Materialism and Consumer Behavior :
Differences in Types of Materialism Among
Different Cultures

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Abstract

This research paper sought to ascertain the importance of values among different groups of individuals, differentiated by gender, age, and ethnicity. The paper contributes to understanding materialism among different cultures. It provides a broader perspective on how those living in one very strong materialistic culture are more vs. less materialistic. A social influence perspective is applied. The paper also provided a broader perspective on materialism, by considering all cultures in a metropolitan area that is composed of a melting pot of cultures. While one research survey mechanism was used to identify a variety of elements that are related to individual materialism, this research incorporated not only one reliable research measure tool from the past, but also a more recently developed and validated research measure. Findings suggest that attitudes toward materialism directly affect consumer behavior and thus, marketing strategy.

Keywords : Materialism, different cultures, consumer behavior, analysis of variance (ANOVA), Fisher's LSD test

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Materialism is part of living in the contemporary post-modern world. Consumerism promotes increasing rates of consumption. Materialism and consumerism are interwoven into the fabric of American culture. Since consumer behavior is often different for different cultures, it may frequently change when consumers cross geographic borders due to acculturation through adaptation and assimilation (Moore, Berger, & Weinberg, 2013). Since the number of those new to the American consuming culture is ever changing, with various people at various stages of these changes, a major challenge for marketers is to assess the current level of values held by those who are readily shopping (i.e., consuming). Without doubt, the consumption culture, where consumption is for the sake of pleasure, has spread to significant parts of populations during the last century.

Fournier and Richins (1991) observed that materialistic people are seen as needing items to be happy. They value their possessions, although the value they place is not consistent for all products or product categories, and there is, of course, variance among consumers. Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, and Sheldon (2004) put forth that materialism comes about when materialistic values are promoted. Some possessions are conspicuously consumed (Veblen, 1899), that is, consumption for the purpose of impressing others and enriching status. Consumers can believe that what they possess defines them. Some might feel that material possessions have a worth greater than their market value. The comfort associated with being surrounded by items helps some people feel optimistic about the future and good about the present. Connections to places and things have merit because they evoke memories of human connections. To some, connections with certain products (e.g., specific clothing, motorcycles,

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and several others) are very important in feeling a sense of belonging with a particular group or category of individuals.

Over the last 20 years, there has been some change in our collective feelings about possessions and buying stuff in general. Perhaps fueled first by deeper thought, consumers of the 1990s were more altruistic. Conspicuous consumption was down, giving to charity was up, and family values became a rallying cry. By the 2000s, the recession had set in and many, if not most, were forced to temper their buying behavior for mere economic existence. Recent findings echo the following: "Dozens of the survey's findings reflect a new American notion of success, but perhaps none more starkly than the sentiment that Americans ranked 'having a lot of money' 20th on a list of 22 possible contributors to having a successful life" (para 22, Gregoire, 2014). Perhaps, our values have changed.

✣ **Materialism :** A few studies have investigated materialism and its relationship to various individual characteristics and states, such as age. The key nature of the construct materialism is that it represents the importance that consumers place on possessions and representations of wealth (e.g., money). Richins and Dawson (1992) developed a scale and performed a research study that assessed the degree to which people believe that possessions reflect success in life, the extent to which central materialism is to their desires, and the extent to which they believe wealth and possessions yield happiness.

The scale includes three themes that have consistently been used to define materialism: possessions define success ("material success"), acquisition centrality - placing possessions and the process of getting possessions at the center of their lives and judge the success of life by the number and quality of possessions - ("material centrality"), and acquisition defining the pursuit of happiness ("material happiness"). Richins and Dawson (1992) found that consumers who had a high degree of materialistic orientation were less satisfied with various aspects of their lives, such as family, income, and relationships with friends.

Our research looks at not only the previously accepted metrics of measurements of Richins and Dawson (1992), but also uses a scale by Trinh and Phau (2012) that was more recently developed and validated. Their scale includes measures of material success, material happiness, material essentiality, and material distinctiveness.

Objectives of the Study

This study compares the measure of materialism across different cultures. The one similarity is that all respondents were studied in the United States, where retailing, packaging, and the development of goods are stronger and more prevalent than it is in most of the rest of the world. It is to be expected that more affluent consumers would be more consumption oriented.

Methodology

✣ **Participants :** A convenience sample was used, consisting of 190 undergraduate and graduate business students (first and second year) at a medium-sized university in the greater Boston area, MA, USA. A small percentage of respondents outside of this grouping were also included. Student respondents were used to keep the differences in age, education, and socioeconomic status relatively homogeneous. The descriptive variables of the respondent sample are depicted in the Tables 1 and 2. The time period of the study is from November 2013 to February 2014.

Table 1. Age of Respondents

Age	%	Frequency
18 - 21	46.3%	88
22 - 25	37.4%	71
> 26	16.3%	31

Table 2. Gender of Respondents

Gender	%	Frequency
Female	44.2%	84
Male	55.8%	106

↬ **Survey Instrument :** Participants completed the values survey, a 37-item questionnaire which was composed of two previously administered surveys. The Richins and Dawson (1992) survey comprised of questions 2 - 19 (labeled as material success, material centrality, and material/pursuit of happiness). Brief details on each theme are as follows:

↬ **Material Possessions Define Success :** The success of individuals and others is judged by the accumulation of possessions. This theme is assessed by questions 2 - 7.

↬ **Material Centrality Defines Success :** The extent to which possessions govern and influence satisfaction/dissatisfaction with life and well-being. This theme is assessed by questions 8 - 14.

↬ **Acquisition is Central to the Pursuit of Happiness.** The extent to which the process of acquiring possessions influence satisfaction/dissatisfaction with life and well-being. This theme is assessed by questions 15 - 19.

Questions 20-34 were based on the scale used by Trinh and Phau (2012). Brief details on each theme are as follows:

↬ **Material Success :** The success of individuals and others is judged by the accumulation of possessions. This theme is assessed by questions 20 - 23.

↬ **Material Happiness :** The extent to which possessions govern and influence satisfaction/dissatisfaction with life and well-being. This theme is assessed by questions 24 - 27.

↬ **Material Essentiality :** Possessions are essential and responsible for the totality of one's life. This theme is assessed by questions 28 - 30.

↬ **Material Distinctiveness :** Possessions are often used as devices to make one person stand out from the crowd. This theme is assessed by questions 31 - 34.

Questions 34-37 ended the questionnaire, asking for age, gender, and ethnicity, respectively. The questionnaire was administered online using Qualtrics. The questions are listed in the Appendix 1.

Analysis and Results

Our primary analysis involved testing which of the seven measures of materiality differed by age, gender, and ethnicity. As a review, the seven measures of materiality are:

Richins and Dawson (1992):

↬ **R1:** Material Success
↬ **R2:** Material Centrality
↬ **R3:** Material Happiness

Trinh and Phau (2012):

↬ **T1:** Material Success
↬ **T2:** Material Happiness
↬ **T3:** Material Essentiality
↬ **T4:** Material Distinctiveness

When we tested each of these measure to see if they differed by age, which had three categories, we used one-factor ANOVA, and if the results were significant, we used the multiple comparison test and Fisher's LSD (least

significant difference) test to analyze the significance of the pair-wise differences between the categories. For gender, which only had two categories, we used an independent-samples t - test (equivalent to a one-factor ANOVA with two columns) to determine whether a significant difference exists between the genders. For ethnicity, which had four categories, we performed the same analysis as that described for age; of course, for age, there are three pair-wise comparisons ($_3C_2$), while for ethnicity, there are six pair-wise comparisons ($_4C_2$).

When we performed the ANOVA and (if significant) the multiple comparison tests, we used a significance level of $\alpha = .05$; this is the traditional value used most often. For age, two of the seven measures of materialism showed significant differences. For gender, only one measure of materialism showed a significant difference. For ethnicity, the results were far more dramatic; six of the seven measures of materialism showed a significant difference, and the one that did not have a p - value of .055, "just missed" being the .05 cutoff point.

✥ **Age :** There is a significant difference among age groups for the two measure of materialism, T3 (Material Essentiality) and T4 (Material Distinctiveness). For T3, the ANOVA p - value = .038. The pair-wise breakdown for T3 showed that age groups 1 and 2 (18-21 years and 22-25 years, respectively) had significantly higher materialism than the highest age group, group 3 ($\geq$26 years), while the 18-21 years and 22-25 years groups cannot be said to be different. Therefore, the means for the three age group respectively, are 2.69, 2.71, and 2.26 (on the 1-5 scale, where a higher value indicates a larger amount of belief in Material Essentiality.) We can summarize the result in a "picture form" as:

For T4 (Material Distinctiveness), the ANOVA p - value = .016. The pair-wise breakdown for T4 showed that age group 2 (22-25 years) had significantly higher materialism than the lowest age group, group 1 (18-21 years), while the highest age group, group 3, cannot be said to be different from either of the other two groups [1]. The means for the three age groups respectively are : 2.92, 3.35, and 3.19 (It might be noted that the degree of Material Distinctiveness is larger for all three age groups respectively, than the degree of Material Essentiality.). We can summarize the result in "picture form" as:

We can see that for both types of materiality, the oldest group (3) had a higher degree of materiality than the youngest group (1), although the middle age group exhibited very different (relative) behavior for the two different types of materiality. As we noted above, there was no significant difference among the age groups for the other five measures of materiality.

✥ **Gender :** The only type of materiality that showed a significant difference was T2 (the Trinh and Phau measure of Material Happiness). Males had a higher mean value than females, with p - value = .022; the respective means are 2.75 and 2.46. A two category situation might not warrant a picture form, but to be consistent with all the other analyses in this section, we present it as :

✥ **Ethnicity :** Since we have six significant outcomes, we present the results in a tabular form in Table 4, and then articulate the findings. From the Table 3, we have group 1 = Asian/Asian Americans, group 2 = Hispanic/Hispanic American, group 3 = White-non-Hispanic, and group 4 = Other ; the groups comprising "Other," which includes
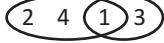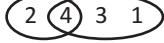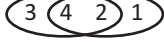
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[1] As those familiar with multiple comparison testing and the Fisher, Tukey, Student-Newman-Keuls tests, and others, know it is not uncommon for such an "inconsistency" to occur.

Table 3. Ethnicity

Ethnicity	%	Frequency*
Asian (Asian/Asian American)	34.4	65
Hispanic (Hispanic/Hisp. Am.)	6.3	12
White (White-non-Hispanic)	50.8	96
Other (includes African American and Indian)	8.5	16

*The total is 189, as 1 of the 190 usable responses left this question blank.

Table 4. Ethnicity Results

Type of Materiality	p - value of ANOVA	"Picture Form" of Multiple Comparison Test Results
R1: Material Success	.001	(2 4)(1 3)
R3: Material Happiness	.025	(2 (4) 3 1)
T1: Material Success	.000	(2 4)(1 3)
T2: Material Happiness	.018	(2 4 (1) 3)
T3: Material Essentiality	.027	(2 (4) 3 1)
T4: Material Distinctiveness	.009	(3 (4 2) 1)

African Americans and Indians, can be seen from question 37, noted in Appendix 1.

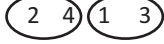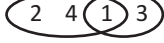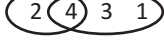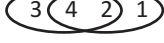While examining Table 4, we see a remarkable consistency for the first five of the six measures of materiality (i.e., all except T4). In every one of these five cases, the mean of group 2 is the smallest and the mean of group 4 is the next smallest, and in every case, the means of groups 2 and 4 are statistically judged as no different. Correspondingly, the means of groups 1 and 3 are the highest, some in the order 1, 3, and some in the order 3, but in every case, the mean of group 1 and the mean of group 3 are statistically judged as no different. In every case, the mean of group 2 is statistically judged as being lower than the means of groups 1 and 3. In some cases (R1, T1), the mean of group 4 is statistically judged as lower than the mean of both groups 1 and 3; in one case (T2), the mean of group 4 is statistically judged as being lower than the mean of group 3, but cannot said to be different from the mean of group 1; in the other two cases (R3, T3), the mean of group 4, while smaller than the mean of group 1 and group 3, cannot be said to be different from the mean of the latter two groups.

The results for T4 are somewhat different than those of the other five measures. The mean of group 3 is significantly higher than the mean of group 1, while no other pair of means can be said to be different.

The Table 5 presents the mean for each group on each of the six measures of materiality. If we momentarily ignore T4, which is a "maverick" in comparison to the results for the other five measures, we see certain patterns in the means. The means for the "T" measures (Trinh & Phau [T and P] measures) are overall lower than the "R" measures (Richins & Dawson [R & D] measures). The T4 means are more similar in magnitude to the "R" measures than to the other "T" measures. This led us to examine selected "R measures" with the corresponding "T measures".

✤ **The (R & D) Measures vs. the (T & P) Measures :** There are two measures of materiality in the (R & D) set of measures of materiality that purport to directly correspond with measures of materiality in the (T & P) set of measures. These are R1 and T1, both labeled as Material Success, and R3 and T2, both labeled as Material Happiness. For each pair, we performed a paired-data t - test, to test whether the mean difference between the pair

Table 5. Mean of Each Materiality Measure for Each Group

Type of Materiality	Means, in ascending order (the order clear from the "Picture Form")	"Picture Form" of Multiple Comparison Test Results
R1: Material Success	2.53, 2.75, 3.21, 3.25	2 4 1 3
R3: Material Happiness	2.55, 2.78, 3.09, 3.15	2 4 3 1
T1: Material Success	1.65, 1.89, 2.49, 2.70	2 4 1 3
T2: Material Happiness	2.08. 2.17, 2.58, 2.72	2 4 1 3
T3: Material Essentiality	2.03, 2.31, 2.67, 2.80	2 4 3 1
T4: Material Distinctiveness	2.93, 2.97, 3.23, 3.43	3 4 2 1

was the same or different. In both comparisons, a significant difference was observed.

For R1 vs. T1, the means are 3.15 and 2.49 respectively, with a p - value of the difference of .000 (to three digits). For R3 vs. T2, the means are 3.05 and 2.59 respectively, with a p - value for the difference of (again) .000. However, the difference in means between the two measures (of the same type of materiality) is really not a very important issue. In fact, in Table 5, we can see an identical result for R1 and T1 (Material Success) when viewing the "Picture Form". For R3 and T2 (Material Happiness), the results are not identical, but are very similar.

Discussion and Conclusion

We found a few differences associated with age (specifically, differences in two of the measures of materiality), but nothing systematic is evident. For T3, Material Essentiality, the younger two groups indicated more beliefs in materiality than the oldest group. For T4, the two oldest age groups, which did not differ from each other, had a higher belief in materiality than the youngest age group. This is interesting, as it may suggest that Materialism Essentiality is learned over time, to a point, and becomes clearer as one ages. With respect to gender, we found a difference in only one measure of materiality : T2 (Material Happiness), and this indicates that men had a higher belief in materiality than women. This outcome needs to be tempered by the fact that this significant result occurred only with the (T & D) measure of Material Happiness, but did not occur in the (R & D) measure of Material Happiness.

As the previous section indicated, there were lots of differences associated with ethnicity; most (five out of six measures) were quite consistent - Asians and Whites did not differ along any measure of materiality, while Hispanics and Others (in which African-American is the most prominent group that can be identified, being nearly half of the Others group) also did not differ along any measure of materiality. In addition, Asians and Whites in every case had higher beliefs in materiality than Hispanics and Others, and in most cases, there were significant differences. For T4, Material Distinctiveness (measured by [T & P], but not by [R & D]), the results differed: Whites had a significantly lower belief in materiality than did Asians, while no other differences among the groups were indicated.

These interesting findings should be explored in greater depth in the future. Why are some groups similar, and why are some different? Is there something in the ethnic cultures related to the similarities and differences? Are observed differences a function of the scales used? Could the definitions of materialism differ among cultures? Are new scales needed to reflect this?

We also determined that similar measures for a type of materiality between R&D's measure and T&D's measure had different means, but that this was not really important, as there was complete consistency of results for both

measures of Material Success and close to complete consistency for both measures of Material Happiness. We noted in the introduction and literature review how one's views of materiality are closely tied to one's consumer behavior. This clearly indicates how promotion decisions and other marketing strategies can be improved by segmentation of the market by ethnicity when belief in materiality is taken into consideration.

Managerial Implications

Marketers may be wise to customize their offerings or approach given the importance of materialism among groups. Perhaps, some strategies should more strongly emphasize materialism, and others emphasize less of it. And, if indeed, cultures define materialism differently, then marketers need to understand this, and calibrate appropriately. All the demographics - age, gender, and ethnicity showed up as significant for different types of materialism; ethnicity was, by far, the most prevalent demographic. A marketing plan should combine the product itself, the target market, and the effects of materialism in order to most usefully arrive at the most successful marketing strategy.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The primary limitation of the study is its external validity. That is, the population in the study is not representative of the "population at large," whether we call that the general population of the United States, or the general population of the world, or even, perhaps, the general population of college students. As we noted, our sample was a convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate students from several countries studying at one university. We cannot say that the materialism attitudes of college students are the same as in the general populations, even if we were to hold the age, gender, and ethnicity mix the same. Also, these three attributes cannot be said to be the same as those of all college students. Of course, it is possible that many of the results do generalize; however, it is a limitation of the study that we cannot say that they do.

Future research should focus on the breadth and size of the population studied. Certain ethnic groups and people from other prominent countries were not sufficiently represented to be properly treated as a "stand-alone" group. That clearly is due to the particular university selected, and the fact that data were collected from only one university. The most noticeable of these would be African Americans and Indians. We believe that the study of materialism of various types and how they relate to different demographics, and ultimately to marketing strategy, is important. With materialism trending so strongly as a prominent factor in purchase and other behavior, we believe that this topic will take on increased importance as time progresses.

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Appendix 1

Questions 1-34 (listed below) all have the following scale for respondents to choose among:

- ↳ *Strongly Disagree* (1)
- ↳ *Somewhat Disagree* (2)
- ↳ *Neutral* (3)
- ↳ *Somewhat Agree* (4)
- ↳ *Strongly Agree* (5)

Some of the questions (3, 6-9, 13, 14, 16) were reverse-scaled, but this was, of course, accounted for in the analysis.

(1) I admire people who own items such as homes, cars, and clothes.

(2) Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.

(3) I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.

(4) The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.

(5) I like to own things that impress people.

(6) I don't pay much attention to the material objects other people own.

(7) I usually buy only the things I need.

(8) I try to keep my life simple as far as possessions are concerned.

(9) The things I own aren't that important to me.

(10) I enjoy spending money on things that aren't practical.

(11) Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.

(12) I like a lot of luxury in my life.

(13) I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.

(14) I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.

(15) My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.

(16) I wouldn't be any happier if I owned certain things I don't have.

(17) I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.

(18) It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I like.

(19) I like to own more expensive things than most people because this is a sign of success.

(20) I like to own things that make people think highly of me.

(21) The only way to let everyone know about my high status is to show it.

(22) I feel good when I buy expensive things. People think of me as a success.

(23) Material possessions are important because they contribute a lot to my happiness.

(24) Acquiring valuable things is important to my happiness.

(25) When friends have things I cannot afford, it bothers me.

(26) To me, it is important to have expensive homes, cars, clothes, and other things.

(27) Having these expensive items make me happy.

(28) Material growth has an irresistible attraction for me.

(29) Material accumulation helps raise the level of civilization.

(30) To buy and possess expensive things is very important to me.

(31) I usually buy things that make me look distinctive.

(32) I like to own things that make people think of me as unique and different.

(33) I feel uncomfortable when seeing a random person wearing the same clothes that I am wearing.

(34) I would rather pay more to get a more distinctive item.

As mentioned before, questions 35 – 37 were the demographic questions soliciting age, gender, and ethnicity, respectively:

(35) What is your age?

⮩ 18-21 (1)
⮩ 22-25 (2)
⮩ 26-29 (3)
⮩ 30-34 (4)
⮩ 35-39 (5)
⮩ 40-44 (6)
⮩ 45-49 (7)
⮩ ≥50 (8)

(Note: as Table 1 indicates, low frequencies required all ages ≥26 to be lumped together into one category.)

(36) What is your gender?

⮩ Male (1)
⮩ Female (2)

(37) How would you describe yourself? (Please check the one option that best describes you)

⮩ American Indian or Alaskan Native (1)
⮩ Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (2)
⮩ Asian (3)
⮩ Asian American (4)
⮩ Black or African American (5)
⮩ Hispanic or Latino American (6)

↪ Hispanic or Latino Non-American (7)

↪ White-Non-Hispanic (8)

↪ Other (9)

(Note: As Table 3 indicates, low frequencies suggested grouping choices 3 (62 responses) and 4 (3 responses) – total = 65; also grouping choices 6 (5 responses) and 7 (7 responses) – total = 12; also grouping categories 1 (1 response), 2 (0 responses), 5 (7 responses), and 9 (8 responses) – total = 16.)