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## **The Safety of Objects: an Examination of Materialism and Brand Connections**

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Consumers across many parts of the globe place considerable value on the acquisition of material objects. Over the past two decades, researchers have sought to establish how materialism is formed and how this value influences individual and collective well-being. However, these studies shed little light on this value's influence on brand consumption. Our research seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between materialism and brand connections. We suggest that individuals with high levels of materialism will exhibit strong ties to the brands they consume as a means of coping with uncertainty. We test this premise by conducting an initial study among 363 Americans, as well as a replication and extension-focused study among 300 Singaporeans. Our results provide strong support for our conceptualization and suggest that materialism encourages consumers to form strong connections with their brands. These results present a new perspective of materialism by suggesting that highly materialistic individuals are not just selfish status seekers but also seekers of communal meaning.

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# The Safety of Objects: An Examination of Materialism and Brand Connections

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers across many parts of the globe place considerable value on the acquisition of material objects. Over the past two decades, researchers have sought to establish how materialism is formed and how this value influences individual and collective well-being (see Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002 for a review). While these studies contribute to our understanding of psychological functioning, they do not generally consider the impact of this value upon consumption behavior. Our research seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between materialism and brand connections. Drawing insights from research on material values, cognitive needs, and branding, we suggest that individuals with high levels of materialism will exhibit strong ties to the brands they consume as a means of coping with uncertainty.

We assessed the relationship between materialism and brand connections by employing two survey studies. The first study was a nationwide mail survey in the United States ( $n=363$ ), while the second study was a mall intercept survey in Singapore ( $n=300$ ). The response rate for these two studies was 20% and 26%, respectively, and the demographic profile for both surveys closely mirrored the general population for each country. Two product categories were the focus of each study. In the US, respondents were asked to record the make of automobile they currently own as well as the brand of jeans they last purchased for themselves. In Singapore, respondents were asked to record the brand of cell phone they currently own, as well as the brand of wristwatch that they last purchased for themselves. Our brand connection measures were assessed in relation to these brands.

We assessed three different manifestations of brand connections, *brand loyalty* (Chadhuri and Holbrook 2001), *self-brand connection* (Escalas and Bettman 2003), and *brand community* (Keller 2003). We assessed materialism using the updated (Richins 2004) 15-item Material Values Scale (MVS). Our conceptual framework argues that materialism is positively related to brand connections because materialists use brands to fulfill their fundamental need for certainty. To assess the influence of this cognitive need, our Singapore survey included two specific measures from the need for cognitive closure (NFCC) scale (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). Conceptually, NFCC is defined as, "the desire for a definite answer on some topic...as opposed to confusion and ambiguity" (Kruglanski 1989, p. 14). Specifically, we focused on *need for order* and *need for predictability* as our key dimensions. All measures displayed good psychometric properties.

We tested the relationship between material values and brand connection through a series of multiple regression analyses using our three brand connection measures (i.e., loyalty, connection, and community) as dependent variables and material values as the key predictor variable. These regressions revealed that materialism exerts a negligible influence on brand loyalty for all four product categories: automobiles ( $b=-.01$ , ns), jeans ( $b=.04$ , ns), watches ( $b=.07$ , ns), cell phones ( $b=.06$ , ns). In contrast, materialism has a significant effect on both self-brand connection (SBC) and brand community (BC), for automobiles (SBC:  $b=.19$ ,  $p<.01$ ; BC:  $b=.26$ ,  $p<.01$ ), jeans (SBC:  $b=.22$ ,  $p<.01$ ; BC:  $b=.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ), watches (SBC:  $b=.18$ ,  $p<.01$ ; BC:  $b=.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and cell phones (SBC:  $b=.23$ ,  $p<.01$ ; BC:  $b=.21$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In sum, materialism exhibits a positive influence on two out of the three measures of brand

connections for all four product categories, providing general support for our claim that materialists attempt to manage uncertainty by establishing strong individual and communal relationships with their brands.

In order to probe more deeply into the nature of the relationship between materialism and brand connections, we investigated the cognitive motives that may underlie this relationship, namely the need for order (NFO) and the need for predictability (NFP). Because our tests of the effect of materialism on brand connections indicate that materialism has no influence on brand loyalty, this additional analysis focuses on materialism's potential role as a mediator between NFO and/or NFP upon self-brand connection and brand community. In order to assess this potential influence, we conducted a series of mediated regression analyses. These analyses indicate that among our two indicators of the need for certainty, only NFP is significantly related to materialism ( $b=.38$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Thus, materialism's role as a potential mediator of the link between need for certainty and brand connections appears to be related to its ability to provide a sense of predictability rather than a sense of order. In addition, these analyses show that materialism fully mediates the effect of NFP on both self-brand connections and brand community for both watches (SBC:  $b=.09$ , ns, BC:  $b=.07$ , ns) and cell phones (SBC:  $b=.11$ , ns, BC:  $b=.06$ , ns), as the inclusion of this variable reduces the effect of NFP on these outcomes to nonsignificance.

In order to give shape to the ephemeral constructs upon which we ply our trade, academic researchers often employ cognitive archetypes (Lakoff 1987). Thus far, the dominant archetype among materialism researchers is an image of materialists as selfish status seekers. For example, Belk's (1985) seminal article portrays materialists as greedy, envious, and possessive. This image appears to hold a considerable degree of verisimilitude, as materialism has been shown to be negatively related to concerns for family, community, and religion (Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). However, our research suggests that this archetype may not fully capture why materialists form strong connections to their brands. Thus, in order to understand the relationship between materialists and branded objects, there appears to be a need for a new archetype. Based on our findings, one potential perspective would be to cast materialists (at least in terms of their brand relationships) as communal meaning seekers rather than selfish status seekers. This image appears to be quite congruent with prior findings that materialism is a means to manage uncertainty (Kasser 2002), and may also stimulate new insights regarding how and why materialists engage in consumption.

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