchers who have adopted this methodology and assessed materialism from related constructs are:

1. Dickins and Ferguson (1957) analysed materialism of children aged 7-8 years and 11-12 years by conducting a content analysis of responses from these children to five open-ended questions relating to expression of wishes and the kind of jobs they desired for themselves when they grow up.
2. Inglehart (1981) carried out a study on adults in Europe and the United States to ascertain existence of post-materialistic societies which are different from the materialistic ones in terms of their relative emphasis on values such as belongingness and self-expression. The survey was conducted using a questionnaire listing 12 goals which the respondents ranked in order of importance. The presence of materialistic or post-materialistic values was ascertained through an analysis of the importance given to the social goals.
3. Belk's (1984, 1985) attempt to operationalise materialism construct through empirical determination of possible aspects of materialism manifested through the consumer personality traits of possessiveness, non-generosity and envy. The materialism score is obtained by adding the respective scores of the three sub-scales measuring possessiveness, non-generosity and envy. The scale was developed using psychometric principles and when assessed using Multi Trait Multi Method (MTMM) matrix (see Campbell and Fiske, 1959), it was found to possess convergent and discriminant validity. However, a limitation of the Belk's scale has been the inconsistent and often low reports of scale reliability (Richins and Dawson, 1992).

The second approach to measure materialism is more direct and is accomplished through the use of attitude scales. It considers materialism to be a one-dimensional construct and uses a multi-item Likert-type scale to obtain the materialism score of a respondent. The instrument consists of a battery of statements that try to explore materialistic tendencies in an individual respondent through analysis of his beliefs e.g., "It is really true that money can buy happiness" (Wackman, Reale and Ward, 1972) or motives e.g. "It is important for me to have really nice things" (Richins, 1987). It is pertinent to mention here that an instrument may operationalise materialism through utilization of both beliefs and motives. Some of the scales that have been operationalised using this approach are:

1. The Wackman, Reale and Ward (1972) scale is one such scale which uses both beliefs and motives to measure materialism. The scale consists of five item Likert type statements. This scale has faced criticism on account of its content validity, since items that measure materialism e.g. "My dream in life is to be able to own expensive things," tend to coexist along with items that seem to be measuring the conspicuous consumption construct e.g. "I think others judge me as a person by the kinds of products and brands I use" (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). However, materialism cannot be seen or measured in total isolation of a related construct like conspicuous consumption. This point of view stands substantiated by findings that more materialistic consumers tend to value items that are consumed publicly and possess public meaning rather than personal or subjective meaning (Richins, 1994b).

This tendency to believe that, "to have is to be" may be explained at two levels-the individual's core identity and extended identity. At the core level, an individual believes that the symbolic meaning of his material possessions is a manifestation of his identity (Dittmar, 1992). While at the extended level, possessions serve as part of a communication for the materialistic individual that informs others about the individual (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Thus, the present author believes that conspicuous consumption is a manifestation of materialism since materialistic individuals view possessions as a reflection of their identity as well as a means of communication of that identity.

The Wackman, Reale and Ward (1972) scale has been adapted and extensively used by Moschis and Churchill (1978). The scale consists of six-item Likert type statements (strongly agree to strongly disagree) instead of five in the original one and was found to have an acceptable degree of reliability i.e. a reliability coefficient alpha of 0.60.

2. Another significant measure of materialism is the one developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) who suggested that "materialism represents a mindset or constellation of attitudes regarding the relative importance of acquisition and possession of objects in one's life." Even as they conceptualised materialism as a value, Richins and Dawson (1992) avoided measuring materialism through the traditional method of measuring a value i.e. ranking method in which the

individual respondent is required to rank a set of end states on the basis of their relative importance to him. Instead, they operationalised materialism through measurement of three centrally held beliefs relevant to the materialistic value: acquisition centrality, the role of acquisition in happiness and the role of possessions in defining success. In order to carry out empirical evaluation of a complex and multi-dimensional construct like materialism, a large number of statements (120 items) were initially generated which were subsequently reduced to 30 statements through empirical tests of reliability, validity, social desirability bias and exploratory factor analysis. Thereafter, principle component factor analysis was employed in order to reduce the number of items to eighteen that empirically reveal the hypothesized underlying structure. An oblique rotation was then undertaken to facilitate the interpretation of factors relating to the concepts of success, centrality and happiness. Here, success represents, "use of possessions as an indicator of success in life," centrality signifies, "importance of acquisition and possession generally," and happiness reflects "the perception that possessions are needed for happiness." The items loading heavily on the factors were then summated to create an overall measure of materialism. The coefficient alpha and test-retest reliability tests for each of the summated scales all exceeded the threshold of 0.70 for acceptance. The construct's validity was established by demonstrating that individuals, who score high on materialism scale place greater value on acquisitions, are self-centered, seek material possessions and tend to be dissatisfied with their circumstances. This is significant since an attempt has been made to assess validity through investigation of attitudes and behaviors. It is in agreement with the findings by previous researchers that there is a consistency between an individual's set of values and that person's attitudes and behaviours. Further, different values guide decisions in different situations and contexts (Rokeach, 1968, 1973; Kahle, 1983).

The present author believes that the scale developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) is more acceptable in and applicable to consumers in varied cultures owing to sheer diversity and depth of the respondent profiles which included adult consumers, students from three universities in different parts of USA and households. This is a welcome departure from the commonly accepted practice of using a purely student sample. Since college students live in a constrained social, educational and economic milieu, this results into a bias towards products signaling high status due to age related desires to impress peers outside the arena of occupational prestige, rather than being an off-shoot of materialistic tendencies (Erickson, 1980; Wang and Wallendorf, 2006). On the contrary, non-student adults operate in a more suitable consumer culture since they possess a wider range of products owing to better economic resources and therefore, facilitate more appropriate generalization of inference. Another key strength of this scale is the fact that it was tested for its "susceptibility to social desirability bias". This is significant since research on materialism or any other "dark side" variable e.g. compulsive buying behaviour (see Faber and O'Guinn, 1988, 1992) may get influenced by Socially Desirable Responding (SDR) i.e. the tendency for people to present themselves favourably according to currently acceptable cultural norms (Mick, 1996). Social desirability was measured using Marlowe-Crowne scale (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) and its low negative correlations with centrality, happiness and success subscales as well as with the combined scale conveyed the absence of social desirability bias.

Richins and Dawson's definition of materialism as a "value that guides people's choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including but not limited to, consumption arenas" has enhanced its applicability across different cultures towards identification of dissimilarities. It has also broadened the horizon of ramifications of materialism which can be studied to comprehend the causal relationship of materialism with other constructs and variables of importance to marketers.

MATERIALISM-GOOD OR BAD

Materialism is generally viewed as a negative characteristic linked to traits like possessiveness, envy and lack of generosity or as a tendency to like possessions and gain pleasure from ownership (Belk 1984, 1985; Browne and Kaldenberg, 1997; Richins and Dawson, 1992). Mick (1996) categorized materialism as one of the "dark side" variable. The genesis of such an interpretation probably lies in the fact that historically, all major religions have condemned materialism for the fear that worldly goods will replace the Supreme Being as the focus of worship (Belk, 1983, 1985). Some of the religions even go to the extent of advocating renunciation of material possessions as key to salvation or *moksha*. However, a more balanced and pragmatic view needs to be adopted since, as suggested by Belk (1987), both-the extremes of self-denial as well as self-gratification - need to be condemned. Research in medical science has shown that extreme forms of material denial may be related to *orexia-nervosa*, *bulimia*, *masochism* and

other self-destructive tendencies (Belk, 1984; D'Arcy, 1967; Masson, 1976). On the contrary, people who are highly materialistic tend to report greater levels of anxiety and physical symptomatology (Kasser and Ahuvia, 2002).

The subjective well-being is also expected to be low since materialistic adolescents report higher levels of substance use (Williams *et. al.* 2000). Thus, materialism has been criticized by some; materialism has been admired by others; however, it is hard to ignore materialism since it is here to stay. This perception is shared by Venkatesh (1994), who opined that materialism would continue to remain the most distinctive characteristic of present consumerist world, especially in the very fast developing Asian economies like India.

In addition, the present author believes that materialism cannot be categorised as either good or bad because, without materialism, society may appear more puritan but without the opportunity to get spoilt, there would be no merit in virtue.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Indian consumer has the unique distinction of being subjected to 2500 years of proposing and opposing rhetoric with respect to materialism. However, surprisingly, there has been an almost criminal dearth of extensive studies on materialistic tendencies of Indian consumers. In this regard, the present study may be considered a small step towards developing a deeper understanding of a dynamic and dialectic construct that materialism is. More research on conceptual and operational aspects of the construct of materialism resulting in an in-depth understanding would facilitate productive application by marketers through arousal of the apparently dormant materialistic tendency among consumers so as to successfully enhance consumer confidence.

The present study has been able to dig down some very interesting information related to the Indian consumers and their materialistic tendencies. At the same time, it has opened up a Pandora's Box. Materialism being an eclectic and almost surreal construct, needs further research to operationalise the abstract relationships it has with different aspects of consumer's behavior, demographics and psychographics. In particular reference to the Indian consumers, there are four prominent issues that require profound attention and examination by researchers.

Firstly, materialism is not a static construct which remains stagnant over the life time of a consumer. Future research needs to address the dynamic nature of materialism by carrying out a longitudinal study. A long term tracking of materialistic tendencies would provide invaluable insight on the temporal nature of materialism. Secondly, the present research should encourage academicians to investigate the antecedents and consequences of materialism. The impact of a range of stimuli and cues (e.g. media, peer group, family values, marketing mix modification, discretionary income and even genes) on materialism can be taken into consideration. Similarly, the impact of materialism on a gamut of aspects, both within and beyond the realm of consumer behaviour, need to be studied. For example, it would be interesting to find out not only how materialism influences brand loyalty but also how materialism impacts marital loyalty. Thirdly, the construct of materialism ought to be investigated empirically in a culturally, socially and demographically diverse setting. India being a multi-religious society, a more heterogeneous sample comprising of greater number of respondents from across different religions might throw up interesting results. Finally, further research should be carried out towards scale development through primary research using a heterogeneous sample from India. A materialism scale needs to be developed through inclusion of Indian consumer specific items and identification of underlying dimensions thereof. This would lead to a more precise and profound elucidation of the construct materialism with specific reference to the Indian consumers. The present author sincerely hopes that this study would give an impetus to further research on materialism among Indian consumers.

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