

Materialism and life satisfaction among Hispanic immigrant males

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Abstract

By all measures, the largest & fastest growing minority group in the U.S. is Hispanics (Garza & Watts 2010). The 2009 U.S. census report indicates that about 33% of this population is in the labor force. This study focused on immigrant Hispanic males, and the constructs of interest were materialism and life satisfaction in this population. Barrett (1992) indicated that several undesirable consequences were related to high levels of materialism. One of the primary consequences was a loss of community sense (Belk, 1988). This sense of community is of particular importance to the Hispanic segment since the family and the community is a significant source of influence in Hispanic culture (Garza & Watts, 2010). Thus, it was expected that materialism would be negatively correlated to life satisfaction in our sample. Age and health status were also investigated as mediating variables in this relationship between materialism and life satisfaction. Aging and a decline in physical health status is usually associated with a decline in physical ability but an increase in wisdom & knowledge (Lockenhoff et al. 2009). It was therefore hypothesized that age would lead to lower levels of materialism and higher life satisfaction levels. A total of 32 Hispanic males were surveyed. A majority of the respondents were between the ages of 19 to 61 years, most had finished high school, with 20% having some college education. Results indicated that materialism and life satisfaction were not related to each other. However, supporting the hypothesis, age was found to be negatively related to materialism, and physical health was positively correlated to life satisfaction as well as materialism. Interestingly, further analyses indicated that educational level had a negative impact on life satisfaction. The implications of these results are discussed.

Keywords: Hispanic males, materialism, life satisfaction, aging, immigrants

Introduction

Garza and Watts (2010) report that Hispanics constitute the fastest growing minority groups in the United States. With such a rapid increase, the authors project that this group will constitute 46% of the population in certain states by 2030. Current demographic indicators for this group include high risk youth behaviors such as school dropout rates and teen pregnancies, along with a community that has low socioeconomic status, is not well educated, and does not have adequate training for skilled employment. Avery, Lerman, and Volpone (2010) cite future projections of the labor force in 2050 to be composed 50% of minorities. The 2009 U.S. census report indicates that 33% of the Hispanic population is in the labor force. This study focuses on Hispanic males in the labor force, and explores the relationships between their materialism, life satisfaction, age and physical health status. This information is considered ubiquitous for workplace and community health and well-being.

Theoretical Foundations

The proposed study is guided by three main theories - Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory, Fishbein's (1996) Theory of Reasoned Action and Planned Behavior, and Socio-emotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003)

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) was used to guide (and explain) the basis for the expectations involving our target population. The SCLT is a psychological theory that explains why people behave the way that they do. It emphasized the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Because it includes attention, memory and motivation, the SCLT spans both cognitive and behavioral frameworks (Sarason & Sarason, 1996). The theory focuses on ways in which children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and ways in which these cognitions then influence behavior and development. SCLT was the first to incorporate the notion of modeling, or vicarious learning, as a form of social learning. It defined human behavior as being uniquely determined by personal factors, behaviors, and the environment. Thus, in this study, the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction of the target population is understood in the context of cultural and personal factors.

Fishbein & Ajzen's (1970) theory of reasoned action and planned behavior proposed that an individual's intention to perform a behavior which is under his or her direct control, is a combination of attitudes toward performing the behavior and subjective norms. Attitudes included behavioral belief, evaluations of behavioral outcome, subjective norm, normative beliefs, and the motivation to comply. For behaviors which were outside one's direct control, the researchers proposed Theory of Planned Behavior, which added the element of perceived control to predict behavioral intentions. Perceived control was considered to be a combination of perceived power and beliefs of control. This theory is used to understand the driving forces of the Mexican immigrant sample, in the context of materialism, life satisfaction, and cognitive age perceptions.

The socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST) may provide us with some explanation regarding the mechanism underlying the materialistic preferences of mature consumers (Carstensen et al. 1999; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003). SST suggests that people change their life goals because they change time views during their life. In their early years, people hold an expansive time view, and knowledge-oriented goals such as getting a degree and preparing for a good career are given priority. However, as people grow older, two major factors cause a shift

in knowledge-oriented goals to emotional meaningful goals: Biological aging and physical health status. In later life, people feel that their ability to draw on their reservoir of future time and extend one's temporal horizon may be complicated by evidence of declining health, physical limitations, and by a resource base jeopardized due to retirement.

Therefore, as people get older, their time view changes to that of a limited temporal horizon, and their pursuit of goals changes from skill-or knowledge-related achievements to emotional-meaningful goals such as spending more time with family members and friends, and seeking positive feelings, hedonic enjoyments and materialistic possessions (Rakowski 1986). The SST theory is used in this study to develop the hypotheses related to older consumers and materialism.

Background

The diasporas of cultures in the U.S. provide an insight toward understanding constructs such as life satisfaction. Lockenhoff et al. (2009) investigated the attitudes toward aging between students from 26 cultures. They found that there was a consensus about the impact of aging on perceptions of life satisfaction, wisdom, knowledge, and the ability to perform everyday tasks. Results revealed expectations of a decline in attractiveness, everyday tasks, new learning, and an increase in knowledge, wisdom, respect, family authority and life satisfaction.

Avery, Lerman, and Volpone (2010) found a positive correlation between life satisfaction and racioethnic dissimilarity. That is, when Hispanic participants indicated that the proportion of individuals with whom they interacted at work, were from a different racioethnic group than their own, they reported high life satisfaction.

Le, Lai, and Wallen (2009) investigated the correlates of multiculturalism and subjective happiness among 338 immigrant youth. The authors expected that multiculturalism in schools would be positively related to perceptions of happiness. Results indicated that for the Hispanic youth, social support was the only and best predictor for subjective happiness.

Cruza-Guet, Spokane, Brown, and Szapocznik (2008) identified the relationship between health status and psychological distress. The sample consisted of predominantly Cuban elders between 70-100 years, settled in Florida. The results indicated a relationship between social support and psychological distress. Specifically, the authors explain that the elders who are not physically or mentally healthy are also those who require more informational social support. Similarly, elders who are physically/mentally healthier report greater satisfaction with the social support that they receive. The authors caution that this group of the Hispanic population, having left their country for political reasons, may have different social support needs. The authors speculate that for other Hispanic groups who do not have access to a legal migratory status or health care receiving more social support may be associated with increased life stability and decreased psychological distress.

Accent-based perceived discrimination among Hispanic English speaking employees has also been investigated. Results indicated that accent-based perceived discrimination predicted outcomes such as employee satisfaction and sense of well-being above and beyond other work stressors. Organizational level and linguistic ability did not moderate the employee outcomes (Wated & Sanchez, 2006). Furthermore, even in the labor force, Hispanic employees reported less satisfaction than the majority employees, even though being a solo representative of the minority group rendered higher reports of satisfaction than if they were a part of a larger minority group (Niemann & Dovidio, 1998). Parker, Baltes, and Christiansen (1997) found that

association with affirmation action/equal opportunity was related to positive attitudinal consequences.

In terms of materialism, Lu and Lu (2010) investigated the relationship between materialism and ethical behaviors. Results indicated that consumers with a high level of materialism were significantly more likely to initiate an unethical activity. The authors explain that materialism may incline the individual to be less likely to take an ethically high ground because doing so might mean sacrificing the possession of the material things he or she so deeply desires.

That relationship between materialism and unethical behaviors has been further explored by Barrett (1992) who also found that several undesirable behaviors were related to high levels of materialism. Belk (1988) argues that especially for those who view personal possessions as a vital component of their self identity, materialism was found to be related to loss of community sense. This sense of community is of particular importance in relation to the Hispanic segment.

Garza and Watts (2010) reaffirm that the family is a significant source of influence in the Hispanic culture. The authors identify four Hispanic values; the importance of the family, personal relationships, trust, and respect. According to the authors, '*Familismo*' is a value whereby family members are perceived as an extension of one's self. Interdependence is valued more than independence and traditionally, a sense of family obligation serves as a cultural survival strategy, which facilitates family cohesion and leads to higher life satisfaction and consequently better health. Thus, it was expected that materialism related to the loss of community sense would be negatively correlated to life satisfaction in our segment.

Hypotheses

Based on the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses were developed:

- (1) There will be a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction.
- (2) Physical health status will be related to Age related variables.
- (3) Age related variables and physical health status will have an impact on materialism and life satisfaction.

Methodology

Hispanic-Mexican males ($n = 32$) responded to the questionnaire. The median age was 30 years, and a majority (50%) were in their late 20s and early 40s. Twenty-eight percent reported that they had a high school education, 19% reported that they had some college level education. Life satisfaction scores had a $Mean = 3.35$, $SD = 1.28$; Materialism scores had a $Mean = 3.74$, $SD = 1.21$.

For this study, materialism was taken to mean the pursuit of one's own material well-being. We measured materialism using Richins' (2004) 9-item short form of Materialism Value Scale. The measure displayed adequate reliability (.80).

Life Satisfaction was measured using a 4-item scale (Wei & Talpade, 2009). A composite was computed by taking the sum of the scores on the four items. Lower scores indicate lower life satisfaction. The measure displayed adequate reliability (.798).

In terms of age, two different types of ages, chronological age, and cognitive age were measured to compare age-related differences in consumer materialism. The operational definitions of the two were adopted from Settersten and Mayer (1997). Chronological age,

expressed in days, months or years, was measured using a question “how old are you?” or “your birth date is”. Cognitive age, also called “feel age”, was measured using a statement “I feel as though I am in my...”.

Physical health status was measured twice with two different scales. The first measure used the question, “How many prescription drugs for chronic conditions are you presently taking? _____ (number)” This measure has been used by previous researchers (Johnson and Krueger 2005). Scores were obtained by taking the count of number of prescription drugs used by the subjects. Higher scores indicated poorer health. Also, a three 7-item Likert scale called Feeling of Healthiness developed by Lumpkin and Hunt (1989) was used to measure health status, with anchors of 1 as “Completely agree” and 7 as “Completely disagree”. The three items included “Compared to others my age, I take less medicine”, “Compared to others my age, I think I am in better health”, and “I really do not have any physical problems”. The measure displayed adequate reliability (.88). Composite scores were computed by taking the sum of the scores on the three items. Lower scores indicate a perception that health is poorer.

The actual questionnaire was translated into Spanish and completed by Hispanic-Mexican respondents, who were approached by a researcher fluent in Spanish. Informed consent was obtained.

Results

Data were analyzed using the PASW Statistics 18.0. The expectation that there will be a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction was not supported. Correlational analyses on variables Physical health status and Age related variables, revealed a significant relationship between chronological Age and reports of “compared to others my age, I take less medicine”, $r(23) = .70, p = .000$; “I feel as though I am in my... was also correlated significantly with reports of “compared to others my age, I take less medicine”, $r(26) = .59, p = .002$; “Compared to others my age, I think I am in better health” was significantly correlated with “At what age do you think the average man becomes old?”, $r(27) = -.51, p = .006$.

To test the hypothesis that age and physical health status had an impact on materialism and life satisfaction, correlational item analyses was conducted. The number of prescription drugs taken for chronic conditions were negatively correlated with life satisfaction item, “If I could live my life again, I would change almost nothing”, $r(21) = -.57, p = .006$. The response “Compared to others my age, I take less medicine” correlated positively with the life satisfaction item, “The conditions of my life are excellent”, $r(29) = .44, p = .018$. The response “Compared to others my age, I am in better health” correlated significantly with the materialism items, “I try to keep my life simple (r)”, $r(31) = -.48, p = .006$; “The things I own say a lot about how well I’m doing in life”, $r(29) = .54, p = .002$. “I really do not have any physical problems”, was positively correlated to the the life satisfaction item, “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”, $r(26) = .56, p = .003$. Age was negatively correlated to the materialism item, “Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure”, $r(23) = -.45, p = .030$.

A further test of the expectation that age would have an impact on materialism/life satisfaction, included a Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test of the life satisfaction and materialism items as a function of the three Age groups: 25 years and lower, late 20s to early 40s, and above 45 years, which were formed based on the birth-date provided by the participants. Results showed a significant effect of Age group on the Materialism item, “Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure”, $\chi^2(2, N = 23) = 6.05, p = .049$, with the oldest age group (*Mean Rank* = 16),

disagreeing the most, followed by the middle age group (*Mean Rank* = 12), and finally by the youngest age group (*Mean Rank* = 6). Although these results were corroborated by the parametric tests, the nonparametric test was conducted and reported as a precaution against violation of the parametric test assumptions such as the unequal and small sample in each of the groups.

Other findings of interest include the impact of educational level on life satisfaction measures. Analyses on the reported education level categories, high school ($n = 8$; *Mean Rank* = 5.38), some college ($n = 6$; *Mean Rank* = 14.08), and other ($n = 6$; *Mean Rank* = 13.75), using nonparametric tests revealed a significant impact on the following-“The conditions of my life are excellent”, $\chi^2(2, N = 20) = 7.83, p = .020$. Thus, those with the some college ‘disagreed’ the most, followed by ‘other’, with the most agreement by those reporting a high school educational level.

A MANOVA conducted on the life satisfaction and materialism measures as a function of Age group and Educational level, revealed an interaction effect of the factors on, “If I could live my life again, I would change almost nothing”, $F(2,12) = 4.95, p = .054$. The age group above 45 years with high school education disagreed significantly more than those with ‘other’ educational level; those in the late 20s and early 40s with some college agreed more than those with a high school education; and those who were 25 years and younger, with some college disagreed with the statement significantly more than those with ‘other’ and high school education. These results however have to be interpreted with caution because of the unequal groups and small sample size involved. The interpretation of the results however fits with the results of the nonparametric tests and hence are mentioned here.

Discussion

Thus, the expectations that materialism and life satisfaction would be directly related to each other were not supported. As predicted, age and physical health were related to each other. Results indicated that there were significant relationships between the age related variables and physical health measures, with increasing age being associated with lower physical health, but the majority of the participants reporting good health for their age. Supporting the hypothesis, results indicated that age related variables and physical health impacted life satisfaction and materialism. Physical health was positively correlated to life satisfaction and materialism measures. Age was found to be negatively related to materialism measure. Interestingly, further analyses indicated that educational level had a negative impact on life satisfaction measures. The more educated the respondent, the less satisfied they were with their life. Rudimentary results documented interaction effects between age, education and life satisfaction, that is older less educated participants were more dissatisfied with their life than those who were middle aged with more education, but the youngest more educated respondents were more dissatisfied than those with less education.

Explanations for the above results are suggested. As purported by Bandura’s SCLT the constructs materialism and life satisfaction must be understood in the context of the demographic variables. Demographic variables tend to mediate the relationships, and as Carstensen et al.’s (1999) suggests, with age changing individual goals from tangible achievements to emotional goals or an increase in the value of ‘familismo’ as suggested by Garza and Watts (2010), thus resulting in a decrease in materialism with the progression of age. The relationship between health and life satisfaction was indicated by Cruza-Guet et al.(2008). It is surmised that this group of participants were relying more on their physical health to earn their living, and thus

only those who were physically fit were able to earn their living and feel valued and achieve their goals (financial, family security) at that point in time. The surfacing of education as a factor in life satisfaction can also be explained by Fishbein and Ajzen's 1970 theory. Educated individuals may have a negative attitude toward performing unskilled jobs and having to depend on such due to their migratory status or circumstances, which may explain the lower life satisfaction among the more educated group.

Although the hypotheses were partially supported and understood in the context of theory and research, some limitations are acknowledged. The small sample size, the inability to conduct in-depth interviews due to the nature of the environment in which the survey was conducted, curtails the external validity of the study. Thus, the authors caution that this is albeit a pilot study and future studies would benefit by conducting random situation sampling to further investigate the constructs of materialism and life satisfaction. This knowledge can further marketing research and the need for interventions and support systems in this growing group of migrant Mexican-Hispanic workers.

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