

MATERIALISM AND ITS MEASUREMENT

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“He thought they were successful, she thought they were blessed,
With objects and material things, but I never was impressed,
And when it all came crashing down, I became withdrawn,
The only thing I knew how to do was to keep on keepin’ on,
Like a bird that flew, tangled up in blue.”

(Bob Dylan)

Is it happening? Is the ‘culture of consumption’ becoming an ever smaller element of our society, and are the jobs of many marketers in danger? We are told by the media that “real gems are too brash for the nineties” (Van der Post, 1993), that Cartier watches are more popular with leather, rather than with gold straps (Economist, 1992), and that western societies are becoming ‘post-materialist,’ placing less emphasis on material possessions and values (Inglehart, 1977). Is the *nouveaux pauvre* mask of the 1990s a result of the ‘mother of all recessions’ that economic downturn which marked the beginning of the decade? Or have the value systems of consumers finally been affected by the counterculture of the sixties, the consumption orgies of the eighties, and the famine and wars of the nineties?

It is hard to say. There is much confusion about what constitutes a value, what exactly ‘materialism’ is, and whether we are better or wiser consumers than we have been in the past. This paper will review some of the debate in this area, both from within and without the discipline. It will also briefly introduce a methodology, that of historical research, which could provide some of the answers to the questions posed. It is also hoped that by exploring these areas and issues that future researchers will feel reassured that marketing, consumer research, and indeed the entire business arena has many inquiries to make and resources to call upon beyond the narrow confines traditionally associated with commerce. So why do we want to do this?

Society is Good for You

What contribution could the study of materialism or the study of values in general, make to the discipline of consumer research, or marketing? Granted, there are the traditional reasons that by knowing the consumer a little more we can fashion our product and brand

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with more precision, and that we will be better able to anticipate their needs. As Hamel and Prahalad (1991) have noted:

Market research and segmentation analysis are unlikely to reveal... (such commercial) opportunities. Deep insight into the needs, lifestyles, and aspirations of today's and tomorrow's customer will.

Yet it was not in this vein that the discipline of consumer research was formally envisaged. Back in the idealistic '60s and early '70s there was heady talk of marketing and consumer research embracing fields such as the study of birth fertility rates, and attitudes towards social services (Wells, 1993). High fathers of the subject were waxing lyrical on the possibilities that lay ahead:

Within a very short period of time, we seem to have firmly laid the foundation for building a distinct discipline of buyer behaviour which will neither be a subsystem of marketing, nor that of any of the older social sciences. (Sheth, quoted in Wells, 1993)

Moreover, the study of materialism and values in general would seem to have a natural home in this receptive habitat:

Ultimately, the rationale for studying differences in materialism is that the resulting knowledge and measurement may be useful for examining the human and social impact of this much neglected impact of consumer behaviour. (Belk, 1984a)

Unfortunately the field which started with such promise 25 years ago, has according to some commentators failed to flower. The discipline has retreated to the realms of academic argument (Wells, 1993), and in seeming to abandon its self imposed societal mandate, has chosen to focus on what Belk (1987) called the 'dog food level of things', echoing the feelings of a frustrated Johan Arndt:

While research attention has been given to issues like the proverbial 1 ply versus 2 ply toilet tissue decision, more important areas such as the emergence of new value systems and their consequences... have, to a great extent, been ignored (Arndt, 1976)

Of late however there has been an acknowledgement in the literature that consumer research does have a wider role to play in a society which encompasses more than just business interests. Belk (1992), in an article which we can safely say offers nothing to business people, traces the Mormon migration of the 1860s and the meaning of possessions among these people. Hill (1991) meanwhile takes a look at possessions

and their meaning among homeless people, a theme he has followed in other articles. The study of materialism, the study of values among consumers, is one method by which the field of consumer research may develop into a 'macro' discipline, more concerned about consumers and the way they live, rather than buyers and the brands they purchase.

Materialism - A Value

Materialism has been defined by Belk (1984b) as:

The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism such possessions assume a central place in a persons life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Materialism has also been called a 'mind set' and a 'cultural system' which lead toward a 'consumer culture' (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Mukerji (1983) defines materialism as 'a general lust for goods', while the Oxford English Dictionary (1990) describes materialism as a 'tendency to prefer material possessions and physical comfort to spiritual values.' Such an interest could be expected to cover a domain larger than ours, and indeed materialism has been studied in several disciplines, including political science, history, anthropology, marketing, agriculture, and medicine.

There has been some discussion as to whether materialism is an attitude, a trait, or a value. Materialism by default may best be conceptualised as a value or system of values. An attitude is a learned predisposition to respond to an object or class of objects, and materialism encompasses more than just attitudes, it also comprises the way we behave and allocate resources in a whole variety of situations. A trait refers to individual characteristics, and how one person differs from another. Materialism however is culturally rather than individually founded. A value then has been defined as:

...an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode or end-state of existence. (Rokeach, 1973)

Values are enduring in that they persist for long periods of time, they are a belief upon which one acts by choice, and they are a mode of conduct as they influence our behaviour in many spheres, not just that of consumption. For instance a person holding materialist values might choose to work longer hours and earn more money instead of using that time for leisure activities (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Values can impede not only upon the collection of resources, but also the allocation of those resources.

The types of values that people pursue have been divided into two; instrumental and terminal (Rokeach, 1973). Instrumental values are those which we pursue in order to further some 'endgame' or goal. Terminal values, as in where the train stops, is our

ultimate destination. A possible list of these values has been published by Rokeach (1973); see Table 1.

Table 1: List of Values

<i>Terminal Values</i>	<i>Instrumental Values</i>
A Comfortable Life	Ambitious
An Exciting Life	Broadminded
A Sense of Accomplishment	Capable
A World of Peace	Cheerful
A World of Beauty	Clean
Equality	Courageous
Family Security	Forgiving
Freedom	Helpful
Happiness	Honest
Inner Harmony	Imaginative
Mature Love	Independent
National Security	Intellectual
Pleasure	Logical
Salvation	Loving
Self-respect	Obedient
Social Recognition	Polite
True Friendship	Responsible
Wisdom	Self-Controlled

The thinking behind this rather large list is that some person may wish to pursue 'Happiness' as an end goal or state of existence, but has a choice of instrumental values, or roads, to achieve that end. One may be helpful, loving, and honest, and believe that this is the route to happiness. Or one may be ambitious, broadminded, and independent, and believe that this will result in happiness. Rokeach's list is rather a large menu to choose from, and some may question whether values such as true friendship, self respect, or national security really belong in the list of terminal values. Rokeach also thought it important to stress that people will rarely have only one value or one priority. As we are bludgeoned from a whole variety of influences, whether it be family, friends, business, or aspirant reference groups, we may choose to adopt a set of values, or what Rokeach called a hierarchy, and at any one time, or in any one situation, one value may gain pre-eminence over others. People with materialist values are usually thought of as aspiring to the less ignoble of the above set of values, or using otherwise laudable values, such as equality or family security in a perverse way (e.g., much as a child clamours for confectionery on the basis of equality with siblings, when the motivating factor is really

self-interest.) Materialism, you see, has had rather a bad press, with many noble institutions, such as the church (or more accurately all churches and all religions) damming the value and calling it base while many institutions with less honourable credentials (capitalists) rally to its defence (Belk, 1983).

The Origins of Materialism as a Value

Materialism, the pursuit of the 'Good Life' has been thought by some as a product of the twentieth century. Not only that, say its accusers, materialism as a value or system of values, has been exacerbated, encouraged, facilitated, and goaded by marketers in their guise of advertisers (Pollay, 1986). It would be inaccurate to say however that materialism did not exist before this century for did not even the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt insist that their possessions be buried beside them? While materialism as a value has always accompanied civilisation and may be partly innate, the real question must be when did materialism attain a pre-eminence in our society, and become part of that society. For it is only by taking such a 'long view' now that we may see how integral the value system is part of our society, and how accurate are the views that it is waxing or waning.

There are various theories about when exactly materialism did become a predominant value system amongst western consumers. Veblen (1899) spent much time berating the exercise of 'conspicuous consumption' among his nineteenth century companions, consuming for the benefit of others. Yet McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982) say that the eighteenth century also marked a heightened activity on the part of consumers:

Men and in particular, women, bought as never before... In fact, the eighteenth century saw such a convulsion of getting and spending, such an eruption of new prosperity and such an explosion of production and marketing techniques that a greater proportion of the population than in any previous society in human history was able to enjoy the pleasures of buying consumer goods. (p. 9)

As to what was the spur to this consumer revolution, McCracken (1988) looks to the Court of Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century whom he says started the ball rolling by placing an emphasis on possessions and their ownership even more than 'her liberal father, Henry VIII.' (McCracken, 1988, p. 11). The industrial revolution also helped, by making goods available to be bought, though as Fullerton (1988) points out, the industrial revolution would have come to an abrupt halt if consumers had not been predisposed to buy, something also stressed by Adam Smith. Rising wage rates and the prevalence of the Protestant Work Ethic also contributed to the rapid accumulation of wealth, investment, and innovation. Another motivating force for the consumer boom of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the perception that goods were a ticket

to the higher social echelons. This was particularly the case in nineteenth century France, where the nobility had largely been wiped out by the French Revolution. Through this continuous accumulation of possessions, the *nouveaux riches* had all the status of a titled subject, without the actual title. Their authority derived from their possessions. Goods carried messages.

Much of the twentieth century has been a furtherance of the institutionalisation of possessions into our culture. The continual refinement and targeting of marketing practices, the ongoing era of innovation and technical improvement has benefited society. Indeed society now measures its progress in terms of material goods and technical improvements (from the 'Stone Age' to the 'Push-Button Age'). What is amazing therefore is that marketing in general, and consumer research in particular, rarely dwells on the emergence and ongoing strength of the consumer revolution, and spends even less time considering the implications of its possible demise.

The Research that Exists

This is not however to say that we have been completely ignorant of the importance that possessions play in the life of consumers. There have been a number of studies which attempt to delineate what materialism is, what characterises the value, and what makes some people value possessions more than others (see Richins and Dawson, [1992] for a comprehensive citation list). These studies have reached the following conclusions:

- There is a negative correlation between materialism and happiness. There are various reasons offered as to why this may be so. For instance, since envy (a materialistic trait) involves comparison of oneself with significant others, it is more likely that continual appraisal of one's own situation (career, possessions, finances, accomplishments) will lead to unhappiness.
- Non generosity (another of those traits) may also lead to unhappiness as people who are reluctant to give may do so because they have a lower opinion of themselves (i.e., may not consider themselves a worthy enough to give and receive).
- People in society (not unsurprisingly) continue to measure their progress and their success in life in terms of the possessions they own. Consider the comments of Levy (1987) on what constitutes 'the American Dream':

While today's middle class dream does not carry a price tag, it exists in popular consciousness and has come to include a single family home, one or two cars, a washing machine and dryer, a dishwasher, a colour TV, raising and educating children, providing for retirement, and so on.

The measurement of values in general, rather than materialism in particular, is practiced in marketing. There are various scales, both commercially oriented (VALS - Value and Lifestyle Surveys), and more academically focused (LOV - List of Values)

that are often mentioned in consumer behaviour textbooks. Both of these scales however miss any notion of hierarchy, or mix of values, the possibility that consumers have many values, with some values more important than others at particular points in time. For instance, people who give priority to materialist values and the pursuit of possessions may temper their actions with other values, say, pursuing possessions in a way that will maintain self respect, or in a way which will keep the world a beautiful place. Both VALS and LOV lack this comprehensive approach, and thus some researchers are returning to Rokeach's list for a deeper analysis (Komakura and Mazzon, 1991).

But What About Trends and Movements? — Inglehart's Theory

While this research is all very well, it still leaves us with a problem in that we are still unable to measure trends in materialist values, to say for instance whether materialism among consumers is more or less prevalent than five years ago. In fact the marketing cupboard is almost bare when it comes to longitudinal surveys, which would seem to be the best way to measure trends in values. The discipline of political science however has not been so idle and the contribution of Ronald Inglehart has been most formative in this regard.

Inglehart believes that Western society is moving from an orientation on materialist values toward an orientation on what he calls 'post-materialist' values, or:

...from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety, toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life. (Inglehart, 1981)

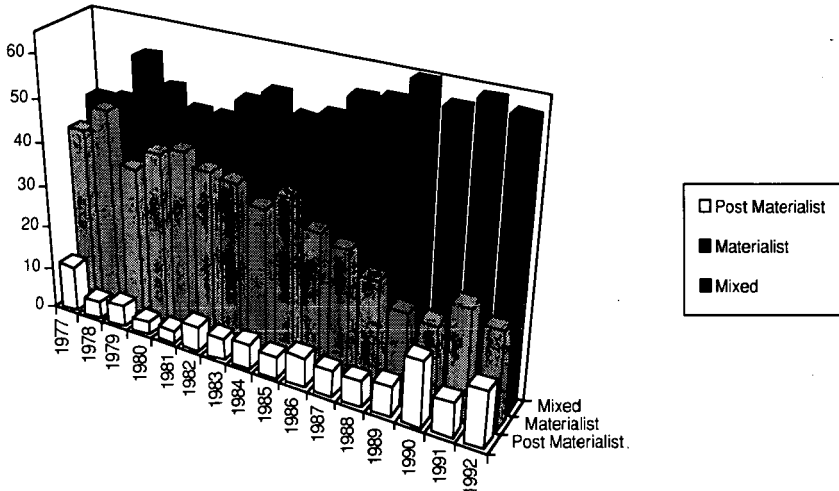
Inglehart's theory is based on two hypotheses (Inglehart, 1977). The first hypothesis, labelled the scarcity hypothesis, states that an individual's priorities reflect the socio-economic environment and that one places the greatest subjective value on those things which are in relatively short supply. The socialisation hypothesis states that the relationship between the socio-economic environment and value priorities is not one of immediate adjustment: a substantial time lag is involved. The values one holds during adulthood have been fashioned by socio-economic variables during one's childhood. If you lived in a time of uncertainty and material deprivation as a child (e.g., born during or before World War II), you will be more materialist. If you were born during the affluent fifties and sixties when money was less of a problem and there was relative stability, your values will be less concerned with material problems. Thus increasing material affluence, coupled with higher cognitive abilities and also increasing awareness of the environment, have all brought upon a value shift towards post-materialist values. The young are most favourably predisposed to bring this change in values to the rest of society.

Inglehart has measured trends in materialism by asking a fixed question in each Eurobarometer poll, a survey which is carried out twice a year in each EU country.

People are classified as either materialist, post-materialist, or mixed, according to how they answer the question. Mixed up people are those which fail to conclusively indicate in the question which way their orientations lie.

Figure 1 gives the responses recorded in Ireland by Eurobarometer for the years 1977-1992, a sixteen year time span. Claims of an 'intergenerational value shift' seem to be somewhat overstated. The number of those classifying themselves as post-materialist has increased by a meagre 2% over the entire period, while those classifying themselves as materialists has indeed decreased. However, this has not translated into a corresponding increase for post-materialists, who in only one time period (1990) creep above the 15% mark, a peak from which they have since declined.

Figure 1: Materialism/Post Materialism in the Irish Population, 1977-1992



The demographic profile of the 1992 Irish post-materialist is that he or she (it is equally likely to be either) is young, well educated, relatively well off and primarily from Dublin. Whether materialism increases with age is a moot point. Inglehart says not, that you are what you are throughout your life span. Others are not so sure. Situational and ageing factors have been given remarkably short shrift in Ingleharts analysis and many argue that it is current and not past socio-economic conditions which weigh heaviest on the minds of the consumer and shape their value systems. Bolton and Jagodzinski (1985) point out that:

Even some hard minded materialists may melt in the sun of enduring wealth, and some post-materialist orientations may freeze to death in times of scarcity.

There are also other problems with both the methodology and the findings of the survey conducted:

- Ingleharts methodology, cohort analysis, is fraught with difficulty and finds it impossible to separate between situational, ageing, and socio-economic effects (Reynolds and Rentz, 1981). At any one time, the method can distinguish between any two of these effects, but never, even with longitudinal analysis, all three. Therefore one cannot say that values held by a cohort are totally attributable to, say socialisation effects.
- There is also the assumption that Inglehart makes of cohort homogeneity, that everyone born in a particular time period will experience the same effects in the same ways. While an age cohort is composed of people of similar ages, backgrounds, socialisation, upbringing, and education will differ among diverse segments of the community.
- Even if we were to accept Inglehart's theory, and especially if we were to accept his two hypotheses, we can forecast that the supposed rise of the post materialist was a momentary aberration rather than an evolutionary watershed. The years 1950-1973 were years of immense prosperity in the US, where average income, even adjusted for inflation, still rose by 30% (Levy, 1987). The rise was even more substantial in Ireland, where between 1960 and 1973, per capita incomes rose by three fifths, kept up with income growth elsewhere in Europe, and significantly outpaced that of Britain (Haughton, 1991). By the standard of these earlier years, the period 1973-93, pales in comparison. In 1970s America, real incomes declined by over 7%, and during the 1980s increased by an average of only 5%. While America is now coming out of recession, consumers still act pessimistically and spend parsimoniously (Economist, 1994a). The failure of the Irish economy during most of the 1970s and nearly all of the 1980s is legion, while the climate of the 1990s has been described as one of "greater political and economic anxiety" (Economist, 1994b).

In sum, Ingleharts analysis is, at best, equivocal. While some consumers may turn towards moments of higher reflection at some point in their lives, we cannot say with any conviction that this is an increasing, or even enduring, trend. And even if more people become 'post-materialist' this does not herald the end of the consumer culture, for goods will still be used and acquired to deliver messages. For instance, Inglehart concedes that post-materialists give higher priority to socialising and 'belonging'. What better way to show that you belong than to display possessions of status, i.e., conspicuous consumption? Levitt (1993) opines in caustic prose:

Even the fabulating anti materialistic hippies of unlamented recent history, earnestly asserting that less is more, wanted more of something - more of less except for pot, and aluminium canoes to take them with less effort to remote locations to grow commercially superior cannabis. (p. 136)

So where does this leave us? We still wish to know more about the meaning of things, and how peoples attitudes towards objects change over time. The most we have in the form of longitudinal research is a survey carried out by a political scientist for other purposes, a piece of research, which while valuable, contains problems and inconsistencies in certain areas, and in any event only stretches back over a period of twenty to thirty years. If we want to go back further than this, or explore the subject through other means, we must look to our history books. But this should not be a problem for marketers, for we are closer to historical research than we may think.

Back to the Future

History, unlike fiction and physics never quite jells; it is an armature of rather randomly preserved verbal and physical remains upon which historians slap wads of supposition in hopes of the lumpy statue's coming to life. (John Updike)

Historical research is descriptive study which attempts to explain why some things turn out the way they do, or simply to illustrate past instances. In such a manner it closely resembles the case study form of research. Historical research was the first methodology used by the first students of marketing over one hundred years ago (Jones and Monieson, 1990). As it was neither normative or prescriptive, it soon fell out of favour as managerial focused methodologies swamped the discipline. However it has in recent years made a comeback in both marketing and consumer research. Savitt (1980) was one of the first to reawaken interest in methodology when he remarked:

Historical studies of market behaviour would provide a better understanding of how markets and competitors do behave, rather than the current theories based on how they are supposed to behave.

Other promoters of the methodology include Nevett (1991), Fullerton (1988), and McCracken (1987), who offers an agenda for future historical research. The methodology has recently been used in the field of strategic marketing (Golder and Tellis, 1993), and in tracing the background of an industry or discipline (e.g., Chandler, 1990). A recent edition of the *Journal of Macromarketing* was dedicated to this research method (Nevett and Hollander, 1994). Smith and Lux (1993) point out that the methodology can also apply to consumer research, and the measurement of values:

Certainly an ironic twist in values lies behind the fact that many from the generation of Americans who sported the Make Love, Not War bumper stickers of the 1960s most recently emblazoned their vehicles with one pronouncing He who dies with most toys wins! Historical analysis offers consumer researchers a means to understand such patterns of change, and the ability to construct causal accounts explaining how and why such changes occur. (pp 595-596)

There are various arguments as to where historical analysis sits in our philosophical stable. Golder and Tellis (1993) argue that it is one of the most objective techniques around, and that it is even more objective than most logical empiricist techniques. Fullerton (1987) however makes many valid points when he argues that as historical research is descriptive it cannot form lawlike generalisations. Nor, argues Fullerton, can long standing trends be expected to last into the future (remember the Phillips Curve!). Most importantly, the researcher, the data, and the method are highly subjective, and this is a good thing. The data being reviewed, be it journals, diaries, or even figures, will reflect the cultural norms and mores of the time, and cannot be taken to be 'neutral'. It is this very subjectivity however which makes historical research so valuable, by informing us so much of past traditions, situations, and values. The researcher, who marshals information for his or her own purpose, is similarly culturally bound and unknowingly subjective.

Consumer researchers have tried to harness historical research to measure trends in values in a number of innovative and interesting ways. O'Guinn, Faber, and Rice (1985) have attempted to track values in movies over time, and note the dominant theme of materialism in the first silent movies of this century:

In general, the films of this period encouraged the pursuit of pleasure, focused on the things that money could buy, and showed you how happy you would be if only you possessed them.

Movies have not been entirely barren ground for the consumer researcher, and various movies such as *Gremlins*, *Out of Africa*, and *Beverly Hills Cop* have been analysed for materialist undertones. Nor has the small screen been left out with *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and TV advertising being subject to review by researchers such as Elizabeth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook.

It seems logical that advertising, a carrier of values (in the same way some would say that flies carry germs) should also be subject to historical review. It is after all the very business of advertising to imbue otherwise barren goods with value laden appeals, to sell the sizzle and not the steak. Within the frame of advertising, the product is associated with, and becomes part of, its surrounding culture. Witness the recent popularity of the Guinness advertisement where every movement from the customer awaiting his pint focuses on the product, the frustration he feels from not having it, and the pleasure of eventually bringing it to his lips. Pollay (1985) has undertaken a large review of advertisements throughout the twentieth century in a number of different contexts, and notes particular times when materialist values seem to be on the increase, or decrease. For instance, during the 1930s, advertisements focused on the 'being' aspect of people, efforts at self-improvement and self-respect. Throughout the eighty year period he surveys objects that are primarily shown in a 'doing' mode, i.e., they are

consistently illustrated as aiding the user in some task or another that otherwise would have been much harder, or near impossible.

Another (initially unlikely) candidate for historical intrusion are comic strips! No less an authority Kassarian has said that:

The Print and electronic media have been thoroughly researched... but Doonesbury and the comics have not been taken seriously... As many as 100 million people in the US, and perhaps two or three times that number world-wide, are exposed to, and perhaps influenced by, the comics. (Kassarian, 1983, p.434)

More recently, Ventakesh et. al (1993) provide us with another reason for studying comics. "After all," they say, "isn't that what marketing is all about? Colours, fictitious imageries, impossible dreams, and pure fantasies?" Taking up the gauntlet, Spiggle (1986) compared mainstream Sunday comic strips with an 'underground,' 'student related,' 'counterculture' form of comic art, known as *comix*. Spiggle content analysed 220 comic and comix strips covering two periods in time (1971-1972 and 1981-1982). She then measured materialism by noting the dominance of material values in the comic strips, and the centrality that possessions held to the storyline.

Spiggle hypothesised that the comix, as representative of a counter revolution, would espouse less materialist values than the mainstream comics. In concert with Ingleharts theory (though she did not mention it), she expected that the comix would be anti materialist in the 1970 period, and that these anti materialist messages would diffuse into mainstream comic art as the students of the 1960s became the newspaper consumers of the 1970s and 1980s. This she concludes, did not happen.

What she did find was that comix, an art form we would associate with 'hippies' were considerably more materialist than the mainstream comics, both in the earlier and the later sample. In the 1970 sample more heroes in the comix pursued wealth as a goal (8.3% as opposed to 4.6% in the conventional comics). By the 1980s, 15.1% of the comix heroes pursued wealth, compared to 5.6% of comic heroes, and 30.5% of the comix heroes pursued material comfort, versus 8.8% of the comic heroes. Why?

There is always the possibility that the materialist overtones in the comic strip surveys reflect values not of the comic audience, but of the comic artist. However, one must acknowledge that the (continued) commercial success of both comics and comix means that the themes portrayed are played to a receptive audience.

Spiggle also raises the point that those reading the comix in the 1970s would have been raised in an era of material abundance and so would be accustomed to a tradition of goal attainment through material possession. Inglehart used this piece of historical conjecture to argue in the opposite direction, that such abundance would be played down in societal goals. Finally Spiggle concludes in concurrence with the sentiment we heard Levitt argue earlier - people are materialist as they ever were, but crave different possessions to confer different meanings:

Thus while (those of the counterculture) attacked materialism as a source of their discontent and a broader social malaise, they did not turn to spiritual asceticism as a lifestyle and source of identity. Rather, they incorporated many products into their lives, particularly those that were repugnant to many of their parents and social elders. (Spiggle, 1986: p. 111)

Belk (1987) also carried out a review of comics, this time a forty year, more qualitatively focused assessment, and other art forms (novels, plays, and songs) have also been subject to historical review in the search for the meaning and movement of materialism in our culture. In general the findings agree that materialist values and the pursuit of possessions continues to be an integral part of us. This is a conclusion also reached by much current literature on branding (e.g., Keller, 1993). The institutionalisation of goods into society during the nineteenth and early part of this century has also continued into the institutionalisation of brands into our culture. Consumer goods are used to personify experiences, and are imbued with character.

Conclusion

The study of values is an inherently interesting and important part of consumer research and marketing. It is interesting because values encompass who we are and how we treat others. It is important because by studying consumer values we are following consumers out of the supermarket, and changing the focus of our research from purchasing decisions to living decisions. By broadening our realm of study in such a manner researchers can provide a service to society and become students of what consumers want to learn, not only what commerce wants to know. Anderson (1983) urges us to stop studying consumers the way fishermen study fish, but rather the way marine biologists do. It is enough for us to understand.

Studying materialism is a good place to start, for not only is it a value system which has been and continues to be central to western society, but it is also a way of living that many say has been promoted by marketers and businessmen. This paper has reviewed some of the ways in which materialism has been explored. We have identified studies which attempt to characterise the value, and characterise the people who cherish this value. We have looked at the field of political science where materialism has been measured over time. And finally we turned to historical research, a methodology used by marketers when the discipline originated, and a methodology crafted for researching the way people behave, and attempting to understand and attach causation to this behaviour.

Four centuries ago Elizabeth I recognised, and sought to utilise, the symbolism inherent in products. What we have seen is that products are purchased and consumed today as they ever were: as much for their symbolic as their functional value. Consider, in closing, the words of Schouten, who recently wrote about his:

...Volkswagen,
 ready at any time to open up
 to you and me and the whole sky,
 to be drunk in,
 to be hot and cold and laughed
 and made love in
 at the end of some road,
 some night,
 in the deepest wood we can find. (1993 p., 339)

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