

A generational shift is underway in U.S. patterns of media use. The Pew Center’s portrait of “Generation Next” (Kohut, 2007) surveyed the lives and attitudes of persons aged 18 to 25. Some 86% of “GenNexters” use the internet at least occasionally, comparable to the 91% of GenXers [the previous generation] who say they use the internet. That figure drops to 73% for the now middle-aged Baby Boomers, and only 46% of seniors.

GenNexters stand out in their comfort and frequent use of instant and text messaging. Fifty one percent reported having sent or received a text message in the 24 hours preceding being interviewed. The comparable figures were 26% for GenXers, 10% of Boomers, and only four percent of seniors. GenNexters also communicate and express themselves using social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, and MyYearbook (Kohut, 2007).

Braun (2007) points out that young adults are still reading, but rarely read traditional books not required by classes or assignments. Instead, they read blogs, e-mails, text messages, or Facebook entries. Some may be reading running commentaries on internet-linked interactive games about fantasy worlds. They may read online articles about their favorite video games, or listen to podcasts concerning their hobbies, or even view cell phone display versions of television programs.

The generation now entering young adulthood also is the leading edge of the most marketing-targeted children in history (Linn, 2004). The recent increases in targeting children have been at an exponential pace, and have reached out to previously non-commercial areas such as on school buses, in school cafeterias, or in school homeroom periods via Channel One. The marketing target increasingly is directly to the child, rather

than through a parent. Schor’s work (2004) shows the direction of causality is clear. It runs from consumerist/materialist values and a dogged pursuit of more to what have been called “affluenza symptoms”—life dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, more stress, greater unhappiness, credit or consumer debt problems, and stressed relationships with parents.

This research project was designed to test which GenNext media use patterns correlate best with affluenza values and symptoms. Past work regarding affluenza (Harmon, 2001; Harmon, 2006) generally has concentrated on links to amount of television viewing, perhaps motivated by Gerbner’s assertion (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1980) that TV is the central cultural arm of society. As traditional television audiences wane, media forms expand, and multi-tasking proliferates, that assertion is increasingly tenuous.

Literature Review

Several issues are worth addressing regarding media and materialism. Initially, materialism not only contains negative traits, for instance, possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy (Belk, 1985), but also may generate some unintended consequences, such as stress, unhappiness, and debt. Walson’s (1998) study indicated the individuals with higher level of materialism tended to spend more money and had a positive attitude toward accumulating debt. Walker (1996) also found that less materialism suggested better financial management.

Secondly, much TV research has concluded that the situations, events, characters, and behaviors presented on television often are unrealistic and even misleading (Gerbner

et al. 1980; Harrison, 2000; Aubrey and Harrison 2004; Signorielli, 2004; Eggermont, Beullens, and van den Bulck, 2005; Luciano, 2006; Scharrer, Kim, Lin, and Liu, 2006). Specifically, several researchers have found that American television depicts the U.S. as an unrealistically affluent society; these portrayals skewed the viewers’ perception of reality and often lowered their satisfaction with their lives (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997; Sirgy et al, 1998; Shurum et al., 2003; Yang & Srividya 2005). For instance, Yang and Srividya’s (2005) study found that viewing U.S. television was positively associated with Koreans’ estimates of Americans’ affluence and this estimate contributed the viewers’ dissatisfaction with Korean society.

Thirdly, from cultivation and social learning perspectives, people’s purchasing habits and behaviors are established at a young age. Research on the influence of advertised products on children suggested that a child’s desire to possess advertised products might influence his or her interactions with peers and parents and may generate unhappiness when the child’s request or demand for a product is denied by his or her parents (Goldberg & Gorn, 1978).

Finally, media consumption is changing due to the advent of the internet. Young people spend more and more time on the internet as they decrease their consumption of conventional media (Markus, 2005). Young people’s mediated resources to understand and perceive the outside world are not limited to conventional media. The Internet has gradually played an important role on the development and establishment of people’s cognition, attitude, and behavior. Merchant’s (2001) study suggested the use of Internet affects teenagers’ learning of social and linguistic interaction within cyberspace. It also

affects teenagers’ communication and information sharing behavior. These effects contribute teenagers’ a wider communication landscape in cyberspace.

The media play a vital role in affecting and constructing people’s perceptions of outside world. Its portrayals of the material world may influence people’s material values and attitudes toward their lives. Young people are in the process of the establishing beliefs and values to cope with their daily encounters. Thus, this study investigates the relationship between young people’s media use and materialism.

Materialism and Television Viewing and Advertising

Since “magic bullet” assumptions about media effects have faded, researchers have found that, most of the time, media message effects are subtle and indirect (Baran & Davis, 2003). Gerbner’s (1976) Cultivation Theory, and the applications of socialization theory in communication research, opine that media messages often assist or build people’s understandings and cognitions of the world rather than directly change attitudes or behaviors. In this vein, several studies on advertising have explored the influence of advertising, especially TV commercials, on viewers’ consumer values rather than the ads’ direct persuasive power. Researchers also have explored whether TV viewers perceive the world in the exaggerated and unrealistic manner shown on television.

To investigate the influence of television advertising upon children, Goldberg and Gorn (1974) conducted an experiment to examine child reactions to television advertising. The objective of their study was to explore the extent to which TV commercials motivated children to try to obtain advertised products. A total of 139 boys,

eight to ten years old, participated in their experiment. The experimental group of children was exposed to a TV program with a toy commercial. The control group of children was exposed to a TV program without commercials. Both groups of children were told that the first 14 boys to solve a puzzle would win the toy. The researchers found that the direct effect of TV commercial was to increase children’s desire for the advertised toy. One indirect effect of the TV commercial was that the children in experimental group worked longer on puzzle than those in the control group. This finding suggested that the impact of television commercials on viewers’ behavior also existed in indirectly ways -- working hard to get the material product -- rather than in the action of direct purchase.

In another Goldberg and Gorn (1978) experiment, the findings suggested that the TV commercials for children’s items not merely were product promotion but also affected child happiness and interactions with peers. The researchers proposed that toy advertising encouraged children to play with the toy, and the commercials resulted in a greater unhappiness once the children’s desire for the advertised toy was denied. Children who were exposed to a toy commercial were more likely than others to play with the toy rather than with their friends. Children even were willing to play with a “not-so-nice” peer rather than a “nice” peer, presumably in order to play with the former child’s advertised toy. This suggested a potential effect of TV commercials on child’s peer relationship. In addition, children experienced greater personal unhappiness when parents denied their request for the advertised toy.

One of the early studies to suggest that television viewing has a direct impact on the development of viewers’ material values was conducted by Churchill and Moschis in

1979. They proposed a model that explained the paths and factors of adolescent consumers’ socialization. A sample of 806 adolescents was drawn from 13 schools in Wisconsin. Eight variables were examined for adolescent consumers’ socialization: age, socioeconomic status, amount of television viewing, family communication about consumption, peer communication about consumption, materialism, social motivations for consumption, and economic motivation for consumption. Television, family, and peers were found to be the important sources of consumer information. More important, television not merely played a role as product information provider, it also correlated with adolescents’ materialistic values. Adolescents’ materialistic values increased with the amount of television viewing.

Sirgy et al (1998) conducted a cross-cultural study regarding to the TV viewing and materialism. This study collected data from five countries, the U.S., Australia, Canada, Turkey, and China. The study aimed not only to investigate the influence of TV consumption on people’s perception of quality life, but also to explore the impact of cultural and media differences in different countries. In terms of the relationships between materialism and life satisfaction and materialism and television viewing, researchers found that materialism generated life dissatisfaction in the pooled Chinese, Turkish, Australian, and U.S. and the U.S. samples, but not in Canadian sample. More importantly, the amount of television viewing positively predicted the materialism found in the pooled Chinese, Australian, and U.S. panel sample, but not in Turkish, Canadian, and U.S. student samples. Additionally, heavy television viewers made more negative evaluations of their standard of living and were more materialistic than light viewers in the pooled samples but not in any of the specific samples.

Unlike most cultivation research focusing on the impact of television viewing on viewers’ perceptions of gender, sex, or violent issues, O’Guinn & Shrum (1997) studied the relationship between television viewing and the construction of consumer reality. They primarily postulated that the amount of television viewing would positively correlate with the perception of affluence. Two surveys were administered in their research. The data from the first study were collected from the general public and showed that heavier television viewers believe that more people are wealthy and generate behaviors associated with a more affluent lifestyle. The second survey sampled from college students and had a result consistent with the first study. Their studies supported the claim that television viewing is positively correlated with people’s perception of greater affluence of others and society overall.

Instead of merely focusing on television viewing or advertising, Shrum et al. (2003) conducted a study to examine the relationship among media consumption (including TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines), the cultivation of material values, and life satisfaction. The authors proposed that levels of attention during television viewing and individual’s cognitive ability played mediator roles on the cultivation effect of material values. Richins and Dawson’s (1992) Material Values Scales was applied to measure respondents’ materialism scores. Rubin et al.’s (1988) Viewing Attention Scale was used to access the extent to which viewers are attentive to what was being shown on television; and Cacioppo & Petty’s (1982) Need for Cognition scale was implemented to access the extent to which individuals enjoy thinking and tend to engage in cognitive elaboration. The results showed that television viewing was a positive predictor of materialism, but none of the other media forms was significantly related to materialism.

The individuals who paid more attention to television while viewing suggested a higher tendency toward materialism. Also, the relation between television viewing and materialism was more than twice as strong for those high in Need of Cognition scores. This study also found the more television viewing, the stronger life dissatisfaction.

Roberts & Vanessa (2005) conducted a study that examined the influences of both television and advertising on the materialistic values of ten to fourteen year-old children. The mediator variables included in their study were trust in advertisements, advertising recognition, contentedness (participants’ general sense of well-being), consumer communication (the extent to which children converse with parents about goods and services), family oriented communication (the extent to which the importance of expressing one’s opinion and examining both sides of an issue), socio-oriented communication (the extent to which the family emphasizes parental authority and non-confrontational behavior). This study found that the scores of advertising recognition, consumer communication and trust in advertisements and the amount of television viewing each positively predicted children’s material values. Another interesting finding in their study was that the more conversations about goods parents had with children, the higher materialism children tended to have. This finding sharply contrasted with the Moschis and Moore (1982) finding that conversations regarding purchases between parents and children could reduce child materialism.

In addition, Roberts & Vanessa (2005) tested the effects of media literacy videos, *Affluenza* and *The Art of Persuasion*, in reducing participants’ materialism. The results are mixed. The children who were exposed to *Affluenza* not only reduced their materialistic values but also reduced their trust in advertising. However, the children who

exposed to *The Art of Persuasion* did not reduce either their materialistic values or trust in advertising. The authors argue that the mixing results might be due to the content difference of these two films.

Overall, the positive relationship between television consumption and the materialism is supported by several research studies, and this detailed review of past work justifies the following hypotheses:

H1: Television viewing will be positively correlated with the viewers’ materialistic values. The more television viewing, the higher level of materialistic values as expressed in the measures of values and attitudes.

H2: Television viewing will be positively correlated with viewers reporting certain “affluenza” symptoms such as debt, stress, unhappiness, and lowered satisfaction with life and one’s peer and parent relationships.

H3: Television viewing will be positively correlated with greater perception of affluence in others and overall affluence of society.

The researchers also will test several suggested mediating variables for any relationships found in the hypotheses. The researchers also will explore as research questions whether and how other media uses correlate with materialistic values, attitudes, and affluenza symptoms.

Methods

Several scales have been developed to measure materialism. Belk (1983; 1984; 1985) proposed to measure materialism by evaluating the specific materialistic traits -- possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy. Possessiveness indicates the degree to which a person’s “inclination and tendency to retain control or ownership of one’s possessions” (Belk, 1983). Non-generosity refers to the degree to which a person’s “unwillingness to give possessions to or share possessions with others” (Belk, 1984). Envy refers to the degree to which a person’s “displeasure and ill will at the superiority of [another person] in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable” (Schoeck 1966, Belk, 1985).

Belk’s (1985) materialism scale mainly focused on evaluating the personal traits, but Richins (1987) developed a seven-item materialism scale which directly evaluated material values, including satisfactions with goods, satisfactions with life and happiness. His questionnaire items for materialism measurement are (p. 354):

1. It is important to me to have really nice things.
2. I would like to be rich enough to buy anything I want.
3. I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
4. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can’t afford to buy all the things I would like.
5. People place too much emphasis on material thing.
6. It’s really true that money can buy happiness.

7. The things I own give me a great deal of pleasure.

Richins (1987) used that scale to examine the relationship between media exposure, materialism, and life satisfaction. In his study, the relationship between attention to advertising and materialism was not significant. A direct relationship between television viewing and materialism also was not supported. Television viewing was positively correlated with materialism only among the individuals who perceived commercial portrayals of consumers to be realistic. A primary finding in his study is that television viewing did not directly increase viewers’ material values. Belief of the reality of commercial portrayals was a mediating factor between television viewing and materialism.

Goldberg et al. (2003) adopted Belk’s (1985) and Dawson’s (1992) adult materialism scales to develop a youth materialism scale. The major difference among these scales is that Goldberg’s (2003) scale takes the influence of peers into account. This scale contains ten items (p.281):

1. I’d rather spend time buying things, than doing almost anything else.
2. I would be happier if I had more money to buy more things for myself.
3. I have fun just thinking of all things I own.
4. I really enjoy going shopping.
5. I like to buy things my friends have.
6. When you grow up, the more money you have, the happier you are.
7. I’d rather not share my snacks with others if it means I’ll have less for myself.

8. I would love to be able to buy things that cost lot of money.
9. I really like the kids that have very special games or clothes.
10. The only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money.

Goldberg et al. (2003) also tested nine independent variables -- gender, age, family income, frequency of shopping, product expertise, interest in TV commercials, likelihood of saving money, advertising and commercial and promotions -- to examine the effects of these independent variables on youth materialistic values. In terms of television, the researchers found that more materialistic youths were more interested in TV commercials than those who were less materialistic. Compared to the less materialistic youths, more materialistic youths tend to rely on the advertising to make purchasing decision and are more likely to ask their parents to buy the advertised products. Because the interest of the present study is to examine the relationship between television viewing and young people’s materialism, Goldberg’s (2003) materialism scale will be among those used to measure the young people’s materialistic values.

The survey also takes advantages of other past scales. Life satisfaction will be measured using the questions developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985). The measures for student attitudes toward student debt were created by Davies and Lea (1995). Faber and O’Guinn’s (1992) clinical screener for compulsive buying also will be included, as will Rosenberg’s (1965) global self-esteem scale for adolescents.

Findings and Discussion

Following institutional approval for human subject research, the surveys were administered in all introductory public speaking courses in a large Southeastern U.S. university. The surveys were completed by respondents during class time in those courses late in November 2007. Data entry and analysis are underway at the time of the deadline for this symposium. The researchers look forward to presentation of the results either as a research poster or as a research paper presentation.

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