

**Post-Materialism's "Silent Revolution" in Consumer Research:
Still Silent After All These Years**

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Abstract

The Protestant work ethic, with its emphasis on ever-increasing levels of production, contributed to the rise of the consumption culture and the legitimization of the market society. It appears that the very premise of the market society--specialization and the production of consumption--also paves the way for a post-materialist revolution.

Post-Materialism's "Silent Revolution" in Consumer Research: Still Silent After All These Years

Almost three decades ago, Ronald Inglehart (1971) spoke of a "silent revolution" of "post-bourgeois" values sweeping the societal landscapes of advanced industrial nations. By "post-bourgeois," Inglehart refers to a set of values related to "the need for belonging and to aesthetic and intellectual needs" (p.991), as opposed to "acquisitive" values related to the acquisition and retention of economic goods. According to Inglehart, "post-bourgeois" value priorities are on the rise, and before the turn of the century those holding such priorities would outnumber the traditional "acquisitive" types. In later writings, "post-materialism" and "materialism" replaced "post-bourgeois" and "acquisitive" respectively (eg. Inglehart 1977); the change, however, is one of nomenclature rather than of content. The premise remains, new names notwithstanding, that

the values of Western publics have been shifting from an overwhelming emphasis on material well-being and physical security toward greater emphasis on the quality of life...(and) a decline in the legitimacy of hierarchical authority, patriotism, religion, and so on, which leads to declining confidence in institutions. (1977, pp.3-4)

Although Inglehart's thesis is framed in the realms of political science, its discourse on such a major social transformation has inspired much research in other social sciences (eg. Cherns 1980, Perkins and Spates 1986, Pfeiffer and Côté 1991, Spates 1983, among others). Relatively uncontaminated by such a seminal idea, however, marketing scholars have given post-materialism a wide berth, except in a few consumer research efforts (eg. Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982, Belk 1985). Indeed, it is interesting to note the absence of any reference to Inglehart's post-materialistic world in studies on seemingly related topics such as idealized advertising images (Richins 1991), possessions and the extended self (Belk 1988), materialism as a social value (Spiggle 1986), the ideology of affluence (Hirschman 1990), consumption and work (Benton 1987)....The list goes on. Marketing's nonchalance has been as sweeping and silent as the "silent revolution" itself.

Surely post-materialism could profoundly affect marketing as we know it, for the demise of consumption culture casts doubts about the efficacy of economic exchange, which has long been a fundamental, if implicit, tenet of marketing thought (Bagozzi 1975; Chung and Heeler 1995). As Bartels (1988) reminds us, it is largely because of Adam Smith's notion that the goal of all economic activity is the satisfaction of consumption that has led to marketing's proclamation of the consumer as sovereign. If post-materialistic values do indeed take on higher priorities in the minds of an increasing number of people, as Inglehart posits, what might the future role of marketing be? If materialism is on the wane, what becomes of consumption culture? Indeed, what of the foundations of market economies? Before attempting to address these issues, however, post-materialism warrants a better understanding.

POST-MATERIALISM

Early writings by Inglehart (eg. 1971, 1977, 1981) give only a sketchy description of what post-materialism is. Often, a contrast with acquisitive or materialistic values is needed to clarify the subject matter. The reader does, of course, acquire a more complete picture of the post-materialistic landscape by studying a combination of Inglehart's work *in toto*. Inglehart and Flanagan (1987) provides some clarification when they define post-materialistic values as:

An emphasis on personal and political freedom, participation (more say in government, in one's community, and on the job), equality, tolerance of minorities and those holding different opinions,

openness to new ideas and new lifestyles, environmental protection and concern for quality of life issues, self-indulgence, and self-actualization. (p.1304)

But this statement also runs the risk of being taken apart and each of its individual components analyzed piecemeal. The "replaceable parts" mentality (Helman 1988) which so agitates post-materialists may well guide the epistemological pursuit of those studying this social phenomenon. A more fruitful line of research has examined the validity of Inglehart's hypothesis. This has largely centred around the questions of whether post-materialism is a fad that is in chic (eg. Marsh 1975), and whether it is merely a life-cycle effect (eg. Pfeiffer and Côté 1991). Nevertheless, since Inglehart's (1971) proclamation of "the silent revolution," evidence supporting the post-materialistic thesis is still robust. Indeed, there has been an impressive array of studies to demonstrate the concept's continued viability (eg. De Graaf et al 1989, Inglehart 1981, Inglehart 1985, Inglehart and Flanagan 1987, Knutsen 1990). And, other research efforts, though not explicitly testing the validity of the concept, offer additional support.

Before moving on, we should address two points of clarification. First, post-materialism does not imply a total abdication of materialistic values. It is the relative importance of values to the individual that is critical to an understanding of the human condition. A post-materialist places higher priorities on post-materialistic values, not necessarily negative values on material goals (Inglehart 1971, p.995). This is an important aspect of Inglehart's theory which is all too easily overlooked.

Second, post-materialism may seem to call into question the importance of "achievement" in society. The issue, however, depends on how one defines achievement. Post-materialistic values do not necessarily mean a rejection of an achievement orientation. Cherns (1980) suggests that in the United States, it is not so much a rejection of achievement but rather an acceptance as equivalent all forms of achievement, "however bizarre or trivial in the eyes of the established" (p.431). Broadening the term achievement to include things other than wealth and material pursuits enables us to reconcile post-materialistic values with achievement. If, for instance, we are to equate achievement with "secular immortality" (Hirschman 1990), then we understand that affluence is not a sufficient criterion.

Conceptual Background

A Set of Values. Inasmuch as post-materialism can be seen as a set of values (eg. Inglehart 1981), an examination of its origin would benefit from a review of what is known about values. A vast literature exists upon which one can draw. Coherence of points of view, however, is another matter altogether. As Spates (1983, p.43) notes, "values exist, but we do not yet know how they work." Not only are we uncertain as to how values function in real social settings, but the inchoate multiplicity of usage of the term further confuses the issue. For our purposes, we shall follow Rokeach and look at values as enduring prescriptive or proscriptive standards that guide our conduct or end-state of existence, and as such, are central to a person's personality makeup and cognitive system. And in that values are driven not by present needs but their utopia, the study of post-materialism is chiefly concerned with what people want their conditions of social existence to be. According to Rokeach (1973), values are derived from needs, though the two are not necessarily isomorphic. It is thus not entirely surprising that, as we shall see below, Inglehart's thesis is closely related to a theory of needs. There are two fundamental hypotheses in Inglehart's concept of post-materialism.

The Scarcity Hypothesis. Drawing heavily from Maslow's (1954) theory of need hierarchy and the economics principle of diminishing marginal utility, Inglehart (1981) offers the "scarcity hypothesis" as the first of two hypotheses concerning post-materialism. In short, individuals would place greater emphasis on those things that are in shorter supply. There are actually two parts to this hypothesis. First, referencing Maslow's theory, Inglehart posits that "individuals pursue various goals in hierarchical order" (1971, p.991). Thus, physiological needs must more or less be taken care of

before a person proceeds to attend to higher order needs. Inglehart (1981) acknowledges that once past the basic physiological needs, the hierarchy becomes murky. His solution is to only distinguish between those physiological needs for sustenance and safety, and non-physiological needs for esteem, self-expression, and aesthetic satisfaction. Second is the principle of "diminishing marginal utility of economic determinism" (Inglehart and Flanagan 1987, p.1289), which calls for a diminishing role for economic factors once a society's level of economic development reaches a certain degree of security. Such a curvilinear relationship naturally makes predictions of value change difficult. This difficulty is compounded when we consider that it is one's *subjective* sense of economic well-being that matters. Still, the essence of Inglehart's argument remains--that as economic security is no longer perceived as a major concern, people will want to satisfy their higher order needs such as self-actualization. But as Inglehart (1981) warns, the scarcity hypothesis alone does not adequately explain the phenomenon of post-materialism. We must also consider a second hypothesis.

The Socialization Hypothesis. The scarcity hypothesis would suggest that most advanced industrial nations should be exhibiting predominantly post-materialistic values. Yet even Inglehart (1981) admits that this is not the case, because, as he puts it, "a substantial time lag is involved, for, to a large extent, one's basic values reflect the conditions that prevailed during one's preadult years" (p.881). The socialization hypothesis suggests that a person's early socialization (during one's formative years) is more important to his or her value system than later socialization. For instance, Rindfleisch, Burroughs and Denton (1997) finds that more materialistic tendencies are exhibited in those reared in disrupted (vs. intact) families. Conditions of economic and physical security in one's formative years are seen as conducive to post-materialistic preferences, as indicated by data showing post-materialistic values strongest among those in the West who have been born post-war (Inglehart 1971, p.999). One outcome of greater economic and physical security is a higher level of education. The latter has been found to be strongly linked with post-materialistic values (Inglehart 1977, p.75), and university-educated individuals are five times more likely to be post-materialists than those who have received less education.

Summary. The two hypotheses work hand in hand in predicting value change. The scarcity hypothesis indicates that prosperity and security are necessary conditions for post-materialistic values. But the change will not happen overnight. The socialization hypothesis implies that such fundamental value changes are gradual, and become visible only "as a younger generation replaces an older one in the adult population of a society" (Inglehart 1981, p.882).

Manifestations of the Phenomenon

Disillusionment with Science and Institutionalization. Helman (1988) suggests that part of the continued appeal of monstrosities such as Frankenstein's monster is that their "replaceable parts" remind us of our own replaceability in the modern industrialized world (as a result of division of labour, specialization, and so on). In reviewing the movie *The Shining* from a psychoanalytic perspective, Cocks (1991) finds an underlying tone of disenchantment with technology and science, and relates that to problems facing society and its future. While much less horrific, Hirschman's (1988) study of consumption ideology reveals a binary opposition of sacred versus secular consumption; the former informed by nature and family, the latter symbolized by technology and urbanity.

Disenchantment with institutionalization at work, in politics, and in everyday life, may well have moved some individuals to seek meaningful experiences in cultural commodities (Alt 1982). McCracken's (1988) discourse on "displaced meaning" informs how this may transpire. Individuals (and societies) need to hang on to certain ideals, so as to give their lives meaning. Reality, however, is often at odds with these ideals. The gap between reality and ideal threatens the ethos of being, and a strategy of "displaced meaning" is used to save the day. Coveted goods are useful in this regard because individuals can concretize the displaced ideals through the anticipation of possession. In other words, goods symbolize the ideal and obviate the need to actually bring the ideal to the "here and

now" and run the risk of damaging it.

The Joyless Consumer. A recurring theme in much of research into North American consumer culture is that of materialism. In proclaiming "we are what we have" as "perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior," Belk (1988, p.139) underscores the important role that possessions play in helping individuals define themselves. But materialism is only a matter of degree (Belk 1985). While extant research indicates a general endorsement of wealth and material comfort, it also argues that materialism is not necessarily all good. Commenting on "the joyless consumer," Benton (1987) notes that much of consumption today "is part of a larger pattern of dependence, disorientation, and loss of control" (p.247). Similarly, Belk (1985) fails to find a positive association between materialistic beliefs and happiness.

Quality of Life and Experiential Consumption. Earlier, we noted the need to reconcile the premise of post-materialism with the concept of displaced meaning, whereby social ideals are channeled through goods. The concept of displaced meaning indicates that goods can come to symbolize social ideals. There is, however, the danger that actual possession of this symbol destroys its very ability to serve as a proxy of the ideal. Once "owned," the object loses its mythical powers and becomes vulnerable to falsification, much as the social ideals it seeks to shelter. Perhaps what consumer researchers called "experiential consumption" may offer some hope of reconciliation.

It is possible that the blurring of individual identity (as in replaceable parts) has prompted a rising interest in experiential consumption (eg. Arnould and Price 1993). In the experiential perspective, consumption goes beyond the purchase of an object, and encompasses elements of fantasy, fun, and feelings. As a means to regain some of the lost individuality in society, the consumption experience has meaning that is uniquely individual--it is the subjective interpretation by each individual that makes the act meaningful. Furthermore, since this consumption experience is primarily a private affair and often takes place outside the public eye, it is another way for people to channel consumption away from a purely materialist bent. Even when physical objects do come into play, it is not that these (ornate or otherwise) are seen as good or bad in and of themselves (Belk 1988, Hirschman 1990). What we choose to collect, how we do it, and what it means to us is within the boundaries of our control. In other words, collections are our way of maintaining and expressing our self-identity--something that institutionalization has deprived us of.

Thus, in an era when markings of social divisions are unstable and rapidly surpassed, when coveted but unobtainable goods are a rarity, mass consumption can no longer sustain a meaningful social life. Instead, a more holistic view of the quality of life is required (Featherstone 1987).

Summary. A large amount of research from various disciplines has lent support to Inglehart's post-materialism theme. While materialistic concerns are by no means moribund, we are witnessing a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. And as we have noted, adoption of post-materialism does not necessitate total abandonment of materialistic values. Only the priorities have changed. Whether Inglehart's post-materialistic world does come to pass as he has predicted, there is little doubt that a silent revolution is indeed transpiring.

STRUCTURAL UNDERPINNINGS

An undercurrent of post-materialism has serious repercussions for the cultural makeup of society. Social "institutions" (Nicosia and Mayer 1976, p.67) represent sets of "specific activities performed by specific people in specific places through time." Post-materialistic ideals, on the other hand, are more reflective of "the metaphysics of culture" (Kaplan 1984, p.30), which is made up of fundamental beliefs and mirrors the ethos of a culture. As Nicosia and Mayer (1976) have noted, the literature is mute on how widely held a value must be. Indeed, a unitary or monolithic culture may well be nonexistent in contemporary societies (Shapiro 1983). Thus, the current dominance of

materialistic values does not prohibit an investigation of the post-materialist phenomenon. For indeed, as Ember and Ember (1993, p.162) have remarked, "individual variation is the source of new culture."

The Market Collectivity

Most industrial societies operate in the context of a market economy, or something of that nature. In a market arrangement, the collectivity is based on exchange. Herein lies the basis of economic theory. Central to such a system is the idea of private property, since a market cannot function--i.e. no exchange can take place--unless people have property. An exchange system can be subverted by monopolistic powers, uncontrolled greed, lack of trust, and a host of other threats. How might post-materialism exist in such an environment? Two issues stand out to offer some insight on this relationship.

The Production of Consumption. The classical economics goal to produce and distribute for consumption, so that individuals can maximize their satisfaction, is the basis of the "production of consumption" perspective of consumer culture (Featherstone 1990). While one may argue from this perspective that the "vast accumulation of material culture in the form of consumer goods" (p.5) signals the triumph of the exchange economy, there is also wide concern that this relentless logic of the commodity is conducive to ideological manipulation. Because "a market system needs freedom to expand, to find new outlets, and to justify increased scale of production" (Douglas 1989, p.51), individuals are indoctrinated to the merits of ever-increasing levels of consumption. Sherry (1987) notes the "social pathology" of consumerism, whose ideology of insatiable wants and unlimited growth ultimately leads individuals to see themselves as commodities. Already we have seen (above) dissatisfaction with the culture of mass consumption. If the production-consumption dyad underlies the rationale of a market society, post-materialism constitutes one of those "cracks in the logic" that Douglas (1989, p.51) warns about.

In an exchange relationship, it is common to assume that producers seek to maximize profits while consumers seek to maximize utilities. Maximization, whether profits or utilities, is made possible by specialization, as manifested in division of labour. The "Protestant work ethic" emphasizes that it is good to produce. Indeed, productivity for society's benefit is the underlying theme. Excessive consumption, on the other hand, is not condoned. Yet this very emphasis on production necessitates increased levels of consumption as an offset. And, in the name of productivity, the agency of scientific management creates role specificity and removes the "content" from work (Cherns 1980). But it is precisely this quest for efficiency which has degraded the creativity of work to the drudgery of labour (Benton 1987). Society is thus faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, it is good to produce as much as possible, and to this end, specialization and role specificity is beneficial. On the other hand, this process also reduces work to meaningless drudgery. Where is one to find a sense of achievement? McCracken's (1988) "displaced meaning," or similarly, Nicosia and Mayer's (1976) "deflection process," informs us that individuals may resolve this conflict by channeling the achievement ideal through consumption. Therein sown the seeds of consumption culture. Hence, "to proclaim that we live in a consumer society is to proclaim at the same time that we live in a society of labourers...a society that does not work, labours, and a labouring society is a consuming society" (Benton 1987, p.239).

The Economic Person Assumption. The notion of the "economic person," which underwrites classical economics theory, assumes full and complete information which an individual uses in a rational manner to evaluate alternatives and make decisions accordingly. This person is also the most likely to be successful in a market society. Yet we also know that people often rely on simple heuristics, rather than machine-like analytical processes, in making decisions (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). The concept of bounded rationality (Simon 1976) submits that humans are limited in their cognitive abilities, and this constraint prevents individuals from making decisions in a systematic, comprehensive manner. In offering what he calls a "radically revised view of the consumption experience," which he claims to have learned from studying the behavior of pets, Holbrook (1987)

suggests that conventional models of consumer behavior, with their focus on rational, purposive action, miss much that is important about the individual. The upshot of Holbrook's argument is that consumers are individuals with feelings and emotions, not logical machines as depicted in behavioral models. As such, the human condition can only be appreciated by relying more on "story telling and other aspects of conceptual humanism" (Holbrook 1987, p.173).

Summary. The market collectivity as a form of legitimization of society was designed for a particular purpose in a particular era by a particular culture. Over time, it has evolved into perhaps the most prevalent form of society among industrial countries. Many developing nations seek to emulate this form of legitimation, perhaps practicing the "displaced meaning" strategy that McCracken (1988) talks about. Yet, as we have seen, the market society is but a precarious collectivity premised on two rather shaky doctrines--the "production of consumption" perspective and the "economic person" assumption. Precarious, because how they are judged by society's members stirs at the heart of the normative debate; shaky, because although they may actually have accelerated post-materialist thinking, their validity is also seriously challenged by the undulations of the silent revolution.

But if changing social values threaten the stability of the market form of legitimation, similar predicaments also face other forms of collectivity. As Douglas (1989) suggests, all societies are formed on the basis of an ongoing normative debate by members of the community. Other forms of legitimation, such as "hierarchy," encounter their own "cracks in the logic." Inasmuch as culture is a social construction (Eisenstadt 1990), it is subject to change as its members acquire a different worldview. The market society as an element of the culture of industrial communities is not immune.

DISCUSSION

Inglehart's thesis provides a useful discourse on a significant social force that is changing our cultural landscape. That the post-materialism phenomenon has not been studied in any depth by consumer researchers is both surprising and disheartening. Hirschman (1993) notes that the machine metaphor, which views humans as mere tools or instrumental resources, is still prevalent in consumer research. She reports, for example, that in the 1990 volume of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, 56 percent of the articles used the machine metaphor to depict human behavior. Furthermore, although the economic person assumption and its corollary of utility maximization are not as dominant in 1990 as in 1980, they are still evident in 12 percent of the articles. Referencing an article which sought to analyze social bonds from a utilitarian perspective, Hirschman writes that "ideology such as this reduces human friendship to mere self-serving calculation and transforms generosity into record keeping" (p.545). We would suggest that the ideology of post-materialism reflects an anomaly in the positivist world of consumer research, and is ontologically inconsistent with the dominant logic. But if marketing in general, and consumer research in particular, is to be socially relevant (Firat 1987), "a macro and societal perspective" (p.264) would have to be adopted by its workers. And "postmodern" consumer research (eg. Hirschman and Holbrook 1992) may well be the means to promote this perspective.

The main intent of this essay has been to bring the concept of post-materialism into the domain of consumer research. That the silent revolution represents a shift in the fundamental values of society makes it that much more interesting and rewarding an area of research pursuit. Several questions remain, however. Has post-materialism surpassed, or about to surpass, materialism as the dominant value in contemporary industrial societies, much as Inglehart (1971) predicted?

A second, and perhaps more intellectually stimulating, question relates to how a successful post-materialistic revolution would affect our normative debate. In other words, if the market society were illegitimated, what other form of social legitimation may we adopt? Having rejoiced (at least most have) the fall of the Berlin Wall and all that it implies, are we about to witness the dismantling of something equally, if not more so, symbolic of a way of life? If so, what is to follow?

Third, and this is alarmingly and immediately moral, of what relevance are the concepts and theories we impart in business schools if they are founded on shaky premises in a collapsing ideology?

And fourth, if post-materialism is undermining the foundations of the materialistic world, what path might consumer researchers take to help the discipline achieve a measure of social relevance? In light of the ferment in the cultural landscape of society, researchers may do well to reexamine their ontological and epistemological assumptions. If, as posited in this paper, the ideology of post-materialism is ontologically inconsistent with the dominant logic of positivist inquiry, and a macro, more humanistic perspective is called for, then in practical terms, where do we begin?

Admittedly, this essay offers no answer to any of the questions raised above. The questions, like locked doors in an old house, can be fascinating and yet threatening. This paper opens none of the doors except to point out that something may be lurking behind them. But by raising these questions, by questioning that which is taken for granted, by revealing the assumptions that routinely go unchallenged, we come closer to opening the doors and coming face to face with whatever awaits us. And, as Stephen King would argue, once the door is opened, we are no longer scared.

Imagination purely as a tool in the art and science of scaring the
crap out of people...Nothing is so frightening as what's behind the
closed door. (King 1981, p.110)

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