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The Role of Culture in the Assimilation of Materialistic Values: the Case of South African Society

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The concept of materialism continues to play an enduring role in the consumer literature because it is widely viewed as a driving force in western society as well as a salient expression of an individual's self-concept (see Richins 1999). Anecdotally, materialism appears to be a central concern for social commentators and scholars alike. We investigate the role that acculturation plays in the assimilation of materialistic values in an advancing society, namely South Africa, when individuals migrate from tribal areas to modern western cities such as Johannesburg. In six long interviews, we uncover factors that facilitate the assimilation of materialistic values as well as those that inhibit that process.

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The Role of Culture in the Assimilation of Materialistic Values: The Case of South African Society

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Extended Abstract

The concept of materialism continues to play an enduring role in the consumer literature because it is widely viewed as a driving force in western society as well as a salient expression of an individual's self-concept (see Richins 1999). Anecdotally, materialism appears to be a central concern for social commentators and scholars alike. As Richins (2004) notes, the topic has spawned more than 100 empirical studies in addition to numerous articles in the popular press focusing on materialism's role in contemporary society. However, much of our formal understanding of materialism comes from research conducted to define and measure the concept or studies that attempt to isolate its individual factors and affirm its basis in possessions. Not only has this research produced viable scales with which to measure materialism (Belk 1984; Richins and Dawson 1992), but it also has demonstrated the relationship between consumption decisions and the values the construct rests on (Belk 1985; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002; Dittmar and Pepper 1992; Richins 1994).

Surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the process by which materialism is inculcated from a cultural perspective. Although some studies have shed light on factors effecting materialistic values (Belk 1987; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Flouri 1999 Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997 research on the acculturation of materialistic values remains dormant. This is particularly surprising given that materialism is widely viewed as a value orientation (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). In a series of depth interviews in South Africa, we investigate what happens to the personal values associated with materialism when individuals move from one cultural setting to another, particularly when the new environment is considerably more materialistic than that of the original one.

In the case of South Africa, society has been, and continues to be dominated by western culture (Klein 2007; Thomas and Bendixen 2000), although it is far from uniform in its makeup. In fact, South African society has a fairly extensive tribal heritage, which derives from various subgroups such as Xhosa, Vendi, Zulu, Tsonga, and Sotho. Most of these share a patrilineal clan based system of kinship, resulting in strong individual values.

As South Africa, with its western dominance, has become more economically advanced, it might be expected that it also become more materialistic in nature. On the other hand, given the strong set of individual values formed through a socialization process largely tribal in nature, it is possible that many South Africans may resist the self-centered nature of materialism (Cf., Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). To investigate this question, we conducted depth interviews with individuals who had migrated, for one reason or another, from the tribal areas to the major city of Johannesburg. We anticipated that these individuals would experience cross pressures from the conflict between materialism and individual values learned in the tribal socialization process. As a result, they would exhibit less receptivity to a materialistic value system.

Our data set regarding this question originates from six long, interviews employing the theme of value confrontation. Informants were individuals who had come from various tribal areas of southern Africa to Johannesburg. Interviews were conducted on the campus of Witwatersrand University and lasted approximately one hour each. They sought to locate individuals' encounter with modern western culture in the context of personal values.

Interviews were conducted in English and taped; transcription followed. Axial coding across transcripts was used to uncover common themes and patterns underlying the interviews. Themes were identified and bracketed, and coded with examples. Further verification, discussion, and file development remain to be completed at this point in time. However, we present our initial findings here from repeated readings to date.

Emergent themes and key differences across informants are best exhibited in the responses of two of our informants—Thandi, from Limpopo, once called Northern Province, or the Transvaal, and Bobby from Botswana Xhosa society. The first theme attendant to moving from tribal areas to Johannesburg was that of marginalization. All of our informants felt out of place in moving to a large modern western city. For instance, Thandi indicated that the move was "quite a challenge for me, having grown up in a slow paced life where you see a car once a day [and where] it is more bushy like, more homeland like, more opened. Here, you have got more buildings..." This is noteworthy because both Richins (1999) and Belk (1984) suggest that marginalization associated with moving encourages the use of possessions to regain a sense of self. A second theme was that of the use of possessions to define self. While both recognized this tendency in their new society at large, each responded differently. Bobby admitted that, having become more aware of possessions, he conscientiously attempted to change his appearance to that which was "stylish" in western terms—"the guys I wanted to relate to were more into All-Stars, flat shoes, etc, a more Italian style, so I cut my hair short..." On the other hand, Thandi moderated her adoption of western style products, eschewing western makeup and those who used it while at the same time adopting western clothing. We suggest that this difference is due to Thandi's closer ties to family and tribal past, which can be seen in her response to questions about current associations. While she listed friends from the past and the "rurals" as close entities, Bobby was more focused on finding new friends who were class and brand conscious. Our final theme is valued possessions. While Thandi placed primary emphasis on house and yard, which, with its gardens, reminded her of her tribal setting, Bobby fixated on clothing, shoes, and designer glasses.

In sum, our data (of which an abbreviated portion is shown here) suggest that acculturation of materialistic values in advancing societies such as that of South Africa occurs in variable yet systematic fashion. Individuals who have strong anchorage in personal values, learned through earlier socialization are able to resist the full impact of materialism and the cross pressure it brings. Those lacking in such moorings are more apt to absorb the full force of materialism. Although our work here is preliminary, we see little controversy or limitation to this proposition.

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Exploring the Relationship between Types of TV Programs, Advertising, and Materialism: A Cultivation Theory Perspective

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Extended Abstract

Because materialism has important negative consequences, it is important to understand what causes materialism. Television viewership is one of the most examined antecedents of materialism. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. 1977) suggests that television programs present a distorted reality and heavy exposure to that distorted reality makes people believe that the real world is similar to what they see on television. For instance, television programs tend to portray a more affluent (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997) and violent (Gerbner et al. 1980b) world full of with doctors and lawyers (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1994).

Many television programs also portray a luxurious lifestyle, making heavy viewers have higher estimates of ownership of luxury products by average people (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997). Moreover, those programs show how people in those programs are happy with their expensive clothes, large homes, luxury cars, and other expensive possessions. Because materialism is a belief that acquiring possessions brings happiness and signals status and success (Belk 1984; Richins 2004) and because TV programs portray people with many possessions as being happy and successful, heavy viewers of TV tend to be more materialistic.

According to the cultivation theory, TV viewing leads to distorted perceptions of reality regardless of the TV program types (Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch 2004). However, it is also suggested that the cultivation effect might be program-specific (Gunter 1994). For instance, crime-related reality programs might affect people's perceptions of crime rates while family dramas might affect people's perceptions of family relationships. Therefore, in order to examine the cultivation effect of TV viewing, it is important to consider the differences between TV program types (Weimann, Broisus, and Wober 1992).