



Indian Perspective on Consumer Materialism

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Abstract

Culture plays a key role in the ways in which a consumer perceive products and services, leading to patterns of consumption. In a culture, material objects have meaning to the consumer that is organically linked to his/her deep seated motives and beliefs born out of growing up in a culture. Indians have unique perception about products and services they buy. To study this, this paper looks at the way by which Indians look at products and services in the process of purchase and post purchase behaviour. In addition, the paper explores the question of how Indian consumer behaves in acculturating into global cultures. Reviewing studies in the area of consumer materialism, the paper argues a case for importance of perception of material objects in evolving marketing strategies from Indian perspective.

Keywords: Consumer materialism, Culture, Consumer Behaviour, Materialism

1. Introduction

Materialism is defined as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions” (Belk, 1984, p.291). Materialism has its presence in many fields like consumer behaviour, marketing, psychology, social sciences etc. “Consumer materialism refers to the importance that a consumer places on the acquisition and possession of material objects” (Marsha L. Richins, 2010). The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner, 1989) defines the term as the “devotion to material needs to the neglect of spiritual matters.” According to Richins and Dawson (1992), “materialism as a multifaceted construct that relates to the importance material objects hold for the individual”. Materialism among consumers has been associated with possession, a trait that can be both positive and negative. Some studies focusing on materialism have found that there is a negative relationship between materialism and happiness (e.g., Wright and Larsen, 1993). Materialism has been influential in designing the lifestyle choices, consumer’s purchase decision making and consumption patterns. A right approach to materialism can be rewarding and beneficial to both consumer and the society. The societies in the earlier centuries were more conscious about repairing and reusing materials as compared to today’s use-and-throw mind-set. Joint families have become nuclear families and one telephone at home has now become mobile phones for each family member. This reflects how materialism has impacted the lives of people across the globe. For most consumers, acquisition and consumption of brands symbolically represents a higher status. This in turn creates behavioural changes in the consumers as well as their consumption pattern.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumer Materialism and Indian context

Materialism has been a part of Indian culture from the beginning in the form of dowry, material possessions like gold, diamonds, silver etc., passing through various stages like colonialization, independent India, Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization post 1990. It has reached a different phase in the minds of people today. The study of materialism in India is important due to the fact that it has to face many

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challenges related to tackling the social evils like dowry which have been associated with acquisition of material possessions (Krishnamurthy, 1981). De Mooij (1998) suggests that “globalization has brought changes in cultural values in various countries.” “There is a greater awareness among consumers about multinational luxury brands” (Kumar et al., 2009). Materialism in India has been an integral part of its culture. It has been there and such concept has been perceived differently from the diverse cultural history to its more vibrant nature till date. Over the years, materialism in India has taken various shapes say possession of things like land, valuables like jewellery, till today’s gadgets and technology. It has gone through a lot of changes. Indians think of collectivism and Westerners are more individualistic.

2.2 Religious Roots

In multi-cultural Indian society, with Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism where the concept of materialism is tied to the deep rooted culture influencing consumption and lifestyle greatly. It has also been strongly associated with religion. Materialism and religious values have important implications for consumption, self-identity, life satisfaction and well-being (Torlak & Koç, 2007, p. 587). Additionally, Schwartz and Huisman (1995) examine the relations between materialism and religiosity through the study of Schwartz’s theory of value. They found that religious values oppose seeking happiness through the purchase of material goods. This theory shows us religiosity positively correlates with well-being and negatively correlates with materialistic values. According to Venkatesh (1994), in India, materialistic values co-exist with spirituality. Consumers with more wealth are considered blessed by Goddess Lakshmi and the modern Indians also associate wealth with ones’ knowledge with the saying, “Where there is Saraswathi, Lakshmi is also there”, as against the conventional adage, that puts both the Goddesses as rivals. In the Hindu Puranas, the problem is never with wealth. Wealth is a goddess, Lakshmi, one of the oldest, invoked in the Shri Sukta of the Rig Veda for cows and grain and gold and children. The problem is with our relationship with wealth.

In Buddhism, materialism is concerned about sufferance and hardships undergone by man. There were two traditions of teaching at the Buddha’s time. In a very general way the Buddhist texts refer to these two kinds of religious traditions as Brahmana tradition and Samana tradition. (Puniyani, 2016) According to Jesus Christ, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy, and where thieves do not break in or steal” (Mathew 6:19-20). The Christian life confronts men and women with this same set of choices. Christians are not forbidden to enjoy many of life’s pleasures, but view them as temporary and, in the long term, unsatisfying (cf. Moses, Hebrews 11:25-26). Materialism is much more than affluence and lavish life-styles. According to Holy Qur’an, Allah describes this life as a place of enjoyment, but all the tools such as money, status are given to achieve the purpose of our lives. But, people fall in love with the money, and forget the purpose. People fall in love with the people in their lives, love with status; wealth, and power and forget the purpose. In one verse, Allah says: “Know that the life of the world is merely a game and a diversion and ostentation, and a cause of boasting among yourselves and trying to outdo one another in wealth and children, like the -growth after rain, which delights the cultivators. But then it withers, you see it turning yellow, and then it becomes broken stubble. In the hereafter there is terrible punishment, but also forgiveness from Allah and His good pleasure. The life of the world is nothing but the enjoyment of delusion”. (Surat al-Hadid, 20)

2.3 Western Influence of Materialism in Indian Buying

Materialism is bound to increase as a phenomenon in all cultures and in all types of economies, even if there is a lack of material goods (Ger and Belk, 1996; Parker et. al., 2010). A number of cross-cultural research studies on European, Asian, Australian and American consumers have demonstrated that there is a negative relationship between materialism and consumers’ perception towards satisfaction in life (Ahuvia and Wong, 1995; Chan and Joseph, 2000; Diener and Oishi, 2000; Kenget al., 2000; Ryan and Dziurawiec, 2001; Kasser and Ahuvia, 2002). Studies therefore, view materialism, its antecedents and consequences as an individual phenomenon that transcends national or cultural boundaries (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Moreover, innate factors, individual factors, consumer socialization, cultural factors, socio-economic,

psychological and political system differences were found to be the factors driving the development of materialistic values (Duh, 2015).

2.4 Impact of COVID-19 on Consumer Mind

The Corona Virus, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the whole world to a grinding halt since its spread beginning from December 2019. Across the world, most countries have opted to implement a complete lockdown and this has made every individual stock food and essentials in view of the lockdown. This is another dimension of materialism. This has not only caused increase in the demand of foods and essentials but has completely changed the way purchase and consumption is done. The lockdown has stalled almost every product and there is no movement of goods. The consumer's mind now looks immensely at survival. With COVID-19, the stress builds up enormously on consumers and the struggle for basic food becomes hard. Thousands of migrants are stranded at various camps. Materialism has received renewed attention in the media and in the public discourse in the wake of the global economic crisis in the past. Strong desire for wealth and goods of the people in the western societies was the main cause for the economic crisis since it led the risky financial decisions (Kasser, 2008; Richins, 2011).

3. Conclusion

Materialism has important implications for society as a driver of personal consumption, and thus of economic growth. Materialism is one's personal philosophical/theoretical ideology and orientation towards the material world, which defines that world in terms of both objects and activities and situates one in it, is not the same thing to all people. Consumer Materialism can have rewarding effect if consumers are made aware of the positives of how materialism influences their behaviour. A deeper understanding on consumer materialism can help in gaining sustainability in consumer behaviour.

4. References

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