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Rethinking Materialism: A Process View and Some Transformative Consumer Research Implications

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ABSTRACT

Although current conceptualizations of materialism have yielded very valuable insights, each seems to be narrowly restricted to its own research purposes. In this article, we offer an expanded view of materialism that stresses the functions of materialistic goal pursuit, the processes by which these functions are developed and implemented, and their potential consequences. This expanded view of materialism should then in turn lead to expanded avenues for future research. We conclude by proposing research implications for enhancing consumer welfare.

ARTICLE

Introduction

Materialism plays a central role in many facets of consumer behaviour (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2011). Although materialism is a well-established concept in philosophy and sociology, only relatively recently have consumer researchers undertaken systematic investigations of materialism. Consumer researchers have generally conceptualised materialism as either a trait (Belk 1985) or value (Richins and Dawson 1992) that guides our actions and quests for meaning and happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 2000), and thus influences the goals we pursue and the means by which we pursue them (Kasser and Ryan 1993). Moreover, most of the research has focused on the negative consequences of materialism that result from such things as trade-offs between social relationships and material pursuits (Kasser 2002), emphases on products over experiences (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003), and other compensatory processes (Raghunathan and Irwin 2001; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997).

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Although these conceptualizations of materialism have yielded valuable insights, we also think they are overly restrictive. First, although some research has focused on sociological antecedents of materialism such as media (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2003; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch 2005), the processes underlying materialism have received relatively little attention. Second, and related, the focus on negative consequences of materialism may ignore important positive functions that materialism and materialistic goal pursuit may serve for some people.

For these reasons, we propose expanding the view of materialism to a conceptualization that stresses the functions of materialistic goal pursuit, the processes by which these functions are developed and implemented, and their potential consequences. In the following sections, we present this expanded definition of materialism and discuss in more detail the nature of these functions, processes, and consequences.

Definition of Materialism

We propose that materialism is the extent to which individuals attempt to engage in the construction and maintenance of the self through consumption. This broadened conceptualization of materialism highlights consumption-driven goal pursuit (e.g., maintaining the self through possessions) and distinguishes it from goal pursuit through non-consumption-driven processes (e.g., nurturing relationships). More specifically, our view begins with a) the self-related functions that materialism and materialistic goal pursuit serve, b) the processes through which these functions are fulfilled, and c) the potential consequences of these processes.

Functions

Our conceptualization of materialism views the primary function of materialism as the construction and maintenance of the self. More specifically, we focus on materialistic goal pursuit as a means for meeting or bolstering particular self-related needs. For example, one need often related to materialism is self-esteem (Arndt et al. 2004; Richins and Dawson 1992). People may chronically strive for more material possessions in an attempt to boost self-esteem because they think possessions make them look more socially attractive, or they may strive for more possessions as a situational response to a self-esteem threat (e.g., they are socially excluded). Other needs that materialistic goal pursuit may bolster are distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and a meaningful existence (cf. Vignoles et al. 2006). Although far from exhaustive, this list of needs provides a useful starting point for investigating the functions of materialism.

Processes

People may bolster their needs in many ways. We distinguish between consumption and non-consumption means of doing so. Such a distinction allows us to capture the trade-offs that arise when one particular means takes prominence over another. For example, materialistic goal pursuit as a means of bolstering needs may lead some people to focus on products to bolster needs at the expense of social relationships (Kasser and Ryan 1993, 1996). Alternatively, some people may value possessions over experiences (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Both of these trade-offs have been shown to reduce happiness.

However, we also think the simple distinctions in trade-offs between products and people, and between products and experiences, are too restrictive. Thus, our conceptualization notes that experiences can be pursued in a materialistic manner; that is, the experiences themselves may be commodified). People may seek out experiences to gain social status (e.g., trips to exclusive or expensive destinations) that have little to do with deriving pleasure

in the actual experience itself. Likewise, people may materialistically collect (consume) relationships that have little to do with intrinsic motivations. For example, people may join social clubs or develop friendships for self-portrayal reasons (extrinsic motivation), rather than for any intrinsic quality derived from the relationship itself.

Consequences

As noted earlier, our expanded conceptualization of materialism entertains the possibility that some materialistic behaviour may have some positive outcomes for some people. For example, to the extent that possessions serve the desired function of bolstering particular needs (e.g., distinctiveness, belonging), they may lead to a more positive self-view and thus increased happiness and well-being. This does not, of course, deny the well-established link between materialism and negative well-being, which is also central to our conceptualization. Rather, linking outcomes of materialism to the critical functions it serves may allow us to separate out useful versus debilitating materialistic behaviours. Doing so should in turn allow for more focused campaigns to enable people to engage in general lifestyles and specific behaviours that enhance well-being.

Some Implications for Transformative Consumer Research

This expanded view of materialism highlights the process (symbolic objectification) and the trade-off (consumption- vs. non-consumption-oriented means) in service of the self. In doing so, we find several implications that would make future research more robust. First, we view materialistic trade-offs as lying on a continuum where an optimal consumption level exists, and beyond which additional consumption goal pursuits lead to negative outcomes, which have been the focus of most extant research. This optimal consumption level is both individually and situationally determined. That is, the optimum level may be a function of the person (trait differences on needs) or the situation (depending on one's circumstances, resource levels, etc.), and in fact may vary throughout one's life stage. Future research should focus on identifying or recognizing optimal consumption levels for individuals that balance such trade-offs in goal pursuits. It is likely that materialistic pursuits may often exceed optimal levels because of our inability to identify this turning point or our tendency to overestimate the benefits of consumption [e.g., affective forecasting error (Wilson and Gilbert 2003); hedonic treadmill (Raghunathan and Irwin 2001); materialistic escalation (Arndt et al. 2004; Parducci 1995)] while underestimating the benefits of non-consumption goal pursuits.

Another implication for future research involves identifying decision cues (e.g., awareness/reminders of time and financial deficits or budgetary aids), environmental factors (e.g., media exposure, leisure activities), and socio-political factors that may influence materialistic behaviours. For example, one could examine whether policy changes would lead to behavioural changes (such as exploring changes in people's working and leisure time consumption (www.timeuse.org) in relation to changes in income levels, changes in personal leave policies, changes in subsidies for working mothers, and so forth). Findings from such research could help in fostering experimental or quasi-experimental explorations of how different needs could be best satisfied through different consumption versus non-consumption trade-offs, or to qualitative explorations that could elucidate why individuals in some circumstances choose consumption over non-consumption routes to need fulfilment.

The identification of optimal consumption levels could also assist in linking the micro-consumption motives to macro-consequences (unsustainable consumption, national debt). Future research that could reveal and translate individual consumption to societal outcomes would help to identify solutions to escape the material trap (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2011, 258-9). Finally, a key factor in the trade-offs between consumption and non-consumption goal pursuit is accessibility (money vs. time). For example, one could pursue distinctiveness

(such as physical beauty) through diet and exercise or through conspicuous consumption of luxury brands. However, the non-consumption means are often more effortful and time-consuming than consumption means, even though they could lead to greater personal debt and be less satisfying in the long run due to hedonic adaptation (Raghunathan and Irwin 2001). Therefore, future research could help identify ways to make non-consumption goal pursuit more accessible so that trading off consumption pursuits becomes easier.

Conclusion

By examining materialism as a fundamental human process of need fulfilment, this new perspective provides a more comprehensive framework to not only situate extant research, but to also reveal new research directions in materialism that have significant transformative consequences for consumer welfare. It also highlights the urgent need for integrating research and data from multiple disciplines and sources in our efforts to truly understand this complex human behaviour.

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