

Materialism – A Conceptualization for Contemporary Research

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ABSTRACT

Objective of this paper is to review the literature on materialism and to come up with the contemporary notion about materialism that is apposite for present-day study of consumer behavior. The study has devised exploratory research design to reconnoiter the existing conceptualizations of materialism. Literature review of different conceptualizations of materialism has been presented in this paper. The contextual review helped in framing the conceptual definitions. The current research spells out the new and contemporary conceptual definitions of materialism, derived from literature review of different conceptualizations, which contributes in the area of behavioral study. The study has added to the literature in terms of a development of the concept of materialism that is contemporaneous and comprehensive. It has offered across-the-board conceptualization of materialism.

Keywords: Contemporary conceptualization, materialism.

JEL Codes: M00, M30, M31, M39

INTRODUCTION:

Consumer culture makes individuals search for happiness through consumption. Materialism is not the end but the means to get satisfaction in present-day life and lifestyle (Van Wessel, 2004). Materialism to some extent tends to contribute to life satisfaction (Manolis, & Roberts, 2012). Exhibiting material things to show off one's uniqueness brings happiness and increases satisfaction (Sidhu, & Foo, 2015); (Rustagi, & Shrum, 2017). At the same time, there have been studies that have shown that materialism diminishes happiness and reduces life satisfaction (Roberts, Tsang, & Manolis, 2015); (Ling, Liu, & Rajah, 2016). This increasing compression of consumer culture and increasing predisposition of people towards material things for happiness and life satisfaction makes the study of materialism imperative. For carrying out appropriate analysis, understand of the concept of materialism is essential. This study intends to study the concepts of materialism in current literature and to come up with contemporary conceptualization.

The interpretation of materialism has evolved through centuries around thrust for material. Economic materialism, which is the focus of contemporary researchers, has been conceptualized in different ways. Various efforts have been put forwards to define and explain the construct, nature, background and detriments of materialism. The study of concept and measure of materialism is not new rather the same is being assessed and analyzed since decades. The subject has evolved through lot of interpretations and inferences. The current study attempts to conceptualize the subject in the current context and for contemporary readings.

Objective of this paper is to come up with the contemporary notion about materialism that is apposite for present-day study of consumer behavior. The current study spells out the conceptual definitions pertaining to materialism, which are derived from literature review of different conceptualizations found in literature. This would lead to the formulation of conceptual definition for contemporary research, based on the review of literature on materialism. Thus, the current research spells out the new and contemporary conceptual definitions of materialism, derived from literature review of different conceptualizations, which contributes in the area of behavioral study.

This study will provide one point reference for different notions of materialism in literature. As materialism is an important concept for marketing and research in consumer behaviour (Rustagi, & Shrum, 2017), the study will have implications for psychologists, economists, philosophers, and social scientists in broader context.

METHODOLOGY:

The study has devised exploratory research design to reconnoitre the existing conceptualizations of materialism. Literature review of different conceptualizations of materialism has been presented in this paper. The contextual review helped in framing the conceptual definitions.

Historical conceptualizations:

The history of development of concept of materialism has dates back to the Greek ‘atomists’ who gave material dimension to nature. The natural constituents, i.e. air, water fire etc., were viewed as material elements of nature (Vanamamalai, 1973); (Sinha, 1994); (Foster & Grundmann, 2001); (Tanzella-Nitti & Strumia, 2008a); (Talang, 2008). The philosophers, like Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, etc. in seventeenth century envisioned the notion of materialism in connection to mind and body problem (Lange; 1880); (Moore, 1899). The philosophical conceptualization of materialism says, “Nothing exists except matter and its movement” (Lange, 1880/1925); (Scott, 2009).

Since last century, the literature on materialism has been split into two broad categories i.e. old materialism and new materialism (Engels & Haldane, 1940); (Marx & Engels, 1957). Imprints of old materialism are apparent in Rig-Veda, Upanishads, Parana Kāśyapa, Ajita Keśakambalin (Frauwallner, 1973); (Philips, 2003); (Del Toso, 2012). New materialism does not premise on the cultural dispensation. The new materialism being analogous to historical materialism, as established by Marx and Engels, converges towards economic configuration (Veblen, 1907); (Goux, 1990); (Bennett, et. al., 2010) and is being studied in economic context in terms of its relation to money, material satisfaction (Parsons, 1934); (Richins & Rudmin, 1994); (Chiagouris & Mitchell, 1997); (Tatzel, 2002). Economic materialism articulates the same view that the only thing that subsists is materials and its engagements (Lange, [1865] 1925). It was given a metaphysical inference and was designated as a conjectural notion (Stalin & Stalin, 1940) in philosophy. In the primeval philosophy, the term semi-materialist was used to demarcate and realise the sophisticated accomplishments. The dialectical materialism as expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels befell as a detailed conception for reconnoitring the evolution of humankind. The dialectical materialism notion proclaimed that conflict arises as a result of material needs of people. The economic materialism was a streamlined interpretation that assesses people solitary through acquisitive celebrity, which has been identified as extra-terrestrial to historical materialism (Cosgrove, 1989); (Schaff, 2013). The contemporary research in materialism has associated the notion of materialism as reinforcement to consumer culture (Eastman, et. al., 1997); (Kasser & Kanner, 2004) and has been criticised by all major religions as it is said to be associated with atheism (Belk, 1983). The allies of secularism have been criticized as they are supposed to be opponents of societal interests (Belk, 1983).

Contemporary Notions of Materialism:

The interpretation of materialism has evolved through centuries around thrust for material. Economic materialism, which is the focus of our study, has been conceptualized in different ways. Various efforts have been put forwards to define and explain the construct, nature, background and detriments of materialism. Many definitions have been proposed and many attempts have been made to describe the characteristics of materialistic people. Materialism was recognized as an arrangement to disentangle the purposes of individuals in the world that observes the material or physical things as supreme important (Cornforth, 1956). An attempt made in last century to describe the attributes of materialistic people was made by (Vedder, 1964) who said that ‘materialists are those who worship things and the pursuit of possessions takes the place of religion in structuring their lives and orienting their behaviours.’ (Ward and Wackman, 1971) gave the conceptualization of materialism as ‘an orientation, which views material goods and money important for personal happiness and social progress’. He acclaimed that a materialistic person believes in prosperity and affluence, worldly goods form a significant place in his life. Material goods brings him contentment and play important role in his development. (Moschis and Churchill, 1978) defined

materialism as, “an orientation emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress.” (Daun, 1983) described materialism as a life style, which aims at colossal consumption of material goods. He argues that in materialistic way of life, consumption becomes a yardstick as well as a point of reference for social comparisons. (Mukerji, 1983) portrayed materialism as a cultural system in which one sustains with a social purpose held secondary to material aspirations. Materialism is also described as desire for worldly possessions (Mukerji, 1983).

The initial effort to define and explain the construct, nature, background and detriments of materialism was made by (Russell W. Belk 1985). (R. W. Belk, 1985) put forward the interpretation of materialism as a personality trait (Belk, 1983). He has defined materialism as ‘an importance an individual attaches to the worldly possessions... At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in the person’s life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction’ (Belk 1984, p. 291). He put forward that materialistic tendencies get reflected from the character of an individual. The materialistic person would be envy, non-generous and possessive (Belk, 1985). Possessiveness means that one is concern about loss of possessions, inclination towards saving and retaining possessions, non-generosity reflects unwillingness to share possessions with others, reluctant to lend or donate possessions to others and negative attitude towards charity and envy involves desire for other’s possessions.

Belk described materialism as a pro-social behaviour. Belk’s contribution in materialism was huge as it brought the philosophical, psychological and economic aspects under one conception. (Rassuli & Hollander 1986) described materialism as a state of mind and behavioural approach in which a person is interested in spending money for attainment of material goods. (Inglehart, 1989) explained that a person is said to be materialistic when fulfillment of lower order needs related to material comfort and physical comfort get priority over higher order needs such as self-expression, belonging, aesthetic satisfaction and quality of life. In 1989 the term materialism was defined in Oxford dictionary as “Devotion to material needs and desires, to the neglect of spiritual matters; a way of life, opinion, or tendency based entirely upon material interests.” (Easterlin and Crimmins in 1991) have defined materialism or private materialism as, a value usually taken to refer to “the pursuit of one’s own material well-being” (Manchanda, et. al., 2015) The other way in which materialism has been conceptualized is as value that one manifests to acquisition and consumption of material goods (Inglehart 1981); (Richins and Dawson 1992). There are individual differences in manifestation of materialism. High materialism has been related to low level of well-being and relegated life satisfaction (Belk, 1985); (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

(Richins & Dawson 1992) took the research on materialism in different direction and established the materialism as a function of value one gives to material objects. Higher the value of material goods in one’s life, higher would be the level of materialism. They ascertained that materialism is ‘Set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one’s life.’

In an enhanced explanation of materialism, it has been described by (Richins & Dawson 1992) as a consumer value, i.e. materialistic person takes material things as a central goal of life, as a path to happiness and as a scale to measure success. The characterization by (Richins & Dawson 1992) has been considered as a compliment over the work of Belk as both have touched different qualitative aspects (personality & consumer value respectively). Belk’s definition of materialism focuses on personality traits, which are endogenous, and forms the persona of an individual. Richin’s measurement focuses on personal values (not social values), which are exogenous and are affected by external settings in which one dwells. Materialistic person would value money differently from a non- materialistic individual as has inner urge to buy something every time (Belk, 1984); (Manchanda, 2015).

Further materialism has been expressed as a conjectural system where matter is assumed to be the only veracity for the humankind that takes them away from spiritualism and idealism (Popkin & Stroll, 1993). (Kasser & Ryan, 1993); (1996) further alleged that materialism is a function of intrinsic and extrinsic goals of ones life. Everything that one aims at does not go beyond the materialistic pursuits.

(Holt, 1995) conceptualizes materialism as “the consumption style that results when consumers perceive that value inheres in consumption objects rather than in experiences and people.” (O’Neil, 1997) explained materialism as a disorder that results in desire for material goods. Materialism afflicted person has collective addictions, character flaws, psychological wounds, neuroses, and behavioral disorders, which are originated or to a great extent aggravated by the presence money or wealth. Materialistic person would value the acquisition and possession of different products (Sirgy, 1999). Materialism has been conceptualized as

giving preference to financial aspirations over other fundamental ambitions and objectives (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). (Burrough and Rindfleisch, 2002) advanced the view of material value and explained it as a worth placed on the acquirement of material objects. Materialism prevail when materialistic goods abounds people that it is difficult for them to disregard them (Schaefer, Hermans, & Parker, 2004).

(Chan & Prendergast 2007) related materialism to happiness. They said a materialistic person feels happy when he possesses more material goods. The materialism has been associated with identity maintenance and construction of self through acquisition and possession of material goods. Its acuteness is determine through the degree to which individuals endeavor to employ material goods to edifice their personality and uphold the identity by the way of consumption (Wong, Shrum, Arif, Chugani, Gunz, Lowrey, & Scott; 2011). Oxford Dictionary (2012) defined materialism as giving importance to material things rather than spiritual values.

(Millar, M., & Thomas, R. 2009) observed the effect of materialism on the association amid activities like experiential or material purchase and happiness and found that materialistic people associate happiness with purchases of material goods rather than non-materialists. This highlights the positive impact of materialism on life satisfaction. Thought by others materialism has been reproached as a factor responsible for plummeting the satisfaction of life (Burrough & Rindfleisch, 2002); (Kasser, 2018); (Nagpaul, & Pang, 2017). Materialistic behaviour eventually brings unhappiness in person's life (Tsang, Carpenter, Roberts, Frisch, & Carlisle, 2014); (Kasser, 2018).

(Shrum, Wong, Arif, Chugani, Gunz, Lowrey, & Scott, K. 2013) further supplemented the disposition of individualism in the concept of materialism. They explained materialism as a quest for material goods intended for preservation of self as characterized by the material goods one embraces. He put forward the idea of materialism as 'construction of self through symbolic consumption.'

Materialism has also been identified as importance one places on possessing material goods and accumulating wealth. The inference was offered that material goods take a fundamental place in the lives of many consumers (Hudders & Pandelaere, 2012).

Recent conceptualization of materialism by (Dittmar, Bond, Hurst, & Kasser 2013) ascertains materialism as continuing and long-standing appreciation for material goods in endorsements of principles, aspirations and related values that depend on the magnitude of importance one gives to obtaining money, wealth and possessions that expresses one's position in society. Such behaviors differ from individual to individual. Materialism is an exaggerated phase of consumption, which has been in focus of consumer research (Srikant, 2013).

New Conceptualization for Contemporary Research:

After exploring the literature and keeping in view the contemporary views and identifications of the studies related to materialism, the conceptual definition of materialism has been formed as 'Materialism is 'a profound desire for material objects that acquire a significant place in one's life, demonstrate individuality and brings satisfaction (Manchanda, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS:

A conceptual framework that related to the concept under study offers the principal and fundamental background for the concept and further exploration can be done. The conceptual definition reflects the germane of the contemporary materialism studies, which contributes in the area of behavioral study. The study would be useful for academicians and behavioral scientists. The further studies can be carried out on exploration on materialism of different sections and segments of society. The positive side of materialism can be devised further to increase happiness and bring satisfaction on people's life.

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