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# Cross-cultural differences in materialism

Güliz Ger<sup>a</sup>, Russell W. Belk<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Business Administration, Bilkent University, 06533 Bilkent, Ankara, Turkey

<sup>b</sup> David Eccles School of Business, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, USA

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## Abstract

Materialism was explored in twelve countries using qualitative data, measures of consumer desires, measures of perceived necessities, and adapted versions of the Belk (1985) materialism scales with student samples. The use of student samples and provisional evidence for cross-cultural reliability and validity for the scales, make the quantitative results tentative, but they produced some interesting patterns that were also supported by the qualitative data. Romanians were found to be the most materialistic, followed by the U.S.A., New Zealand, Ukraine, Germany, and Turkey. These results suggest that materialism is neither unique to the West nor directly related to affluence, contrary to what has been assumed in prior treatments of the development of consumer culture.

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## 1. Consumer culture, consumption orientation, and desire

The consumption-based orientation to happiness-seeking that is commonly labeled materialism has generally been seen as a Western trait that has achieved an elevated place in industrial and post-industrial life (e.g., Campbell, 1987; Leach, 1993; McCracken, 1988; McKendrick et al., 1985; Williams, 1982). It is

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: mkrwb@business.utah.edu, Tel: +1 801 581-7401, Fax: +1 801 581-7214.

a trait with implications for a wide spectrum of consumer behaviors (Belk, 1985; Richins and Rudmin, 1994; Dittmar and Pepper, 1994). While high level consumption for the sake of pleasure has existed for a few people in many different cultures throughout history, it has spread to entire populations only within the past century (Belk, 1988; Carrier, 1992; Mason, 1981; Page, 1992). Like a technological innovation, materialism now seems to have diffused to ever more of the world's people. This paper uses qualitative data and a modified psychometric measure of materialism to explore whether the same sort of happiness-seeking through consumption thought to characterize much of North America and Europe is developing in other parts of the world.

Recent analyses of globalism suggest that consumer culture is spreading from the West to other parts of the world (e.g., Belk, 1995; Featherstone, 1990; Mattelart, 1989/1991; Sklair, 1991). Stimulated by mass media, international tourism, and multinational marketing, consumers of even the so-called Third World seem to be starting to want luxury consumer goods similar to those of the West, even before they have adequate nutrition (Belk, 1988; Vilanilam, 1989, Wallack and Montgomery, 1991). This is quite different from the historic pattern in the West where minimal levels of health and wealth were achieved before high level consumption desires became dominant.

Materialism, as a consumption-orientation, has been defined as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. 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" (Belk, 1985). Belk's scale of materialism consists of three dimensions: possessiveness, envy, and nongenerosity. Earlier measures of materialism are reviewed by Richins and Dawson (1992). In the Richins and Dawson (1992) conception, materialism is defined as an instrumental or terminal value (Rokeach, 1973). Although they share some adapted items in common with the measures of Belk (1985), the value measures of Richins and Dawson (1992) construe materialism as an enduring belief in the desirability of acquiring and possessing things, and as consisting of three components: acquisition centrality, the role of acquisition in happiness, and the role of possessions in defining success. As with the Belk (1985) scales, these scales were developed and tested solely in a United States context.

## **2. Consumer culture across cultures**

Recent arguments in psychology have stressed the need to rethink concepts developed in the West and suggest that cross-cultural studies are a more

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