

A Gender Centric Empirical Analysis of Materialism in India

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Abstract

Materialism as a personality trait is a key driver to the consumption tendencies of the target market. The study attempted to investigate if gender of a consumer can be a basis for significant differences in the pursuit of materialistic tendencies. Materialism is an inherent part of humankind and has existed since time immemorial. However, consequent to the increased exposure of the consumer to occidental culture through print and electronic media and in the backdrop of rapid economic strides and transforming societal norms in the urban parts of the country, an empirically oriented analysis was required to understand the intricacies of the consumer materialistic tendencies. Materialism was measured using the Richins and Dawson (1992), 18 – item, 5 – point, agreement – disagreement scale and subjected to t – test in order to compare materialism among the two independent samples consisting of men and women. The sample size consisted of 96 respondents under the age of 30, residing in the cities of Bhubaneswar and Brahmapur. The study revealed that in two of the eighteen variables used to measure materialism, there exist significant differences between the materialistic tendencies of men and women living in urban India. This translates into a somewhat varied behavior of men and women, as far as materialistic tendencies of consumer behavior are concerned.

Keywords: Materialism, Exposure, t-test, Independent sample.

1. Introduction:

The concept of materialism as an inherent constituent of life has been of interest to different streams of studies e.g. philosophy, theology, sociology, political science and marketing. In the field of marketing, owing to the increasing relevance of materialism in consumer behavior, efforts have been made in recent years to study, analyze and interpret materialism. Pioneering and extensive work in this regard has been done by Russell W. Belk (1991, 1990, 1988a, 1988b, 1985, 1984, 1983). Other recent consumer researchers who have contributed to the body of knowledge include Richins (1987), Fournier and Richins (1991), Richins and Dawson (1992), Richins (1994) etc.

Materialism is the ‘devotion to material needs and desires, to the neglect of spiritual matters; a way of life, opinion or tendency based entirely upon material interests’ (The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, 1995). The materialism of the consumer represents the degree of attachment a consumer has to worldly possessions. Belk introduced the idea of materialism as a personality trait. Materialism, as a personality trait, distinguishes between individuals who regard possessions as essential to their identities and their lives and those for whom possessions are secondary (Belk, 1985).

He proposed an indirect measurement system of materialism, mediated through personality traits whose aggregate manifestation, at different levels, serve as an indicator of the materialism of an individual (Belk, 1984). The three traits that he used are: possessiveness - the inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one's possessions (Belk, 1983), non-generosity - an unwillingness to give possessions or to share possession with others (Belk, 1984), and envy - an interpersonal attitude involving displeasure and ill-will at the superiority (of another person) in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable (Belk, 1984).

However, Richins and Dawson's scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992) has been equally popular due to its higher reliability scores (Graham, 1999). The scale conceptualizes materialism broadly as “a value that guides peoples choices and conduct in a variety of situations, including but not limited to, consumption arenas (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

The scale is based on three dimensions or “orienting values”: acquisition centrality - materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness - view (possessions and their acquisition) as essential to their satisfaction and well-being in life, and possession defined success - judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

The existing literature on materialism can be categorized into three groups (Kamineni, 2005):

1. Acquisition and possession-defined materialism;
2. Instrumental and terminal materialism;
3. Measurement of materialism through related constructs.

However, is materialism really a universal, can also be thought of as a style of consuming that structures the society into classes through distinctions that are situated in cultural capital that people possess. This cultural capital can be seen as set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge and practices that classifies people regardless of what they consume. Materialism may, thus, refer to the cultural understandings that are inscribed in consumption practices rather than the quantities and physical characteristics of consumption objects (Holt, 1998). According due consideration to the fact that materialism as a trait is generally viewed in a negative sense and considered an anathema in Indian culture, it would be rather interesting to gauge the materialistic tendencies in urban Indian consumers. Globalization has paved the way for urban Indian consumers to be exposed to the symbols of western materialism through Internet, the “information highway”. The emphasis on Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and the ability of the companies to explore and exploit all the “contact points” sees to it that the consumer has information at his disposal regarding the products available to him and their value – either through utility or through their snob appeal. The strategies of customization and customerisation have further ensured that the customer not only feels like a king but may also have to pay like a pauper.

2. Objectives of the Paper:

The main objectives of the present paper are to describe a conceptual framework of a gender centric empirical analysis of materialism in India. Since present paper is an attempt to investigate the effect of materialistic tendencies from the perspective of the customers as well as the marketers of a developing economy like India, it has following objectives:

- In the backdrop of these tumultuous changes that the urban Indian consumer is being subjected to, it would be interesting to find out if the materialistic tendencies differ between men and women.

3. Review of Literature on Sustainable Marketing:

Materialism has become an inherent part of consumer behaviour world over. As per a global survey conducted by Synovate, a market research company, comprising of 5500 respondents across 10 countries (India, China, Canada, France, Hungary, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Taiwan and Thailand), respondents under the age of 35 are the most attached to electronic devices while 45% of the respondents said they could not live without their mobile phones (Synovate, 2006). This inclination towards consumption and possession is prevalent and growing in urban India due to the rapid economic strides that the country has made in the last decade.

The Indian economy has attained a growth rate of 6.9% in the fiscal year 2004-05. Over the last decade, the Indian GDP has registered an average growth of 6%. The per capita income has also increased at the same rate over the last 5 years. According to a World Bank survey, India ranks fourth in the world, in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), next only to the USA, China and Japan. To add to this, India is the home to the youngest population in the world, where 50% of the population is under the age of 25, and 85% below that 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).

The growing working population in India and the increasing per capita income are responsible for the growing demand for lifestyle products and services. Indians are consuming more than ever before. This desire for consumption and possession, two very significant aspects of materialism, has resulted in an increase in discretionary spending by 16% for the upper and middle class Indians (CII & Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2005). According to India Luxury Trends 2006, India has over one million consumers for luxury goods which is greater than the adult population of several countries and this number is expected to treble by the year 2010 (The Knowledge Company, 2006).

The AC Nielsen Online Consumer Confidence and Opinion Survey, polling over 23,500 respondents in 42 markets from Europe, the Asia-Pacific, North America, South America, 66% of Indians are willing to purchase what they desire and are excited about trying out new products and services. The Indian consumers were found out to be the most optimistic with India finishing at the top of AC Nielsen's global ranking by scoring a confidence index of 132 points – 9 points ahead of the world's second most optimistic nation, New Zealand (AC Nielsen, 2006).

The authors believe that this necessitates a thoroughly scientific investigation into the materialistic tendencies of urban Indian consumers to ensure availability of a valid and reliable means of measuring individual differences in materialism.

4. Research Methodology:

The methodology was based on collection of primary data through a self-administered questionnaire using a sample consisting of men and women living in the cities of Bhubaneswar and Brahmapur, Orissa, India. Materialism was measured using the Richins and Dawson (1992), 18 – item measurement scale focusing on acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession defined success. The sample size consisted of 96 respondents under the age of 30. The sample had 49 men and 47 women. The research question was analyzed by using t – test to compare the materialistic tendencies of the two groups (independent samples) consisting of men and women (Malhotra, 2004; Kothari, 2004; Hair et al, 2006).

- Null hypothesis $H_0: \mu_1 = \mu_2$
- Alternate Hypothesis $H_1: \mu_1 \neq \mu_2$

5. Data Analysis and Findings:

Materialistic tendencies in men and women:

A t-test was undertaken to determine if there are any differences between men and women, as far as materialistic tendencies are concerned in Table- 1.

TABLE - 1

Comparison of Materialism Scores

Variables	Sex	Mean	Significance (Two-tailed)	t	Inference
1	M	3.4082	0.047	2.011	≤ 0.05
	F	2.9787			
2	M	3.7143	0.445	0.766	NS*
	F	3.5532			
3	M	2.7551	0.899	-0.127	NS
	F	2.7872			
4	M	3.5918	0.558	0.587	NS
	F	3.4468			
5	M	3.6735	0.154	1.438	NS
	F	3.3191			
6	M	2.7959	0.306	1.029	NS
	F	2.5532			

7	M	2.4898	0.942	-0.073	NS
	F	2.5106			
8	M	2.3878	0.315	-1.011	NS
	F	2.6383			
9	M	3.4082	0.672	-0.424	NS
	F	3.5106			
10	M	2.5306	0.934	0.083	NS
	F	2.5106			
11	M	4	0.165	1.401	NS
	F	3.7447			
12	M	3.7347	0.263	1.127	NS
	F	3.4468			
13	M	2.9592	0.495	0.685	NS
	F	2.8085			
14	M	3.1224	0.528	0.633	NS
	F	2.9574			
15	M	4.0408	0.074	1.809	NS
	F	3.6596			
16	M	3.449	0.044	-2.038	NS
	F	3.8723			
17	M	4	0.004	2.974	≤ 0.05
	F	3.4043			
18	M	3.8163	0.292	1.06	NS
	F	3.5957			
* Not Significant.					

A statistically significant difference was found in case of two items on the materialism scale:

1. **“I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.”** – Men ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.11$) feel strongly in comparison to women ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.99$) that they admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes, $t(94) = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$.
2. **“I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things”** - Men ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 0.81$) feel strongly in comparison to women ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.11$) that they would be happier if they could afford to buy more things, $t(94) = 0.04$, $p < 0.05$.

The study led to the inference that there is not much difference between the materialistic tendencies of men and women living in urban India. A statistically significant difference was found only in case of two items on the materialism scale. It indicates that men feel strongly in comparison to women that they admire people who exhibit their material possessions and believe that they would have been happier if they have more disposable income so that they could afford to buy more things.

The intellectual contribution of this study may be utilized to understand consumption patterns in urban India with specific reference to the contribution of gender towards buying decisions. It is all the more relevant in case of products that have a snob appeal and are gender centric e.g. perfumes, motor bikes etc. Further, the findings have to be given due consideration while devising an effective integrated marketing communication strategy that is intended to cater to the varied materialistic perceptions of different genders.

6. Conclusion:

There is a difference between the materialistic tendencies of men and women living in urban India. The subject though, needs continuous and profound exploration so that the influence of materialistic tendencies on consumer behavior can be utilized to the advantage of both: the company as well as the consumer.

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