Like It, Love It, or Gotta Have It: Relating Materialism and Attachment

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract – Building on extant literature, this paper first provides an overview of the marketing literature on materialism, material values, and attachment to objects. Then, the constructs are interrelated and empirical analyses are made. Using a student sample, respondents' material values are measured, as well as their attachment to varied items. Multiple methods are used, such that first summated materialism scale values are related to summated attachment scale items. Then, materialism is used as a single construct to explain the construct of attachment. Finally, Richins and Dawson's (1992) three factors of materialism–centrality, happiness, and success—are used to explain attachment. The unique comparisons of measurement models that link the constructs of material values and attachment in this paper provide insight and basis for future research.

Keywords – material values, materialism, attachment

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners – This paper continues a long conversation in the marketing literature about materialistic consumers. In this study, individuals' material values are identified and related to the individuals' attachment to possessions. Using multiple methods to examine the relationship between material values and attachment, findings provide empirical support relating materialism to attachment. The variations used to assess, compare, and relate the constructs are beneficial because they broaden the foundation for future work of researchers who aim to investigate relationships from multiple perspectives.

Introduction

"I like this!"

"I love this one!"

"Oh, I've gotta have this!"

Imagine that you are shopping at a fashion mall. The expressions above are sentiments that we often hear when people are finding goods that really appeal to them. What starts as appreciation or attraction to an item may deepen until it is to the point of a bond between the person and the object. At the deepest level, consumers seem to feel that some products embody who they are and the image they want to convey.

Approaching an academic perspective of this scenario, this paper explores the relationship between the constructs of materialism and attachment. To begin, the academic literature on materialism and attachment is reviewed. Then, several analyses are conducted to examine the role that materialistic values play on attachment. Finally, implications for marketing and consumption are suggested.

Materialism

The view and definition of materialism in marketing have evolved over time. Moschis and Churchill (1978) used "materialistic attitudes" as one of seven properties selected to investigate the learning of consumer behavior, providing an operational definition of materialism as an orientation toward possession and money that leads to personal happiness. They found that males tended to be more materialistic than females.

Later, Belk defines materialism as a trait variable, "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions," saying that, "at the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction" (1984: 291). Creating a scale to measure materialism, Belk used three subscales for factors of materialism—possessiveness, nongenerosity, and envy (1985). Rassuli and Hollander (1986) expressed materialism as a mind-set expressing an interest in getting and spending. Based on this, marketers began to expect consumers to regard their possessions as part of themselves (Belk, 1988).

Considering materialism as a trait, whether or not a person is materialistic may have a direct impact on other factors in their lives. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) suggest that individuals who claim to not be materialistic (because they do not have belongings that hold special meanings for them) also lack special close friendships and relationships. Those who do

have strong ties to other people represent these ties in special material objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

However, the conceptualization of materialism in the marketing literature began to shift with the work of Richins and Dawson. Richins and Dawson (1992) propose transitioning the conceptualization of materialism in the literature from trait materialism to materialistic values. Their argument places materialism as a value because it shows the significance that a person gives to attaining and having possessions as essential or wanted conduct. How desirable it is for an individual to have possessions will guide his or her consumption choices by influencing the types, quantities, or varieties purchased.

Conceptualizing materialism as a "set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life," Richins and Dawson propose that people who are high in material values consider the acquisition of possessions as a central life occupation, bringing them happiness and success (Richins and Dawson, 1992: 308). This suggests that behavior will vary from those individuals with high materialistic values and those with low values for materialistic possessions. Richins and Dawson developed a scale to measure an individual's materialistic values, which is widely used today.

The materialism scale by Richins and Dawson (1992) encompasses three themes: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. Individuals who have high levels of material values with respect to acquisition centrality focus their lives and behaviors around their possessions and/or acquiring possessions. Individuals who focus on possession acquisition as the pursuit of happiness get life meaning and personal well-being from their possessions. Finally, possession-defined success refers to materialists who measure the success of themselves and others based on the quality and quantity of their possessions. Later in this paper, these three factors are referred to more concisely as centrality, happiness, and success.

In marketing, one expects that consumers high in materialistic values can transfer product and brand meanings into their own self-concepts by selecting products and brands that express a desired meaning. In addition to defining the self-concept, possessions also serve as a mechanism by which the self-concept may be expressed to others. Possessions have been found to be a means by which individuals communicate their actual self-concepts, their ideal self-concepts, or who they want to be (Ahuvia, 2005), and their past selves, or who they were (Park et al., 2006). Additionally, recent research has considered the relationship between materialistic values and consumer behavior, such that Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong (2009) find that the fear of death causes individuals high in materialistic values to strongly connect with their brands.

As the value that individuals place on their possessions is studied, the findings of Wallendorf and Arnould's (1988) study are relevant for consideration. When asking participants about their favorite objects, functional values were not

included in the primary responses. In fact, 60% of the participants gave reasons the item was a "favorite" that were based on personal memories such as if the item were purchased on vacation or a gift from someone special. Thus, there is some level of personal, psychological attachment toward special possessions.

Attachment

Classical attachment theory has been introduced to the academic literature by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1978). Ainsworth's research analyzing the responses of infants when they are left with a stranger provided a foundation for attachment theory. Since then, the literature generally approaches attachment theory when attachment instincts take on two purposes: seeking proximity to others for safety, as well as to meet social needs. The research that began with parent-child considerations is now found focusing on much broader social situations (Stever, 2013).

While originally considered with respect to human relationships, the idea of attachment can also be extended to involvement with material items. However, specific object attachments need not take over the individual's orientation to life and develop into an all-consuming materialism or attachment to objects as in the care of fanatical collectors (Baudrillard, 1968). As defined by Ball and Tasaki (1992: 158), attachment is "the extent to which an object that is owned, expected to be owned, or previously owned by an individual is used by the individual to maintain his or her self-concept." They created a scale with nine items to reflect the domain of this construct, using an example possession (e.g., a car).

The attachment scale created by Ball and Tasaki was established in the same year that Richins and Dawson established the material values scale (1992). Ball and Tasaki differentiated their conceptualization of attachment, stating that it should not be strongly related to the psychological trait of materialism. However, with Richins and Dawson's new updated view of material values, we expect that material values may have explanatory power toward attachment.

Method

Data was collected from 141 undergraduate marketing students at a large Midwestern university. Two participants had incomplete responses and were removed from the analysis, leaving a sample size of 139 for analysis. Of the 139 participants, 91 (65.5%) were female and 48 (34.5%) were male. The mean age of participants was 21.81 years, with a range from 19 to 49 years. A picture of a t-shirt with the university logo served as a prime for attachment. The participants were asked to consider the shirt and how much they liked it. More importantly, the participants were asked to complete the attachment scale established by Ball and Tasaki (1992). Material values were measured with Richins and Dawson's (1992) Material Values Scale. The attachment is with respect to the t-shirt, and

the materialism was a more general value measure. A general material value scale is used to explain the item-specific attachment.

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for the summated scales of attachment and material values. With the nine-item attachment scale, each with seven scale units, the absolute high and low scores range from nine to 63. As expected, respondents were not very attached, as the average of the summated attachment scale was 27.47 with a low score of nine and high score of 51.

At the overall summated level, the material values scale had 18 items, each with seven scale units, creating an absolute score range from 18 to 126. The average of respondents' summated material values scale was 75.06, only slightly above the midpoint of 72. Material values scores had a range of 84, with a minimum score of 39 and maximum score of 123.

The material values scale is composed of three subscales: success, centrality, and happiness. Each subscale has six items, with possible absolute summed scores ranging from six to 42. The mean of the success subscale is 24.00 for survey respondents, with a range of 36, minimum score of 6, and maximum score of 42. The mean of the centrality subscale is 29.90 for respondents, with a range of 30, minimum of 16, and maximum of 46. The mean of the happiness subscale is 21.16 for respondents, with a range of 27, minimum of 8, and maximum of 35.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Summated Scales

Summated Scale Measure	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*Range*	*Min.*	*Max.*
Attachment	27.47	9.65	42	9	51
Material Values	75.06	13.53	84	39	123
Success	24.00	6.22	36	6	42
Centrality	29.90	4.65	30	16	46
Happiness	21.16	5.22	27	8	35

The purpose of this study is to utilize structural equation modeling, linking together the measurement model for attachment and the measurement model for material values. Given that the measurement for materialism is administered in a general setting and attachment is item-specific for the t-shirt, materialism will be used to explain attachment. To do this, the overall data analysis scheme will entail the following three components:

1. The summated materialism scale will be used to explain the summated attachment scale (Figures 1 and 2).
2. Materialism as a single construct will be used to explain attachment (Figure 3).
3. Materialism as three separate factors (success, centrality, and happiness) will be used to explain attachment (Figure 4).

Results

The results for this study are shown in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. Summary statistics are given in tables below the depicted models. In general, the results indicated that, as predicted, material values can be used to explain attachment. Results in Table 2 show the summated scores of material values are quite successful in explaining the attachment summated scores. The coefficient takes on a value of 0.14 with p-value being 0.02. In the case of using the three summated scores of the three material value sub-factors, as shown in Table 3, no statistical significance can be captured.

Results for the single factor and second-order construct approaches are given in Tables 3 and 4. The single construct results in Table 4 yields a coefficient of 0.09 and is marginally significant at the 0.10 level. More superior results are shown in Table 5 where the three, second-order constructs are used to explain attachment. Centrality and happiness are found to be positively and significantly related to attachment. The coefficient between centrality and attachment has a value of .15 with a significance level of .05. Similarly, the coefficient between happiness and attachment has a value of .24 and is statistically significant at the .08 level. The overall model fit indices, CFI = .66, RMSEA = .11, show a quite reasonable model fit.

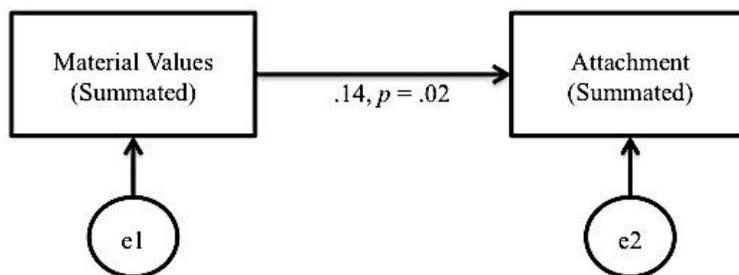**Figure 1: Model 1a, Summated Scores of Material Values Explaining Summated Attachment Scores**
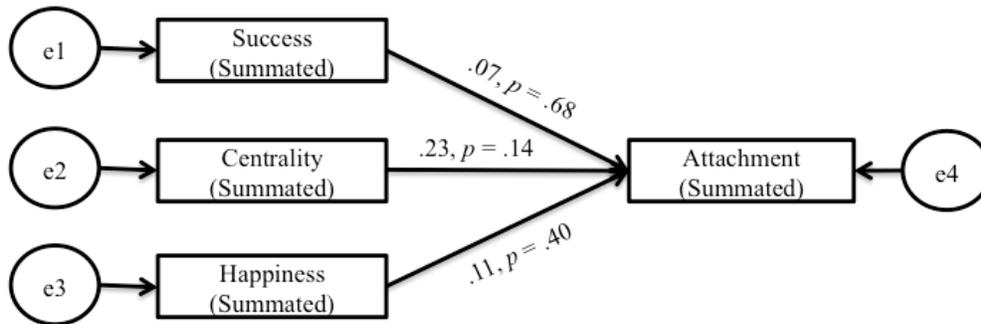
Table 2: Summated Scores of Material Values Explaining Summated Attachment Score

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Material Values --> Attachment	.14	.06	2.26	.02

Figure 2: Model 1b, Summated Scores of Three Material Values Explaining Summated Attachment Scores

Overall model fit: $X^2 = 133.71$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$; CFI = .02; RMSEA = .56

Table 3: Summated Scores of 3 Material Values Explaining Summated Attachment Score

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Success --> Attachment	.07	.17	.41	.68
Centrality --> Attachment	.23	.15	1.49	.14
Happiness --> Attachment	.11	.13	.85	.40

Overall model fit: $X^2 = 133.71$, $df = 3$, $p = .000$; CFI = .02; RMSEA = .56

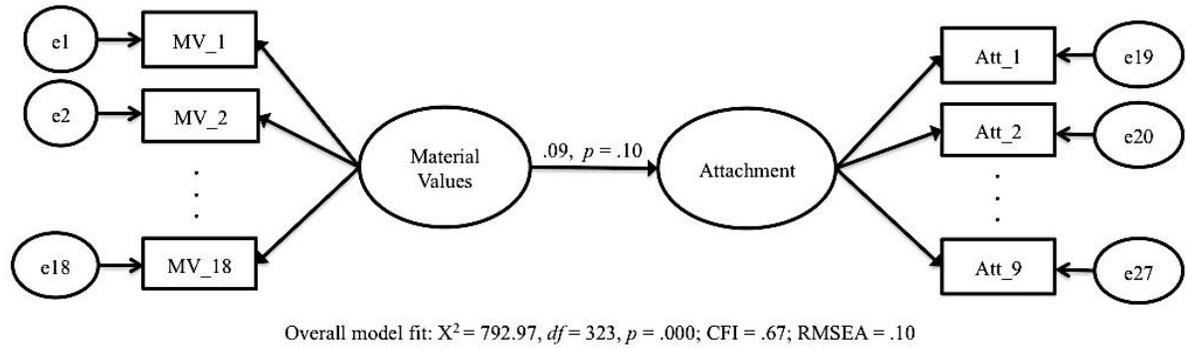**Figure 3: Model 2, Construct of Material Values Explaining Attachment**

Overall model fit: $X^2 = 792.97$, $df = 323$, $p = .000$; CFI = .67; RMSEA = .10

Table 4: Construct of Material Values Explaining Attachment

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Material Values --> Attachment	.09	.05	1.67	.10

Overall model fit: $X^2 = 792.97$, $df = 323$, $p = .000$; CFI = .67; RMSEA = .10

Figure 4: Model 3, Second-Order Construct of Material Values Explaining Attachment
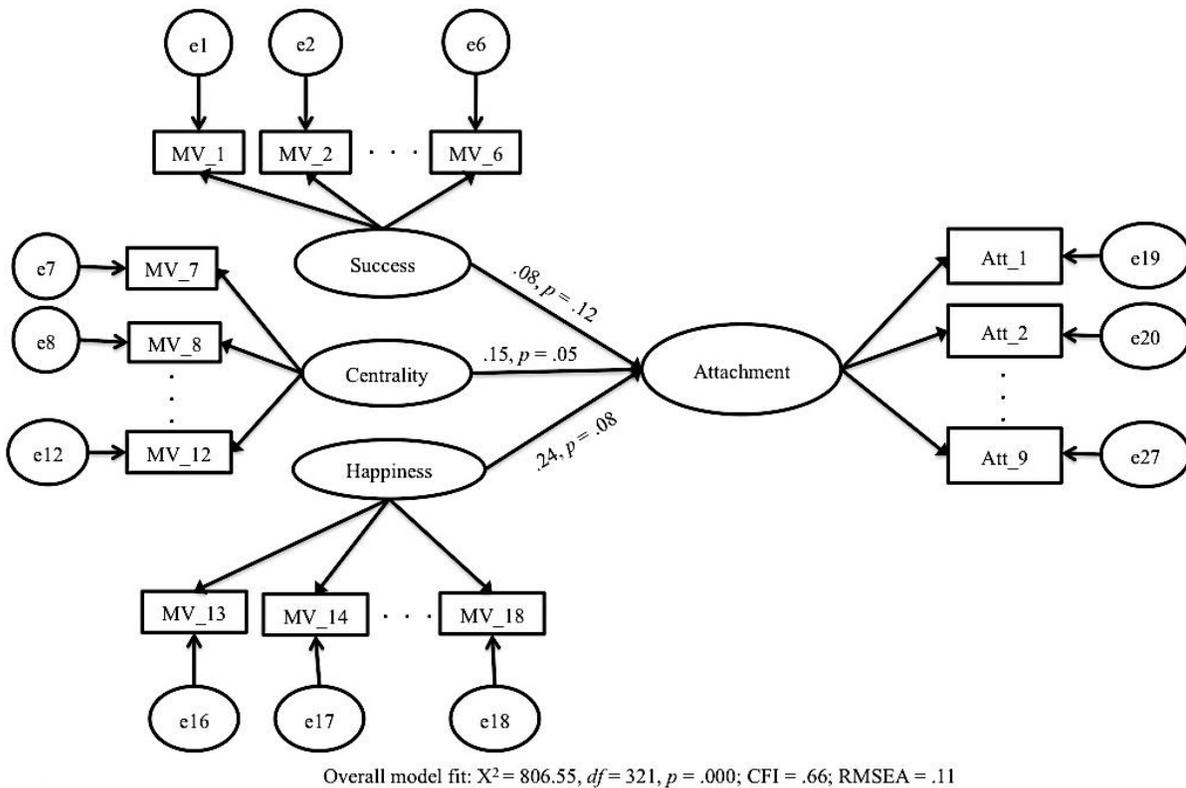

Overall model fit: $X^2 = 806.55$, $df = 321$, $p = .000$; CFI = .66; RMSEA = .11

Table 5: Second-Order Construct of Material Values Explaining Attachment

	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	p-value
Success --> Attachment	.08	.05	1.57	.12
Centrality --> Attachment	.15	.08	1.99	.05
Happiness --> Attachment	.24	.14	1.76	.08

Overall model fit: X^2 = 806.55, df = 321, p = .000; CFI = .66; RMSEA = .11

Discussion

This study introduces some evidence that material values can be used to explain attachment. Attachment is operationalized for a single item—in this study, a t-shirt with the respondents' university's logo. At the same time, material values are operationalized more generally, in an effort to explain attachment. Given the nature of this study and its operationalizations, one should not lay claim beyond the very limited scope of this study.

Some interesting empirical findings have been revealed through this study. For our particular sample, the second-order construct model in Table 5 yields the best results. Centrality and happiness were found to be statistically related to attachment. It would have been more comforting to see this result be consistent with the summated three-factor model as in Table 3. One may argue that the summated model introduces aggregation bias, which in turn can lead to stronger or weaker relationship between material values and attachment. Aggregation hides much of the detailed information being provided by each participant at the item level, whereas the factor analytic approach for doing measurement models retains and fully utilizes that information. Thus, one would have much more faith in the factor analytic measurement model approach.

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