

Exploring the psychological mechanisms underlying the cognitive and affective responses to consumption desires

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to examine the psychological mechanisms through which the internal responses that accompany consumption desires occur. The research is based on a conceptual model where these responses are assumed to follow from consumers' propensity to desire consumption objects, which itself is hypothesized to be a function of materialistic values and social pressures.

A survey was conducted among a sample of 203 North-American adult consumers in order to assess the various concepts of the theoretical framework and test the hypothesized relationships. This was accomplished by means of a series of mediation analyses performed on the basis of the collected data.

The overall pattern of results is consistent with the proposed theoretical model, showing that the effects of general materialism and susceptibility to social influence on the various affective and cognitive responses that accompany consumption desires are mediated, totally or partially, by the extent to which one is inclined to desire consumption objects.

Key Words: consumption desires, materialism, internal responses

Background

Although theoretical accounts of consumer motivation commonly assume that consumption is guided by hierarchically-organized individual goals that derive from problems, or unsatisfied needs (e.g., Baumgartner and Pieters, 2008), it must be recognized that in economically developed societies, consumers are fundamentally motivated by the pursuit of happiness, an end-goal that they seek to achieve in good part through the formation and fulfillment of consumption desires (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003; Boujbel and d'Astous, 2015; Dholakia, 2015).

Despite their importance for understanding consumer behavior in general, and consumer motivation in particular, little is known about consumption desires. Research by Belk, Ger, and Askegaard (2003) and Boujbel and d'Astous (2015) suggests that desiring is a psychological experience that is accompanied by internal responses that are probably more

complex than those associated with primary needs. Thus, while desiring a consumption object may correspond to a pleasurable experience, it may also lead to frustration when the desire cannot be satiated, or guilt when it is felt as unreasonable, and may prompt the person to engage in psychological control.

Desiring is indeed a psychological experience leading to ambivalent feelings (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003). Recent research by Boujbel and d'Astous (2015) has revealed that the internal responses that accompany consumption desires relate to affective (i.e., pleasure, discomfort, and guilt) as well as cognitive (i.e., control) dimensions. Thus, to think of a desired object gives pleasure, not only because the act of desiring is fantasy-like (e.g., d'Astous and Deschênes, 2005), but also because joy and satisfaction are anticipated (Belk, 1985). This pleasure is however likely to be greatly diminished when, for some reasons (e.g., lack of financial resources, social or cultural constraints), the desire cannot be fulfilled. This in turn may lead to a state of discomfort and if, for instance, the individual still pursues the consumption desire experience, even strong feelings of guilt. This in part explains why individuals may engage in controlling their consumption desires, trying to postpone or suppress their satiation.

Boujbel and d'Astous (2015) have developed a psychometrically valid instrument to assess the internal responses that accompany the experience of desiring consumption objects (i.e., goods or experiences). Their scale is composed of 19 items aimed at evaluating the extent to which consumers associate each of four different responses to the experience of desiring consumption objects: pleasure, discomfort, guilt, and control. However, Boujbel and d'Astous (2015) did not look at the psychological processes by which these desired-based internal responses come along. The objective of this research is to propose and test a theoretical model of these processes.

Conceptual development

The conceptual framework of this research is displayed in Figure 1. As can be seen, it is proposed that consumers' level of general materialism and the extent to which they admit being influenced by others when choosing and buying products are determinants of their propensity to desire consumption objects. In turn, this propensity influence the degree to which the internal responses that accompany the experience of desiring consumption objects (i.e., pleasure, discomfort, guilt, and control) occur. Thus, this model's basic hypothesis is that one's propensity to desire consumption objects acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between the internal responses that consumers activate when desiring consumption objects, and their level of materialism and susceptibility to social influence in a consumption context.

Materialism and consumption desires

Research has shown that consumers' level of materialism influences the extent to which they engage in consumption activities. Fitzmaurice and Comegys (2006) found a statistically significant relationship between consumers' materialism and how much time and money they spend on shopping. Watson (2003) on the other hand found that materialistic consumers have a positive attitude toward credit and are more likely to borrow money in order to buy products that may not be essential. These findings are consistent with the idea that consumers who are guided by materialistic values tend to desire consumption products to a greater extent. Some authors (Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992) even see the desire to possess products as a basic facet of the concept of materialism. Richins's (1987) much utilized scale, for instance, has two dimensions that are termed "general materialism" and "individual materialism". While general materialism refers to beliefs regarding the relationship between money and happiness (e.g., "It's really true that money can buy happiness"), individual materialism refers

to beliefs that buying and possessing products can bring personal happiness (e.g., “I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things”). It appears therefore that in the case of this well-known scale, individual materialism is not conceptually distinct from one’s tendency to desire consumption objects. Hence, in the context of the present research it is the general materialism dimension of the concept that is of relevance.

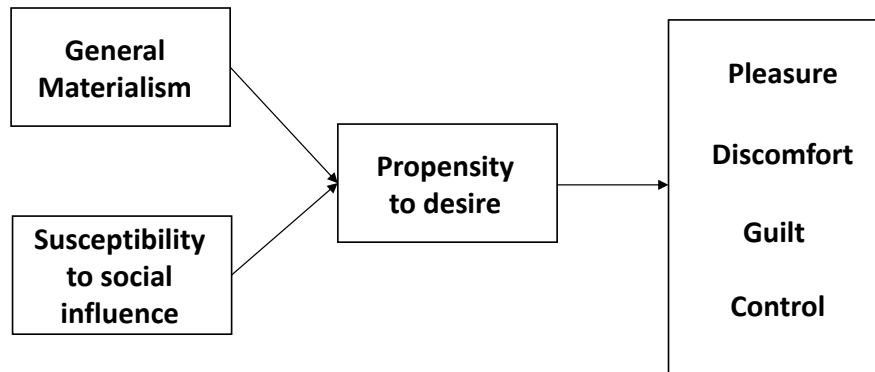


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

Susceptibility to social influence and consumption desires

Desiring consumption products is a way of feeding one’s hope to achieve a certain social status or to be accepted by important others (Hoffmann, Baumeister, Förster, and Vohs, 2012). An object is desired not only for its utility, but also for the image that it helps to project in one’s social environment. Individuals in general seek to attain a minimum of social recognition (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, and Schreindorfer, 2013) and consumption appears as a privileged means to get this. Consumption desires therefore participate in one’s identity construction (Dholakia, 2015), just as it is the case with possessing objects (Belk, 1988) and having consumption dreams (d’Astous and Deschênes, 2005).

Social factors are important determinants in the process by which consumption desires are formed. As argued by Belk, Ger, and Askegaard(2003), consumption desires stem in part from the need to interact with others because they imply some social connection. This connection may unfold through *mimesis*, as when one tries to imitate the desires of important people. The social environment in general also has an important role in how desires are created and evolve. Socialization agents (family, friends, and educators) contribute to create desires by stimulating consumers’ imagination. In other words, desires stem from one’s mind which itself is nourished by the physical, commercial, and social environments (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard, 2003). Hence, the extent to which consumers use others as information sources for making their consumption choices and as reference points for consumption decisions (i.e., susceptibility to social influence) should influence positively their propensity to desire consumption objects.

Method and results

Overview

A survey was conducted among a sample of 203 adult consumers in order to assess the various concepts of the theoretical framework(Figure 1) and test the hypothesized relationships. This was accomplished by means of a series of mediation analyses performed on the basis of the collected data.

Measures

The scale aimed at measuring the respondent's propensity to desire consumption objects was developed specifically for this research. The items are based on a scale used by d'Astous and Deschênes (2005) to assess people's propensity to engage in consumption dreaming. It is composed of four items: "In general, I desire new products or services all the time"; "I am a person with little desire for new products and services" (reversed); "I often have in mind an object (product, service, or brand) that I desire"; and "In general, I spend a great deal of time thinking about my consumption desires". All other measures used in this study are based on or adapted from existing scales. The concept of materialism was assessed using Richins's (1987) six-item scale. Four of these items reflect individual materialism (e.g., "It is important to me to have really nice things") whereas the other two items reflect general materialism (e.g., "It's really true that money can buy happiness"). Although the interest in this study centers on people's general materialism (i.e., as a value), the entire scale was used in the questionnaire. Susceptibility to social influence was measured with eight items from Bearden, Netemeyer, and Tell's (1989) scale (e.g., "It is important for me to buy products and brands other people like"). Finally, the affective and cognitive responses that accompany consumption desires were measured with Boujbel and d'Astous's (2015) four-dimensional scale: pleasure (6 items – e.g., "I really enjoy it when I know that I'll be able to buy a product or a brand that I really desire"); discomfort (5 items – e.g., "When I can't buy myself a product or a brand that I desire, I feel frustrated"); guilt (4 items – e.g., "Sometimes, I feel ambivalent between my will to satisfy my consumption desires and the ensuing guilt"); and control (4 items – e.g., "In general, I can control my desires to buy products and brands).

Data collection

The data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire that was distributed using a drop-off delivery survey procedure. A total of 551 dwellings in a sample of streets located in residential areas of a major North American city were visited in order to secure the participation of adult consumers. Among the 322 potential respondents that could be contacted (contact rate = 58%), 248 accepted to fill in the questionnaire (acceptance rate = 77%). Seventeen of the 220 questionnaires that were picked up were incomplete or badly filled in, resulting in a total of 203 valid questionnaires for analysis (response rate based on total number of contacts: 63%).

Psychometric assessment of the measures

The items of the different scales were factor analyzed (i.e., principal components) for dimensionality as well as discriminant validity assessment. The factor analysis of the susceptibility to social influence items resulted in a single factor explaining 69.6% of the total variance. The items of the Richins (1987) scale loaded on two dimensions that reflected, as expected, general and individual materialism. The factor analysis of the four items purported to assess one's propensity to desire consumption objects led to a single factor. However, the reversed item had a very low communality (0.17) and was therefore eliminated. The two general materialism items and the three propensity to desire items were factor analyzed altogether, which resulted in two distinct factors (total explained variance: 70.7%; materialism: 49.9%, propensity: 20.8%) where each item loaded on its respective factor (minimum loading: 0.73). This provided empirical evidence that the two measures were adequate from a discriminant validity point of view. Reliability was very good in the case of the susceptibility to social influence ($\alpha = 0.94$) and propensity to desire ($\alpha = 0.85$).

scales, but somewhat low as regards the two-item measure of general materialism ($r = 0.19$, $p < .01$). The mean of the items served as a measure of the concepts.

The three propensity to desire items were factor analyzed with all items aimed at measuring affective and cognitive responses to consumption desires. This resulted in five factors where each item loaded on its proper factor (total explained variance: 73.6%; discomfort: 35.4%, pleasure: 13.8%, control: 11.6%, guilt: 7.9%, propensity to desire: 4.9%). These results provided evidence that the scales are well differentiated. The reliability of the responses scales were high (minimum alpha: 0.83).

Sample description

Female participants were slightly more numerous than male participants (51.7% and 48.3%, respectively). The age of respondents varied from 18 to 82 years with a mean of 38 (standard deviation: 16.35). The participants were well educated with 68.8% of them having attended the university (students represented 26.8% of the total sample). About one-third of the sample reported a household annual income of more than 120,000\$, a result that is consistent with the sample's fairly high level of education.

Mediation analyses

The research hypotheses were tested by means of a series of regression-based mediation analyses (Hayes, 2013; MacKinnon, 2008). The first step consisted in testing through multiple regression analysis the combined effect of the independent variables, namely general materialism and susceptibility to social influence, on the mediating variable (i.e., propensity to desire consumption objects), as this is a necessary condition for concluding that mediation is taking place. As shown in Table 1 (Model 1), both variables had a positive and statistically significant effect on the mediator (materialism: beta = 0.13, $t(197) = 1.90$, $p < .05$ ¹; social influence: beta = 0.53, $t(197) = 6.53$, $p < .001$).

Subsequent steps of the analysis consisted in regressing each dependent variable (i.e., the affective and cognitive responses that accompany consumption desires: pleasure, discomfort, guilt, and control – Model 2 to 5) on the independent variables and the mediator. It is concluded that mediation takes place when the effect of the mediator is statistically significant in the context of these models.

As can be seen by looking at the results displayed in Table 1, in all cases (i.e., Models 2 to 5), the mediating variable (i.e., propensity to desire consumption objects) was statistically significant. In two cases (i.e., discomfort and control), the analysis revealed a total mediation effect of propensity to desire. As for the other two models, susceptibility to social influence still had a direct effect in the context of the pleasure response while in the case of guilt, it was materialism which had a direct effect.

The statistical significance of all indirect effects was ascertained via the PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). The estimates along with their bootstrap 90% confidence intervals are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, none of the confidence intervals contains the value zero. To complement these results, Sobel tests are displayed in the table and they all are statistically significant.

In conclusion, the overall pattern of results is consistent with the proposed theoretical model since it shows that the effects of general materialism and susceptibility to social influence on the various affective and cognitive responses that accompany consumption desires are

¹When the estimated effects of explanatory variables are based on directional hypotheses, one-tailed tests are used in all analyses. Two-tailed tests are used otherwise (i.e., testing the direct effects of the independent variables on the dependent variables).

mediated, totally (in the case of the discomfort and control responses) or partially (in the case of pleasure and guilt), by the extent to which one is inclined to desire consumption objects.

Table 1
Regression-Based Mediation Analyses

| Model | Dependent Variable | Independent Variables | Standardized Coefficients | R ² |
|---------|----------------------|---|--|----------------|
| Model 1 | Propensity to desire | General Materialism Susceptibility to Social Influence | 0.13* 0.43*** | 0,49*** |
| Model 2 | Pleasure | General Materialism Susceptibility to Social Influence Propensity to Desire | 0.01 ^{NS} 0.17* 0.48** | 0.58*** |
| Model 3 | Discomfort | General Materialism Susceptibility to Social Influence Propensity to Desire | -0.05 ^{NS} 0.13 ^{NS} 0.41*** | 0.48*** |
| Model 4 | Guilt | General Materialism Susceptibility to Social Influence Propensity to Desire | -0.16* 0.14 ^{NS} 0.36*** | 0.43*** |
| Model 5 | Control | General Materialism Susceptibility to Social Influence Propensity to Desire | -0.10 ^{NS} -0.02 ^{NS} -0.33*** | 0.38*** |

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; NS : not statistically significant

Table 2
Tests of Indirect Effects

| Hypothesized Mediating Process | Est. Indirect Effect | Bootstrap C.I. (90%) ^a | Sobel Test (Z) ^b |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Materialism→Propensity→Pleasure | 0.08 | 0.01; 0.17 | 1.82* |
| Materialism→Propensity→Discomfort | 0.06 | 0.01; 0.14 | 1.78* |
| Materialism→Propensity→Guilt | 0.07 | 0.01; 0.16 | 1.69* |
| Materialism→Propensity→Control | -0.04 | -0.11; -0.02 | -1.66* |
| Social→Propensity→Pleasure | 0.27 | 0.19; 0.37 | 4.81*** |
| Social→Propensity→Discomfort | 0.21 | 0.14; 0.31 | 4.29*** |
| Social→Propensity→Guilt | 0.24 | 0.15; 0.35 | 3.86*** |
| Social→Propensity→Control | -0.14 | -0.22; -0.07 | -3.58*** |

* $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

^a Bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 samples generated with 200 resampled observations (3 missing values). The 90% level of confidence reflects the predicted directionality of the estimates.

^b One-tailed tests.

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with previous research having theorized about and corroborated the existence of a relationship between the need to be accepted by important others (e.g., social recognition) and consumption. As shown by Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982), people form impressions of others partly through observing the products that they consume. It is therefore logical that the importance attached to the opinions of others be positively related to one's propensity to desire consumption objects. They are also consistent with research having shown that materialism is positively related to the propensity to engage in consumption activities (e.g., Fitzmaurice and Comegys, 2006). This latter finding is even more relevant since this study specifically focused on the effects of general materialism on the propensity to desire consumption products and associated internal responses, in an attempt to eliminate the possibility that a positive correlation between desiring products and materialism be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the latter concept would include the notion of deriving pleasure from buying products (e.g., Richins, 1987). This conceptual distinction between materialism as a general value and the propensity to desire consumption products is analogical to that made years ago by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) who argued that people's beliefs should be considered distinct from their attitudes.

A significant contribution of this research is that it did not restrict itself to simply examining the impact of consumers' materialism and susceptibility to social influence on their propensity to desire consumption objects; it also looked at the direct and indirect effects of these two determinants of people's consumption desires on the experience of desiring products, more specifically on the internal responses that this experience commonly generates. This approach offers a fine-grained analysis which allows a more comprehensive understanding of the processes which underlie the experience of desiring consumption objects. In particular, the results have shown that these responses entail different mediating processes. Thus while susceptibility to social influence has both a direct and indirect impact on the pleasure and discomfort felt when desiring consumption objects, it only has an indirect effect on people's feeling of guilt and their inclination to engage in controlling their desires. Similarly, while there are direct and indirect effects of general materialism on guilt, this is not the case with the three other responses where the effects of materialism are totally explained by the propensity to desire.

Since this is an exploratory study, one can only speculate about the psychological processes that lead to these differentiated mediating effects. A first observation concerns the direct effects of consumers' susceptibility to social influence on the pleasure and discomfort responses that accompany the experience of desiring consumption objects. This indicates that, irrespective of their natural propensity to desire, consumers who attach some importance to people's opinions about products (informational social influence) and who want their approval (normative social influence) are more likely to derive pleasure from desiring products and more likely to feel frustrated if they cannot satiate their desires. Desiring consumption objects therefore represents a means to fulfill consumers' need for social approval, leading to pleasant feelings when anticipating the purchase of products that important others favor and annoyance when they foresee that these desires will not be satisfied. Interestingly and consistent with these results, consumers' susceptibility to social influence does not impact the extent to which desiring products activate feelings of guilt and perceived self-control.

The observation of a direct negative effect of general materialism on feelings of guilt during the consumption desire experience (Table 1) along with a positive indirect effect (Table 2) is an intriguing result. While general materialism leads to stronger feelings of guilt because it is associated with a greater propensity to desire consumption objects, more materialistic consumers, irrespective of their propensity to desire, are less inclined to feel guilty when experiencing consumption desires. These opposite effects probably explain why the simple correlation between general materialism and guilt is not statistically significant ($r = -.02, p > .78$, not shown in the tables). In her study of the impact of materialism on consumers' product-evoked emotions during the purchase process, Richins (2013) also found no statistical relationship between materialism and guilt. Apparently this result was expected because, as she mentioned, arguments can be advanced for a positive or a negative relationship (unfortunately, she did not detailed these arguments). Although her result concurs with the results of the present study, it is worth noting that in her study, guilt was assessed with a single item, leaving open the possibility that the non-observation of a relationship between the two variables might be due to the unreliability of the guilt measure. In contrast, in her research about splurge purchases and materialism, Fitzmaurice (2008) observed that highly materialistic consumers had stronger feelings of guilt than their less materialistic counterparts when reflecting upon a splurge (or extravagant) purchase made in the last six months. However, the fact that she did not provide a clear explanation for this somewhat surprising result, in the context of an exploratory study dealing with what might be considered a singular purchase episode, along with a small sample size ($n = 107$), are factors that cast doubt on the reliability of this observed relationship. The conceptual framework developed in this study offers a more convincing explanation of the effects of materialism on consumers' feelings of guilt by showing their underlying psychological mechanisms (i.e., the mediating role of propensity to desire).

Conclusion

This study is the first to investigate the causal determinants of consumers' cognitive and affective responses when they experience consumption desires. Further studies should be undertaken in order to verify if the relationships that were uncovered can be replicated. It would be particularly pertinent in these endeavors to use a more reliable measure of general materialism than the one used in this study. As argued in this paper, the concept of individual materialism (Richins, 1987) appears to share too much conceptual similarity with the propensity to desire consumption objects. Consequently, some effort should be devoted to the construction of a materialism scale that is distinct from consumption desires, a scale focusing on people's fundamental beliefs about the importance of acquiring material goods in the quest for happiness.

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