Media, Materialism, and Human Happiness

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer values are frequent sources of concern for philosophers and social critics. Schudson (1984, p. 7), in his analysis of advertising and culture, summarizes from the work of a number of critics two descriptions of consumers enmeshed in the "consumer" or material culture. In one case,

> participants in consumer culture are seen as philistines; acquisitive and upwardly mobile, with sturdy character, perhaps, but bad values, working long hours and saving money to satisfy obsessive longings for whatever the next prestigious consumer good may be-the stereo, the home computer, the food processor, the videotape recorder.

In the second, more advanced state,

> character has degenerated and values have, in a sense, disappeared. There is no longer an obsessive striving after things but a mindless indulgence in them, and the problem is not so much the quest for the stereo or home computer but the assumption that all values inhere in or grow out of these objects.... Narcissism runs wild, the unguilty desire for objects and experiences to "pleasure" oneself runs free.

Implicit in these descriptions of the consumer culture is the idea that goods are a means to happiness; that satisfaction in life is not achieved by religious contemplation or social interaction or a simple life, but by possession and interaction with goods. Such an orientation fits well with Belk's definition of materialism as "the tendency to view worldly possessions as important sources of satisfaction in life" (Belk and Pollay 1985b, p. 394; see also Belk 1984).

Many critics have suggested that advertising increases materialism among consumers (see Pollay 1986). Christopher Lasch (1978), for instance, makes the accusation that advertising influences people to find life's meaning in the products they purchase and that advertising

> ... manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored. Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life (p. 72).

While critics have extensively argued for and against the possible ill effects of advertising on materialism, there is almost no empirical evidence on the subject. In his entire analysis and rather thorough literature review, Schudson does not cite a single empirical study investigating whether exposure to advertising influences consumers to value material goods more than they would otherwise. Further review has revealed only a few studies, all conducted with children, that empirically addresses the issue (Churchill and Moschis 1979; Goldberg and Gorn 1978; Moschis and Churchill 1978; Moschis and Moore 1982).

Thus, while there are plenty of studies of advertising effectiveness--which media are most effective, how much repetition is most effective, whether comparative ads are more effective than noncomparative, and so forth--there has been almost no empirical investigation of the effects of advertising on society.

This paper reviews some of the theoretical bases for some proposed relationships between advertising, material values, and life satisfaction. It also reports the results of an exploratory study of some of these relationships.

Advertising Exposure and Material Values

Advertising critics posit a relationship between advertising exposure and material values. What theories might account for such a relationship? The most directly relevant body of literature concerns media effects on the construction of social reality. The cultivation hypothesis suggests that media to some extent shape or cultivate people's perceptions of social reality. This is especially true when media

images are not entirely congruence with the typical environments of viewers or when viewers do not have alternative sources of information on which to base their judgments of social reality (see Hawkins and Pingree 1981 for a review).

Numerous studies of social realism have shown that television presents an unrealistic picture of many aspects of American life. For instance, more crime is shown on television than the average individual can expect to encounter in a lifetime, and older people appear on television dis-proportionately less than they exist in the population. Studies of heavy viewers of television indicate that these people have a much higher expectation of being crime victims than do light viewers (Gerbner et al 1980a; see however, Doob and Macdonald 1979); when asked how many older people there are in America, heavy viewers report a lover incidence than light viewers (Gerbner et al. 1980b). While these studies are of television exposure, rather than advertising exposure, the two are highly linked and thus basis for a relationship between advertising exposure and expectations is provided.

In the case at hand, the cultivation hypothesis would suggest that, to the extent that the media in general and advertising in particular show images of materially well-off consumers, those consumers exposed to heavy doses of advertising and other media would overestimate the material well-being of typical consumers (see Belk and Pollay 1985a,b and Friedman 1985 for the depiction of material themes in advertising and media). Further, the frequent pairing of products with happy consumers in television and other advertising may result in an unexamined belief that possessions bring happiness, leading consumers heavily exposed to such advertising to value material possessions more highly than those with less exposure.

There is some evidence that the impact of media images is mediated to some extent by how realistic these images are perceived to be, though this hypothesis has been tested primarily with children subjects (see Hawkins and Pingree 1982 for a review). Summing up research by a number of investigators, McLeod and Reeves (1980, p. 20) state:

> Perceiving program content to be realistic is assumed to make television information more socially useful and more likely to be assimilated equitably with information from nontelevision sources. Thus all or most of the impact of television exposure operates through the perception of reality as a conditional variable.

Material Values and Satisfaction

A potential link between materialism and happiness or life satisfaction has not been directly addressed by most critics. However, the tone of their statements implies that they expect materialistic people to be less happy than those with other values (see Pollay 1986; Schudson 1984). For materialistic people, material possession are frequently characterized as an addictive drug of which consumers need larger and larger doses to maintain happiness.

While theoretical support for a link between material values and happiness is neither strong nor direct, adaptation theory (Brickman and Campbell 1971; Campbell 1980) seems to suggest a negative link between the two. This theory suggests that individuals adapt to a level of satisfaction or comfort. Thus when a desired status or result is obtained, after a time the expectation level of what ones state should be rises, resulting in a gap between state and expectation. This gap between state and expectation is dissatisfaction (French, Rodgers, and Cobb 1974). Thus, those expecting material possessions to bring happiness may in fact experience satisfaction from their goods for a time, but through adaptation processes dissatisfaction will eventually reassert itself. Belk's (1984, 1985) studies of attitudes toward material possessions both found a negative relationship between these attitudes and happiness.

One school of life satisfaction research has investigated the domains of life satisfaction (e.g., Andrews and Inglehart 1979; Andrews and Withey 1976; Campbell 1980). Researchers have measured individuals' satisfaction with various "domains" of their lives such as their marriages, standard of living, health, community, and so forth, as well as overall level of life satisfaction. Using correlation and regression methodologies they have determined which domains contribute most to overall life satisfaction. In this research, material satisfaction, or satisfaction with standard of living, consistently shows a strong correlation with overall satisfaction, although the authors suggest that there are individual differences in how important the various domain; are in influencing overall satisfaction. Given the definition of material values provided above, it can be argued that the link between material satisfaction and overall satisfaction would be higher for more materialistic individuals.

Research Objectives

The above discussion leads to the following research questions addressed in this study.

1. What is the relationship between advertising exposure and material values? To what extent is this relationship moderated by perceived realism?

2. What is the relationship between material values and satisfaction with one's material possessions?

3. To what extent do material values mediate the relationship between material satisfaction and overall life satisfaction?

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Data were collected in a medium-size Sunbelt city using drop-off pick-up procedures to meet quotas of 50% male/ female, 50% over age 40, 50% under. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 284 respondents; 252 of the questionnaires were usable (26 cases were eliminated due to missing data on the income variable). Demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in Table I. While the sample is somewhat upscale, there is good representation across all levels of the demographic characteristics measured.

TABLE 1 (/volumes/v14/14353t01.gif)

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DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE (/volumes/v14/14353t01.gif)

Measures

Material values. While Russell Belk's (1985, 1985) measures of traits related to materialism (possessiveness, nongenerosity, envy) have undergone psychometric evaluation, they do not directly measure material values as defined above. For this reason, seven Likert-format items were generated for purposes of the study and are shown in Table 2. Initial principal components analysis with oblique rotation revealed that the items did not reflect a unidimensional construct, as three factors emerged using either a scree test of "eigenvalues greater than one" criterion. e the third factor had high loadings for only one variable (Item 7), the analysis was again performed with this item removed. Results are shown in Table 2. The first factor reflects the extent to which respondents believe more material possessions would increase their personal happiness, while factor 2 reflects a general belief that money can bring happiness. These two factors capture 60.5% of the variance among the items; correlation between the two factors is .32. All subsequent analyses employ summed scores, with personal material values consisting of items I through 4 (alpha-.73) and general material values of items 5 and 6 (alp a-.61).

Perceived Realism of Advertising. To measure bow realistic respondents perceive television advertising to be, realism was assessed for ads featuring four product categories: fast food restaurants, automobiles (manufacturer commercials), beer, and cosmetics/perfume. Respondents were asked to recall a specific commercial they had seen for each product category and to indicate how similar the people portrayed in them are to people in real life using seven-point scales ranging from "much more than people in real life" to "much less than people in real life." Similarity was measured across the dimensions of attractiveness, happiness, and wealth.

TABLE 2 (/volumes/v14/14354t02.gif)

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PRINCIPAL COMPONENTS ANALYSIS OF MATERLALISM ITEMS (STRUCTURE MATRIX) (/volumes/v14/14354t02.gif)

The midpoint of the scale (4) represents the case where commercial characters are seen as realistic portrayals. The absolute value of the difference between the category marked and the scale midpoint was used as the realism measure. Hence, a low value on the realism measure would indicate high perceived realism (low perceived discrepancy between advertising portrayals and real people). Because of the large amount of missing data on the cosmetics commercial variables (largely among male respondents), these variables were eliminated from subsequent analyses. The remaining items were summed to create a perceived realism scale (alpha-.82).

Media Exposure was measured with two items. The first asks how many hours per week the respondent watches television. Because this variable vas severely skewed, a logarithmic transformation was applied. The second item vas a 7-point scale that asked how often respondents pay attention to television commercials. Response categories ranged from nearly never (I) to almost always (7).

Satisfaction. Respondents rated their feelings about three life domains, including "income or standard of living" and overall life satisfaction using the "delighted ... terrible" scale described by Andrews and Withey (1976).

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Advertising Exposure and Material Values

The relationship between advertising exposure and material values was examined with two multiple regression analyses in which the two material values scales functioned as dependent variables and the two media exposure variables the predictors. The correlations between the exposure variables and general material values were not significant. For personal material values, only the beta for television exposure was significant "beta" .17, p<.01). The relationship is very weak, however, and the exposure variable accounts for only about 4 percent of the variance in personal material values. Furthermore, an examination of the residuals when the logarithmic transformation of the television exposure variable was used versus residuals using the untransformed measure suggests that the relationship is nonlinear. As amount of television viewing increases, an increasingly large rise in viewing is needed to result in a change in level of materialism.

The Mediating Role of Perceived Realism

Because communication researchers have found that the impact of media on attitudes is influenced by how realistic media content is perceived to be, analyses using the framework described by Sharma et al. (1981) were carried out to determine if perceived realism moderates this relationship. Moderated regression analysis showed a significant relationship between realism and general materialism variables but no interaction; perceived realism correlates with general materialism regardless of level of advertising of television exposure.

For personal materialism, however, realism serves as a pure moderator in that it has no zero order relationship with materialism, but the prediction of materialism is significantly improved when interaction terms (realism X exposure) are placed in the equation (p<.05). This suggests that the form of the relationship between exposure and general materialism varies across levels of perceived realism. These differences were examined using subgroup analysis .

The median of the realism variable was used to split the sample into two groups. Regression analyses assessing the relationship between media exposure and materialism were performed separately for the high and low realism subgroups. Results are reported in Table 3. They suggest that realism is a precondition for a relationship between exposure and materialism to occur. When commercials are perceived to be atypical representations of real consumers, there is no relationship between exposure and personal materialism. When character portrayals in advertising are perceived to be accurate, however, a significant relationship between exposure and personal materialism does occur. Realism does not, however, serve as a moderator for the general materialism variable.

Material Values and Material Satisfaction

The second research question concerning the relationship between materialism and material satisfaction was tested using hierarchical multiple regression. Because level of income has been shown to correlate highly with material satisfaction, partial correlations controlling for income were calculated. The squared partial correlation for the set of independent variables (general materialism and personal materialism) was significant (R2ya b-a089 p<.01).

TABLE 3 (/volumes/v14/14354t03.gif)

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BETA WEIGHTS FOR MATERIALISM AND MEDIA EXPOSURE WITH CONTROLS FOR REALISM (/volumes/v14/14354t03.gif)

The relationship between general material values and material satisfaction is not significant (beta-.09, p > .10); that for personal material values was more substantial (beta--.31, p<.O I), even after effects of income are controlled for. These analyses indicate that more materialistic people (as measured by the personal materialism scale) are more dissatisfied with their standard of living than less materialistic people.

Life Satisfaction

Numerous studies have shown that material satisfaction or satisfaction with ones standard of living is an important correlate of overall life satisfaction. Further, it has been suggested that the strength of this relationship may vary across subgroups, although the composition of these subgroups has not been specified. The following analyses assess whether material values mediate this relationship; namely, whether the correlation between material satisfaction and overall satisfaction is higher for materialistic individuals than for less materialistic ones.

The sample was split at the median of the personal materialism scale and the correlation between material satisfaction and overall satisfaction calculated for each half. As in the previous analysis, hierarchical regression vas used to first control for the effects of income. Squared partial correlations were .13 and .27 for the low and high materialism groups, respectively (p<.01). Thus it appears that the extent to which one believes material possessions bring personal happiness correlates with overall life satisfaction, and this relationship is moderated by the extent to which overall happiness depends on material happiness.

The same set of analyses was performed after reforming the sample based on splits of the general material values scale. No difference in the strength of relationship was observed between the three subgroups. Thus, while personal materialism mediates the relationship between material satisfaction and life satisfaction, general material values do not serve the same function.

DISCUSSION

This very exploratory study makes some suggestions about the relationships between media exposure, materialism, and human happiness. With respect to materialism, the measure used here yielded two dimensions that have not been previously addressed in the literature: personal materialism and general materialism. Of the two dimensions, the personal materialism dimension seems the richer construct in terms of relationships. This variable correlated with media exposure and material satisfaction, and it mediated the relationship between material satisfaction and life satisfaction. On the other hand, only one studied relationship was significant for the general materialism measure: respondents who believed advertising to realistically portray typical consumers had higher scores on the general materialism measure.

There are a couple of possible explanations for the poverty of the general materialism construct. First, the measure of this construct was somewhat unsatisfactory. The measure consisted of only two items that were moderately correlated. Rather than dismissing this construct, then, future research needs to improve the measure to accurately determine the construct's role in the material scheme of things. Alternatively, the general materialism construct may be less useful because it is a more abstract, less personal concept. Personal values rather than general social values may be more relevant in influencing individual behavior. Further, the general nature of the questions asked may also make them more subject to social desirability biases or unthinking endorsement of social maxims, attenuating observed correlations.

This study examined the relationship between media exposure and materialism. The correlations between attention to commercials and materialism were not significant. Those between hours watching television and materialism were significant only for those who perceived television commercials to be realistic portrayals of consumers. This is a provocative finding, and more research needs to be done in this area. For instance, it would be useful to know if the operative construct is perceived realism of commercials or a more general construct of perceived realism of all media representations. This could be examined by studying perceived realism of program content, advertising other than television commercials, and even perceived realism of such media as popular literature. It would also be useful to know what factors influence perceived realism and what demographic subgroups are most likely to perceive media representations as accurate.

Future research also needs to improve the perceived realism measures. The recall measures used here suffer from many forms of bias and selectivity. A better approach would be to actually expose subjects to commercials or television programs and assess how realistic these specific stimuli are perceived to be.

Previous research (Belk 1984, 1985) found a significant relationship between material values and happiness. This study provides some idea of how this relationship operates. Materialism may influence how satisfied a consumer is with his or her standard of living, and further, the extent to which satisfaction with ones standard of living affects overall feelings of life satisfaction.

The study reported here is strictly correlational. Despite the relevance of causal questions concerning the impact of advertising and other media on material values and life satisfaction, answers to causal questions remain elusive given the methodology available in the social sciences. Given the inadequacy of experimental methods for assessing anything but very short term media effects (Pollay 1986), future studies must address these questions with well-formulated and carefully controlled correlational studies.

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