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How materialism affects environmental beliefs, concern, and environmentally responsible behavior

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between materialism, environmental beliefs, environmental concern, and environmental behaviors. The study used a random telephone survey of 337 US adults. Using a causal modeling approach, the study demonstrates that materialism has a negative effect on environmental beliefs, and these beliefs positively affect environmental concern and environmentally responsible behaviors. The article then provides implications of the results for consumer and environmental policy.

Keywords: Materialism; Environment; Environmentally responsible behavior; Environmental concern

1. Introduction

The role of the environment in market behavior has taken many turns over the last thirty years. Prior foci of research include identifying environmentally concerned consumers (Alwitt and Pitts, 1996; Kinnear et al., 1974), green marketing strategies (Menon and Menon, 1997), socially responsible consumption (Fisk, 1973), energy conservation (Leonard-Barton, 1981), and sustainable consumption (Kilbourne et al., 1997) among many others. Many argue that environmental awareness and concern have increased since the early 1970's, but an attitude–behavior gap still exists (Alwitt and Pitts, 1996). This gap refers to the fact that "environmentally concerned" consumers do not seem to show any consistent preference for environmentally friendly products in their purchase behavior. Smith (1999) and Dowie (1995) suggest that while, on the surface, environmentalism appears to be increasing in the US, the environmental movement fails to deliver substantial changes in behavior.

This raises two vexing questions. Why does the attitude–behavior gap persist? What public policy will encourage consumers to be more environmentally benign in their purchase behavior? Certainly, many studies examine the relationship between consumer action and the environment. However, consensus is lacking as to why negligible progress occurs in transitioning to more sustainable consumption behavior or why efficacious policy alternatives have not been forthcoming. The one consistent premise in much of the research on the environmental consequences of market behavior is that both the quality and quantity of consumption in Western industrial societies are complicit in the environmental problem (Capra, 1982; Jones, 1987; Porritt, 1984).

Carson (1962) characterizes environmental decline as an economic phenomenon, and Fisk (1973) brings the environment into the marketing literature as a consumption problem. However, most of the research that followed was not systemic and tended to focus on symptoms of environmental degradation such as pollution, resource decline, and waste disposal rather than root causes. Kilbourne and Beckmann (1998) provide a summary of environmental studies within the marketing literature that clearly demonstrates this. Porritt (1984) and Jones (1987) make the same argument suggesting that a thorough examination of the institutions of Western society is necessary for enduring changes toward environmental stability.

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Arguably, the institution most in need of examination and critique is consumption itself. The literature only recently relates consumption to the environment *per se*. The present article focuses on the problem of materialism, or more specifically, the centrality of consumption in the Western industrial lifestyle and its role in individuals' willingness to adopt more environmentally benign consumption types.

Numerous authors address the question of consumption in the environmental context (e.g., see Capra, 1982; Daly, 1991; Porritt, 1984; Trainer, 1985). All argue from a conceptual framework rather than an empirical one however, and all address the consequences of excess consumption from the perspectives of pollution, waste, resource depletion, or some other side effect of consumption behavior. None addresses the impact of consumption practices from the perspective of the values and beliefs that guide individuals' consumption behaviors.

The present article redresses this deficiency by examining the role of certain consumption patterns and the values that drive them in the formation of environmental beliefs, expressions of environmental concern, and environmentally responsible consumption behaviors (ERBs). In developing the model, the particular form of consumption referred to as materialism is presented first. Certainly, not all levels or types of consumption are equally complicit in environmental degradation. The marketing literature, for example, substantiates green marketing efforts well, although Alwitt and Pitts (1996) question their efficacy in reducing environmentally damaging consumption practices.

2. Materialism

A diverse set of materialism constructs evolved over the last few decades. Bredemeier and Toby (1960) argue that consumers in the US believe the acquisition of material goods leads to the fulfillment of life. They also argue that materialism is the cause of many social problems. More recently, Belk (1985) characterizes materialism as the importance attached to worldly possessions. Others suggest that possessions affect perceptions of well-being (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) and act as identity markers (Micken and Roberts, 1999). Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) argue that materialism is a cluster of values related to possessions. While these definitions each describe materialism in slightly different ways, they have much in common. They all suggest that consumers seek more in the consumption process than the utility, or instrumental value, of the goods themselves and that the context of consumption is important.

Materialism is a value structure through which individuals seek more than instrumental value from the goods they acquire. They seek relationships with the objects of consumption that form their identity and enhance their subjective well-being. Thus, materialism is a multi-faceted construct relating individuals to the goods they possess. The institutionalized character of materialism in Western societies has both individual and social consequences (e.g., see Ahuvia and Wong, 2002; Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992).

Ger and Belk (1996) argue that the materialistic lifestyle is expanding on a global scale. Conversely, the Inglehart (1981) thesis argues that materialism will decline as cultures develop economically, and that materialistic values will diminish in importance as economic stability improves. The literature does not support this, however. Both Feather (1998) and Ger and Belk (1996) demonstrate in cross-cultural studies that post-materialist values have not developed in advanced economic cultures and, at the same time, materialistic values are growing in the less developed economies. The materialistic lifestyle is becoming a global phenomenon, and the number of individuals pursuing such a lifestyle is increasing exponentially. This in turn, has the potential to accelerate the associated negative consequences.

The present article focuses on the environmental consequences of materialism. Few in the environmental arena argue that positive environmental consequences follow from materialistic behavior. The exception to this paucity of arguments is within the neoclassical economic literature where Bhagwati (1993), for example, argues that economic growth solves rather than exacerbates environmental problems. Lofdahl (2002) concludes, however, that the economic argument is specious in failing to consider trade related economic growth.

The focal concern here is that the collective consequences of individual consumption behaviors have negative environmental consequences. These consequences emanate from social processes that are characteristic of market based societies, and they are categorized as a social trap (Dawes, 1980) and as a "commons dilemma" (Shultz and Holbrook, 1999). Each suggests that the sum of individual behaviors produces a negative collective result that was unintended by any individual actor. While any single individual's actions have virtually no environmental consequences, the sum of all similarly disposed individuals' actions damages the environment of the collective, including the individual actor (Dawes, 1980). The damage results because, in market societies, self-interest governs behavior, and the payoff for behavior is higher if the individual acts in his/her self-interest regardless of what others do (Shultz and Holbrook, 1999).

Porritt (1984) argues that materialism found in market societies is one of the root causes of environmental decline. In Western industrial societies, materialism proffers a one-dimensional model of the "good life," and its achievement is a primary societal objective (Schmookler, 1991). Jones (1987) argues that, because materialism is deeply embedded in the institutional structures of industrial societies, the institutions themselves must be examined. As a result, admonishing consumers to consume less for personal, social, or environmental reasons is likely to be ineffective in changing behavior. Culturally embedded institutions continuously reinforce and reward materialism as a mode of consumption. Consequently, one who is materialistic would find little reason for altering consumption behaviors to be more accommodating to the environment.

Critiques of materialism in the environmental context have addressed many relevant issues including resource depletion, pollution, and waste among others. While examining these variables is necessary, the approach is not sufficient because these variables are better characterized as symptoms of the problem than as the problem itself. These symptoms can have very negative consequences, but eliminating them does not eliminate the problem because the root causes of environmental