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Consumer culture and the culture of poverty: implications for marketing theory and practice

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***Abstract.** This paper explores the influence of the larger material culture on consumers living within the culture of poverty so that the scholarly community might better understand the actual as well as potential role marketing plays in the lives of the poor. The data are a series of short stories based explicitly on six distinct sub-populations of impoverished people, and these stories are used as ethnographic data for the purposes of analysis. An interpretation emerges that emphasizes five inter-related thematic categories: meager possessions, consumer restrictions, role of the media, consumer reactions, and survival strategies. The paper closes with a summary of findings and specific implications for the marketing community with regard to theory and practice. **Key Words** ● consumer culture ● culture of poverty ● marketing theory*

Introduction

If Descartes' famous maxim were to be updated for 2001, it might become 'I have therefore I am.' Popular media saturate our society telling us that pleasure, security, and success are defined in terms of material possessions and commodified experiences. . . . From this standpoint, meaning making and personal identity become inextricably bound up with ownership and consumption. . . . The very existence of "haves" and "have-nots" is the logical outcome of this individualistic, competitive, acquisitive culture. (Hoepper, 2001)

Following the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001, the USA plunged into its first recession in more than a decade (Powell et al., 2001). Tributes to fallen heroes among the dead, missing, and injured resonated throughout the nation as the



citizenry grappled with a sense of vulnerability that has plagued parts of Europe and the Middle East for decades. Pundits called for a renewed strength and determination by Americans in the face of this adversity, with the loudest calls requesting a return to the market place to show resolve (McKegney, 2001).

Both the President of the USA and the Mayor of New York made clear that the 'war on terrorism' requires consumers to continue buying, especially through air travel and shopping junkets to NYC. These requests were eerily similar in intent to the trip to a local shopping mall by former President Bush and his wife the day after Thanksgiving during the last recession, where consumption was presented as the model of good citizenship in a time of economic turmoil (Schmidt, 1992). The plethora of goods that has been marketed subsequent to the recent attack, from t-shirts to flags to commemorative ribbons, gives credence to the importance of consumer culture in the healing process of a postmodern society in distress.

From consumer culture

Of course the theoretical notion of a consumer culture has been around for generations, or at least since Thorsten Veblen coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' to refer to attempts by the developing leisure class to enhance their status through the display of material possessions (Gorn, 1998). The Industrial Revolution within western societies gave birth to the first truly ubiquitous modern culture of consumption, with the availability for the first time of a broad range of consumer products at prices affordable to a mass audience. It was during this period that the populace came to believe that higher-order goals and problems could be achieved and solved by suitable consumption (Murphy, 2000).

Over time, values, aspirations, and behaviors shifted from a reliance on citizenship, religion, or military rank for direction to that of one's place in the consumer hierarchy. As a result, 'It is partially through the use of goods and services that we formulate ourselves as social identities and display these identities' (Slater, 1997: 31). This reliance on what one has or consumes continues to be important within post-industrial western democracies, where products have come to represent signal objects to both the self and others. As McCracken (1990: 136) notes, 'Goods, then, are two media of communication: both bulletin boards for internal messages and billboards for external ones.'

The essential role of marketing in the creation and maintenance of modern consumer culture has many proponents with critical perspectives (e.g. Bud et al., 1999; Garvey, 1996; Ritzer, 2000). Their points of view are consistent with Lears (1995) who believes that the 'hallmark' of our consumer culture *is* advertising, which plays such a prominent role in society because of excess production that requires significant marketing effort to eliminate. In this respect, marketing is positioned as a forceful influence that literally transformed western culture during the 20th-century to the present time. Its persuasive ability and pervasive influence results from powerful messages that link essential human needs, from sex to play to personal success, with consumption opportunities (Berger, 2000).

One outcome of the expanding influence of marketing on consumer culture is



the rise of globalization, which has altered societies throughout the world and created universal consumer market segments that associate similar meanings with people, places, and products (Alden et al., 1999). Together these segments form a transnational consumer culture (Ueltzhoffer and Ascheberg, 1999), which gives the appearance that consumer choice lacks constraints and 'is depicted as a land of freedom in which everyone *can* be a consumer' within the larger human society (Slater, 1997: 27). Thus, most of the associated theory is based upon the belief that consumers are at least middle-class in terms of their resources and material aspirations (Chin, 2001).

Of course, as Chin (2001: 33) aptly states, 'the endless proliferation of choice in contemporary consumer society is, in fact, an illusion.' As a result, one of the essential research questions in the study of consumer culture involves resource allocation within and among social systems and its relative equity across various subpopulations or market segments. Most current scholarship in this area has found that a variety of groups are left out of the material abundance that is available in the larger society due, in part, to their race, gender, or relative poverty (e.g. Chin, 2001; Hill and Adrangi, 1999; Hill and Dhanda, 1999). It appears that significant numbers of people worldwide lack the ability to achieve satisfactory consumer lives and identities consistent with the promotional messages that so pervade their lives (Keyfritz, 1992).

To a culture of poverty

La Farge describes the devastating impact of globalization in prophetic terms:

Here is the greatest export of the Euro – North American family of nations – a new material culture that shatters the nonmaterial cultures of the peoples it reaches, and that today is reaching them all. All over the world, people are hating the light-skinned, machine age nations, and busily aping them. One of the first returns they get is a cultural desolation. (Lewis, 1959: ix)

It is within this context that Oscar Lewis (1959) first proposed his controversial 'culture of poverty' thesis. In actuality, the term refers to a subculture of people living in poverty who respond to their lack of material abundance with a distinct set of negative beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (also see Morris, 1989). This negativity is the result of the inequity, alienation, loss of self-esteem, and poor mental and physical health they must endure (Belk and Ger, 1996; Hill and Stephens, 1997). To Lewis (1959: 2), this cultural devastation is pervasive and 'cuts across regional, rural – urban, and even national boundaries.'

While several concerns have been lodged about his use of word 'culture' (see Leeds, 1971), the largest area of disagreement between Lewis and other social scientists involves his distinction of the value systems between the poor and non-poor. For example, Lewis claims that impoverished individuals are aware of middle-class ideals but do not behave according to their dictates (Lewis, 1970). However, others suggest that societal values are fundamentally the same regardless of one's socioeconomic status, and it is the low-income realities of the material lives of the poor that cause perceived differences (Jones and Lou, 1999;



Valentine, 1971). In fact, Leeds (1971) asserts that the behaviors of the impoverished would mirror that of more affluent citizens if restrictions were lifted from their consumption options.

Nonetheless, recent scholarship suggests that Lewis may have been misunderstood originally, and that there is more agreement than disagreement with his critics (see Chin, 2001). For instance, Lewis (1970: 69) posits that the culture of poverty 'represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair,' resulting in 'local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies.' Harvey and Reed (1996) maintain that Lewis never meant to imply that the poor lived pathological existences, but instead that they channel their feelings to develop positive adaptive mechanisms that allows them to overcome material constraints. This perspective is consistent with the beliefs of his early detractors who contend that the impoverished exhibit tremendous inner strength and ingenuity in dealing with consumer restriction (see Leeds, 1971; Valentine, 1971).

Scholarship within the consumer behavior field concurs with this thesis. In fact, Holloway and Cardozo (1969: 55) go so far as to state that the poor 'have developed shopping strategies to obtain the best assortment of products they can within budgets limited in size and flexibility.' Additionally, Andreasen (1975: 40) believes that even excessive debt obligations by the impoverished are 'a result of careful calculations of the consequences of their actions' that seek to maximize material abundance. Lee et al. (1999) expand these findings through their research involving the rural poor. In their study of health care delivery in Appalachia, the authors reveal that poor consumers have resource strengths (e.g. social capital or community) that greatly enhance their consumption alternatives beyond the limitations inherent in their resource deficits (e.g. economic and cultural capital).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the culture of poverty is influenced by the consumer culture so that the scholarly community might better understand the actual as well as the potential role marketing plays in the lives of impoverished consumers. The next section presents a description of the data and resulting analysis that involved six distinct subpopulations of people living in poverty. A thematic interpretation follows, with an emphasis on five interrelated categories that capture the material lives of the poor and include the role of the media. The close provides a summary of findings and specific implications for marketing theory and practice.

Ethnographic data and analysis¹

Van Mannen(1995: 3) notes that 'ethnography is a storytelling institution' where the line between science and literature increasingly is blurred. This approach to ethnographic data allows for a variety of presentation styles including 'impressionist tales,' 'dramatic ethnography,' and 'creative non-fiction.' These representations bring the lived experience of an unfamiliar group to an interested



audience in a way that allows them to see, hear, and feel what it is like to exist in a different world (Van Mannen, 1988). The objective is to motivate the reader to learn more about an unfamiliar subpopulation without giving too much direction through authorial interpretation. This methodology often includes the presentation of a series of important and critical events in the lives of cultural members that define their relationships with the larger community. Composite characters may be used to avoid linking situations or behaviors to particular individuals, and these 'rounded' characters may employ internal monologue to express their subjective reality (Agar, 1995).

It is with this perspective in mind that the composites of these six impoverished subpopulations were developed (see Hill, 2001b). Each of the resulting short stories used as evidence in the formulation of this thematic structure is organized in parallel fashion. They are based explicitly on the original ethnographic data that were collected with a particular subpopulation, using a variety of methods including interviews, field notes, participant observation, and non-participant observation. In all cases, these data were employed to mold the focal characters and their consumer lives, and every example of their interaction with the material culture is data-driven. The resulting stories provide thick contextual description that presents a vivid portrait of the lived experience of members of these groups.

The first story is based on Hill and Stamey (1990), which involved a research project of over a 1000 contact hours in a wide variety of locations with more than 100 different homeless persons who lived outside the social welfare system. It chronicles the trials and tribulations of Jack, a man who recently became homeless. He spends his first night homeless in a municipal shelter but finds the experience threatening and demoralizing. He moves outside, living under a bridge on a landing until arsonists destroy his possessions, and then into a homeless community that resembles the shantytowns of the Great Depression. His final residence is an abandoned building that he shares discreetly with two other homeless men.

The next story is grounded predominantly in Hill (1991) – a year-long investigation that entailed working one day a week at a homeless shelter for women and their children – and it focuses attention on Zoë and her family's experience of homelessness. After a difficult childhood, Zoë becomes pregnant for a second time and moves in with the father of her younger child. Unfortunately, his employer reduces his work status to part-time, and they must leave their modest home. After a series of stays with relatives, Zoë and her children are forced to live in a variety of shelters where many of their original possessions are lost and new ones are obtained.

Hill (1992) and Ozanne, et al. (1998) inform the third story, the former project associated with the shelter mentioned previously and the latter project involving performance of the role of 'Life Skills Consultant' to a group of incarcerated juvenile delinquents over a period of six months. This story profiles the life of Fast Eddie, a late teen living in a poor community. Eddie grows up in an unstable environment where he is forced to move from one residence to another during his early childhood. His father is a distant and violent man who comes in and out of

his life. His mother is warm and caring but submissive, and Eddie takes advantage of her nature as he matures into a teenager. Over time his relationship with material possessions goes from joyful anticipation to apathy to anger at his relative poverty. Eddie falls in with a fast crowd, and they commit property crimes in order to gain access to the material world.

The consumer lives of Anita and her children are based primarily on Hill and Stephens (1997), a report of a study that included nine months of work as a GED (Graduate Equivalency Diploma) instructor as well as depth interviews with welfare (AFDC—Aid to Families with Dependent Children) mothers. Anita struggles as a child of a welfare recipient and vows not to live that life. However, her existence takes a radical turn when she becomes pregnant as a teenager, quits school, and marries. The first few years of this union go smoothly and her family grows to five persons. Unfortunately, her husband's employer lays him off and the only viable option for a new job is out of town. He takes the position and works diligently but is fired after a physical confrontation with his boss, leaving Anita without much income. She eventually joins the welfare rolls only to find that the level of support is too low for her family to survive.

Lee et al. (1999) inform the rural poverty story, and it describes a two-year long research project that was conducted in the Appalachian Mountains with women seeking health care services. This story centers on Tammy and her mother and their lives in a former coalmining town. As a youngster, Tammy's family had most of what they needed to get by. However, by the time Tammy's own children were young adults, the mines closed permanently and the financial basis of the town collapsed. Jobs became scarce and supporting services within the town dried up. Tammy's mother eventually took ill and they struggle to get adequate medical attention within a reasonable distance from their home.

The final story is based in large part on Hill (1995), which describes the results of interviews, non-participant observation, and participant observation of several hundred Aborigines living in remote areas of the Kimberley region of Western Australia. It examines the existence of Mary and her maternal ancestors, native people who lived most of their lives in an isolated region of the Australian Outback. Mary rebels against her cultural heritage and marries a white man in order to partake in the material world outside of her homeland. However, over time Mary realizes the importance of her identity as an Aborigine, and she returns home to live among her people following the death of her mother.

These stories were treated as text and subjected to evaluation that is typical of qualitative data (see Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). The first step of the analysis involved creating an understanding of the intersections of the material culture and the culture of poverty within each story. The second step required summarizing these findings for each story with an emphasis on contextually based information contained within the text. The third stage involved developing thematic categories that depict particular aspects of the material culture of the poor across characters and situations. The fourth stage required that relationships among the themes be explored in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the material lives of impoverished consumers.



The results of the analysis are presented in the next section as a series of thematic categories.

The impoverished material world

The five interrelated thematic categories portrayed below capture the relationship between the culture of poverty and the consumer culture among the six indigent subpopulations. Four of the themes discuss the material circumstances, consumer restrictions, negative emotional consequences, and survival strategies of poor consumers, while a fifth theme describes the impact of the media in general and marketing in particular on this process. The order is purposeful, and the presentation moves from one to the next as the stories unfold from beginning to end. Each theme employs excerpts from the composites themselves to exemplify the intended meanings.

Meager possessions

What is striking about the consumer lives of the focal characters in these stories are the stark material circumstances they must endure. They are often forced to consume goods and services that would be deemed unacceptable to middle-class consumers under ordinary conditions. Such deficits are not limited to certain product categories such as higher-priced items, but extend to most goods and services from housing to clothing to foodstuffs. Additionally, this poverty is pervasive, typically including family members, friends, and their larger communities.

Each of the characters experiences a different route to material collapse, but the resulting deprivation is approximately the same. For example Jack, a homeless single adult, leaves a housed living environment with family or friends and ends up in a municipal shelter in a nearby city. He is fed partially spoiled food, eats in the company of distracting strangers, and sleeps in a communal setting where a drug addict eventually vomits on him. Eddie's mother enters the welfare system following abandonment by her husband, and she moves the family into a welfare hotel until permanent placement in public housing can be obtained three years later. They limit their worldly possessions to what they can carry in two suitcases before making the trip to their new home, which is a small apartment with peeling paint, discolored carpeting, dilapidated furniture, and little privacy.

Zoë provides a vivid and revealing case-in-point. She grows up under dire circumstances after the break up of her parents, and her material world takes a turn for the worse. The situation improves somewhat during early adulthood until the father of her second daughter has his wages reduced due to cutbacks by his employer at a local factory. Zoë has no alternative but to move into a homeless shelter for women and children, and as the following excerpt demonstrates, their resulting material circumstances are quite severe:



Zoë was assigned living area number forty-five, and she was handed sheets and blankets for two beds, three pillows, and some towels, a small tube of toothpaste, and a toothbrush for personal hygiene. The woman told her that the facility was not responsible for the loss of her possessions, and that Zoë was advised to keep them with her at all times. Her mind wandered to a scene where she was bathing her children in a shower stall with their suitcase somehow in attendance. How could that possibly work?

When the woman finished her instructions, Zoë asked if there were any food at the facility for her daughters. The woman told her that food and drink were prohibited in the living quarters, but that there was a large group of fast-food restaurants surrounding the facility that accepted city meal coupons. She then passed Zoë \$12.00 in script – \$5.00 for herself and \$3.50 for each of her daughters.

With her family and cargo in tow, Zoë walked down the hallway to the living quarters in search of number forty-five. As she entered the room, its size and the level of commotion caught her by surprise. There were ten rows of enclosed areas that were at least five deep. Sheer blankets that moved with the rhythm of activity nearby separated each area. It was clear to Zoë that this feeble attempt to create some privacy did not succeed. However, she was reassured by the fact that no male over the age of ten was allowed to stay past 8PM.

Tammy and her family experience material demise somewhat differently and as a result of the closing of the coalmines in their Appalachian town. The home in which she raised her children belongs to the mining company, so she and her husband seek living accommodations elsewhere after he is laid off from his supervisory position. The only alternative occupations within their community are low-level service jobs, and the change in income as they begin their new employment has a dramatic impact upon their quality of life. The excerpt below reveals how far they have fallen when benchmarked against middle-class material ideals and aspirations:

When Tammy considered her own situation, she also experienced mixed emotions. She and her husband felt almost claustrophobic in their mobile home, which was less than one-third the size of their previous residence. It had a limited amount of property associated with it, and she was unable to grow even a modest garden of fresh vegetables. The walls were flimsy, allowing the noises from their neighbors as well as from the elements to penetrate. In the winter Tammy was always too cold, in the summer she was always too hot. They had taken the best furnishings from their former home to the trailer, but this furniture had aged over the years into a dingy mess. No matter how hard Tammy tried to clean or repair items, everything in her place seemed dirty and worn. When her family or friends visited, they spent most of the time outside to avoid feeling overcrowded in the cramped living areas.

Their limited wardrobes had dwindled down to the bare necessities over time, and neither Tammy nor her husband had more than one outfit that was suitable for Sunday services, weddings, funerals, or other special occasions. They were forced to spend their own money purchasing uniforms for their jobs, and they resented the need to update these items on a regular basis. The car they purchased when their family was younger was now a broken down wreck with several deep dents, a faded paint job, bald tires, and engine trouble. They regularly used it to go back and forth from downtown or their jobs, but neither one was willing to drive it more than a few miles at a time for safety reasons.

Money always was tight, especially around the holidays when Tammy planned special meals and purchased gifts for her family. Both she and her husband worked part time most of the year, and their employers provided few benefits beyond a minimum wage salary. Together they



earned less than one-half his previous income from the mines, and they were without medical or life insurance. Tammy prayed every day that they would continue to have good health and that their financial situation would somehow change for the better.

Consumer restriction

The meager possessions of the focal characters in these stories are the result of a variety of restrictions that act singularly and in combination to remove opportunities that exist within the broader material world. One likely culprit is a reduction in, or complete loss of, income by the primary breadwinner, along with the lack of an adequate financial support network of family or friends. In some cases societal-sanctioned institutions such as the welfare or criminal justice system externally impose such restrictions. As a result, these characters, their families, and their communities often experience a separation from the primary consumer culture and a push further into the culture of poverty.

All six of the focal characters experience a significant reduction in their standard of living because of circumstances externally imposed upon them. The loss of union wages by Tammy's husband after the collapse of the largest employer in their township requires them to move to lesser living quarters, to change their eating habits, and to forsake refurbishing their home, renewing their wardrobes, or buying a recent model automobile. When Tammy's mother becomes seriously ill, this dramatic reduction in their income, as well as the elimination of health-care options within their community following the closing of the coalmines, makes appropriate alternatives for medical services few and far between. Eddie enters the restricted existence within an alternative penal system, following his incarceration for stealing and fencing cars in order to partake in the material abundance available within the larger consumer culture. He is physically removed from his ill-gotten gain, and Eddie is forced to experience material restriction so that he can be repatriated back into the culture of poverty.

Jack's experience of material restriction is most telling. After leaving the municipal shelter where he encounters poor treatment from a variety of caretakers and residents, Jack decides to sell his car and move his few remaining possessions under a bridge in a wooded area near his familial home. He goes into a virtual hibernation in this new residence, and he experiences new hardships associated with the lack of lighting, heating, and cooking facilities. After nearly freezing from the falling night temperatures and running low on supplies, Jack eventually resurfaces only to face significant material restrictions that threaten his survival. As this excerpt makes clear:

In the end, he decided he had no other option but to leave temporarily in search of food. He calmed himself by noting that no one had bothered him so far. Jack checked his wallet and discovered he had exactly \$28.33. He put the money back in his wallet and placed it securely in his front pocket. Then he climbed up the ladder, waited for traffic to clear, and jumped up onto the highway.

He decided to go back to the supermarket he patronized during his last shopping trip. Jack made a mental note of what he needed this time. He still had enough toilet paper and tooth-



paste for the only hygiene activities available to him now. The peanut butter and jelly worked out okay, but the bread had gotten a bit hard over time. Drinks were cold enough—maybe too cold. A hot cup of coffee or soup would be nice but impossible.

Jack entered the market at a brisk pace and grabbed a hand-held basket rather than a shopping cart. If he couldn't carry his items in the store, there was no way he would be able to transport them home. He concentrated on foods that were wrapped in single-serving portions. While they were probably more expensive, such foodstuffs were less likely to go stale over time. The cashier charged him \$23.50 for the load, and Jack made a mental note that he had \$4.83 left, about the same amount he started with before he sold his car.

Anita provides an example of institutional restriction imposed upon an impoverished consumer. When her husband loses his job at a local shipyard, the only equivalent position is several hundred miles from their home, requiring him to relocate. He remains in this job for several months and regularly sends most his paycheck home, but he eventually is reduced to sporadic employment after he is fired. Anita turns to her extended family for material support, but they are of little help due to their own financial restrictions. As the next excerpt explains, her mother and grandmother urge Anita to join the hundreds of other single parents in her community who live marginal material existences on welfare:

When all was said and done, Anita and her family were placed on the welfare rolls. At first she was relieved that their financial crisis was resolved. They would have a steady income, the ability to purchase food, and access to health care. However, on closer inspection Anita realized that there was no way they could survive on the budget established by the benefits specialist. It was unrealistic and too restrictive.

Anita had been good at math in school, and she used her knowledge of arithmetic to examine these numbers for herself. The biweekly checks from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program were only forty dollars above her monthly rent and utility payments, providing little additional income for clothing, phone service, public transportation, laundry, and toys for her children. Food stamps supplied about \$0.75 per meal, and even Anita, who was frugal by nature and could stretch a dollar, was unable to figure out how to make them last for the whole month. Besides, they couldn't be used for a host of additional goods for which she had no resources, including basic toiletries such as soap, toothpaste, and feminine hygiene products, and medicines not covered by the state health care plan like cough syrup and aspirin.

After a few months of living on welfare, her prediction of a severe shortfall became a reality. She worked out an arrangement with her landlord regarding back payments, and their home was secure for a while. However, even with the help of the WIC program there was never enough milk, meat, and produce in the house to satisfy her growing family. Anita ran out of diapers regularly, and the co-pay on her son's prescription medicine took almost one-fourth of her biweekly cash. They were now three months behind on their phone bill, and they were scheduled to have their service terminated in two weeks unless the full amount was received.

Role of the media

The media plays an essential role in communicating the standards for material accumulation within the focal characters' neighborhoods. Soon after infancy these characters or their children learn from the media what is available within the larger consumer culture, and they develop a great sense of need or desire for a



wide variety of goods and services. Over time these characters and their families establish a baseline standard of living against which they measure their relative affluence. In all cases they come up short, with no indication that the future offers a substantial improvement in typical consumption opportunities.

This benchmarking against media portrayals of material life has its greatest impact upon parents and children. For instance, Tammy expresses concern over how her sons and daughter will respond to the decaying condition of their community given their understanding of all that is available elsewhere. Zoë comes to comprehend the restricted consumer existence of herself and her siblings, when compared to media portrayals of family meals, as they 'hunt' throughout their home in the morning looking for anything at all to eat. Mary sees the deep longing for European-style goods by the young people on their Aboriginal reserve as a result of the influx of western music, television, and movies. In most cases these images of material abundance are particularly damaging during holidays or on special occasions, when negative comparisons are in stark contrast to their vivid material fantasies developed over many years.

Eddie's struggle to rise above the culture of poverty within his community provides a powerful example of material benchmarking against societal norms. Following his incarceration, he finally has time to stop and reflect upon the circumstances that led to his eventual arrest. Eddie's thoughts often turn to daydreams about various events in his life, especially the best of times when he could buy anything he wanted and was considered a success by his peers because of his relative affluence. The following excerpt of a memory from his youth demonstrates the role of the media in the formation of his material desires:

After school Eddie often would go home and sit in front of the television set with his siblings to watch their favorite programs. They enjoyed a variety of cartoon shows as well as situation comedies that portrayed family life. He particularly liked sitcoms such as the *Cosby Show* and *Family Ties*, and his favorite episodes involved holiday events and birthdays. Meals were lovingly prepared and there was always an abundance of his most wanted foods. Families exchanged gifts and Santa Claus visited each year, bringing special presents for everyone.

Eddie liked the advertisements as much as the shows themselves, especially during the time period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. While the programs portrayed the importance of family during the holidays, the commercials demonstrated that the real meaning was in material goods. An endless parade of toys, games, clothes, videos, and other items too numerous to mention danced before his eyes, and he looked at them in eager anticipation. He was fully aware that they were available to good girls and boys, and Eddie felt entitled to his fair share.

Unfortunately, Eddie never experienced holidays like the TV families did. Church groups from more affluent communities donated most of the foodstuffs that they consumed at these meals, and they consisted of a variety of canned and packaged meats, vegetables, and starches. The food wasn't bad, but it certainly did not live up to his fantasies of an old-fashioned holiday feast. Gift giving at Christmas was even more disappointing. Eddie would make lengthy lists of desired items that he had seen on television, and he would send them to Santa Claus for delivery. During the best of times he would receive one of the smaller toys he had requested, or some piece of clothing that his mother felt he needed such as socks or shoes.



Once on welfare and with an adult understanding of the resulting consumer restrictions, Anita attempts to blunt her children's developing interest in the material world. For example, she ends their regular trips to a local shopping mall, one of the few enjoyable distractions from their otherwise grueling lives, because of their insistence that Anita buy them products she cannot afford. However, she does not succeed in stemming their demands because images of the joys from material abundance during childhood are so widespread, lending credibility and authenticity to their requests. The excerpt below captures her dilemma as Anita attempts to cut short their fantasies without damaging their evolving sense of self:

To make matters worse, her children were reaching the age when they begin expressing desires for the myriad products available within our society. Almost daily Anita would hear from one of the older boys that he wanted a particular toy he saw on television, to go to the latest Disney movie, or to have dinner at McDonald's and get a Happy Meal. She briefly considered getting rid of their television set altogether in order to stunt their urges, but she decided against it when she realized it was their primary form of entertainment.

Holidays and birthdays during their first year on welfare were particularly traumatic for them. For months prior to [Christmas], the television paraded an endless series of programs and commercials before her children's eyes that showed Santa Claus and loving families enjoying the holiday season. These scenes typically contained beautifully adorned trees, brightly colored seasonal decorations, and individually selected gifts that demonstrated either their love for one another or the fact that they had been good all year long. Anita's children anxiously asked for her reassurance that they had behaved properly during the year so that Santa would come to their house with his bag full of toys. They also were concerned that the small tree and meager decorations in their home didn't display the proper Christmas spirit. Anita told them they were all good boys and that Santa Claus came without regard for the quality of the decor in a home.

Inevitably the day was a disappointment for everybody. All three children rose early, with her eldest son leading the charge. As they looked at the meager number of gifts under the tree, Anita could sense the drop in their enthusiasm level. The children had two items each for them to open, but neither gift was very exciting or desirable. The holiday meal was similarly uninspiring, with few additions beyond their ordinary evening meals. As Anita expected, her eldest son asked what happened and why Santa Claus had ignored the Christmas list he had so carefully prepared and mailed to the North Pole. She responded that Santa wasn't able to make it to their apartment this year, but he promised to bring them extra gifts next time around. This reply satisfied his curiosity for the moment, but Anita wondered what she would tell him if things failed to improve by the following holiday season.

Consumer reactions

The reactions of the focal characters to the combination of meager possessions, consumer restrictions, and relative deprivation are primarily a diverse set of negative emotions that further reduce the quality of their lives. For some these feelings manifest as anger or rage at the inequities they experience at the hands of uncaring, unhelpful, or insensitive individuals. Others experience an overwhelming sense of futility and despair over their material lives that may evolve into a deep-seated depression. Still others are swept up in fear and a personal sense of vulnerability that may result in grave concern over their future consumer lives.



Ultimately, many of these characters or their families endure several of these emotional states over time as they mature or their personal circumstances worsen, occasionally suffering from emotional deadening as a last resort.

Each of the characters in the stories provides an exemplar of one or more of these emotional outcomes. For instance, Jack becomes enraged following the handling he experiences at the municipal shelter, and he feels violated and apprehensive after his makeshift living quarters are burned by teenagers. Tammy becomes angry over the treatment her mother receives at a distant medical clinic, and she feels helpless in her search for appropriate care as her mother's health continues to decline. Finally, Mary sees the mental health of her community deteriorate as their Aboriginal culture is replaced by the larger material culture, bringing higher levels of alcoholism, spousal abuse, and child neglect to their reserve.

Zoë's emotional state by the end of her story provides an excellent example of psychological shutdown in order to cope with impossible material circumstances. She moves with her children from the city-run shelter into a private facility sponsored by a religious order. However, a little more than a month after her arrival, Zoë is informed that her family must vacate the premises so that room can be made for another family on the waiting list. Her man and extended family can provide no other option except for the streets, and as the excerpt makes clear, Zoë deals with this situation by closing off from the external world:

The sisters were sympathetic but firm. Since they were unfamiliar with the social welfare system outside their own private facility, they asked one of the male volunteers to intercede on Zoë's behalf. This person was a white male from an educated background, and the sisters felt that he would command more respect from the bureaucrats in the housing section of family services. He called their emergency shelter number and began explaining Zoë's situation to the gatekeepers on the other end of the phone.

Zoë listened as he argued with several different parties, his frustration level rising quickly. She took this as a negative sign and her own emotions began to well up inside her. Zoë was paralyzed with fear for herself as well as her daughters. Tears began to flow from her eyes, and she was unable to function enough to provide comfort to her children. Two other volunteers picked them up and tried to entertain them. They stopped crying, but they refused to be engaged, going into their own protective worlds.

Zoë could feel herself slipping away, helpless to do anything about it. Random events, thoughts, and ideas entered and left her head, and she began to see bright lights before her eyes. At some point the volunteer hung up the phone and began giving her advice. It seemed like he was very far away, and his words came to her as a soft whisper. Zoë was confused and unsure how to react, so she continued looking straight ahead as if he was a fading memory.

Eddie's emotional deadening occurs at a different time and place in his life. His early fantasies of gifts, toys, and holiday celebrations that provided so much joy and relief from his drab existence are extinguished as he matures into a young man. The bright light of his youth is replaced with a protective shell that helps him avoid any more material disappointments. In the end, Eddie blames no one, including himself. He just comes to realize that the culture of poverty he occupies and the larger material culture fail to overlap in any significant way. The follow-



ing excerpt shows the harm to his self-image, his anxieties about the consumer world, and his resulting emotional apathy:

His self-esteem also was damaged through comparisons with his peers in the community. Because of his family's income level, Eddie was eligible for a free lunch at school. However, he was required to stand in a special line to receive this meal, and he was forced to sit at a particular table with other poor children. Eddie was certain that the rest of the kids at school knew their situation, and the obvious association humiliated him. As a result, he never looked up from his food and left the table as soon as possible.

Clothing and school supplies held similar difficulties for Eddie. Most of his wardrobe was purchased from secondhand stores or consisted of clothes donated by charitable organizations. They neither fit exactly right nor represented the newest styles. Even his friends teased him about being out of touch with the latest fashions. Additionally, he often went to school without the required pencils, paper, or other materials, and his teachers looked at him as if he personally had done something wrong. Eddie pleaded with his mother to buy him new clothing and school supplies, but she told him that there wasn't enough money to purchase their day-to-day necessities, much less those items.

Over time Eddie began to experience a kind of emotional deadening with regard to material possessions. He lost his enthusiasm for the holidays and other special occasions, and his birthday became just another day. Santa Claus didn't exist for him anymore, and the display of material goods in television commercials only elicited apathy from him. Even his favorite programs provided little relief from the realities of his life. They represented a fantasy world that didn't exist in his universe.

Survival strategies

The severity of these negative emotional consequences notwithstanding, the focal characters often employ a variety of coping strategies in order to survive. Some of these methods are psychological in nature and attempt to alter emotional states by refocusing their minds on earlier, more pleasant material circumstances or fantasies of better consumer opportunities in the future. However, the majority is rooted in genuine community support that bolsters their material lives, often originating with extended family, friends, or neighbors. Of course the culture of poverty often lacks the goods and services necessary to create permanent change, so the characters may seek resources that are imported into their communities through the generosity of more affluent others.

Thus, regardless of their individual tenacity or emotional endurance, each of these characters requires material support from a subset of the larger community. For example, Anita's depression finally lifts after her mother and grandmother relieve her of some mundane daily chores and take financial responsibility for the purchase of her son's medication. These women commiserate with her about material restrictions while on welfare, and this developing sense of kinship causes Anita to reach out and seek other forms of support from women like herself within her neighborhood. Tammy's family and friends come together and share their scarce resources in order to boost themselves emotionally and survive materially. However, after her mother receives inadequate treatment through the diminished health delivery system within driving distance of their home, Tammy locates an



alternative provider that is staffed by a group of volunteers from outside their township that offers emotional support along with quality care.

After abandoning his home under the bridge, Jack wanders the streets in search of something to eat. He stumbles upon another homeless man who leads Jack to his living quarters located on an abandoned highway exit ramp. This 'homeless village' contains a number of individual and joint living units that are constructed from recycled items found locally. Reciprocal relationships among the inhabitants improve the material circumstances of all, and they exploit the resources contained in the larger community as well in order to extend their consumption options. As the ensuing excerpt describes, Jack thrives following his acceptance of their invitation to live among them:

Over the next two months, Jack settled into the community, staking out some ground a few feet from his new friend. The interior skeleton of his home was composed of 2x4s he picked up on the edge of town where some old row houses were being renovated. He felt badly about taking them, but he really had no choice if he was to survive the winter. The exterior was a combination of plywood covered with a clear plastic tarp. Jack insulated the whole structure with remnants he found behind a carpet store.

He ran an electrical wire from the community extension to his home so that he could power a single light and a small space heater. Now, even when the temperature dropped below freezing, Jack remained comfortable. His clothing, however, were a different story. He had lost most of his winter apparel in the fire, and he needed to replace them. To this end, he joined several members of the community on their weekly visits to a small single-room house behind a private shelter where donated clothing were stored. Over time, Jack acquired two additional pairs of pants, three sweaters, a pair of work boots, two stocking caps, and an insulated jacket. They weren't the latest styles, but they would keep him warm.

Jack also mastered the art of scavenging for food and sellable items. Along with others, he would rummage through the dumpsters of certain restaurants after closing time for leftovers. Jack learned to search for the heavier bags, since they were more likely to contain food. Items that were warm and untouched were valued the most. Jack was surprised to find that some of these establishments seemed to purposefully pack such foodstuffs in a single bag and place it carefully in the front of the bin. He quietly thanked them for their generosity. On occasion, when others sources were dry, someone would call a local takeout restaurant and place a large order. When no one came to retrieve it, they often would throw the food out at closing time. Jack or someone else would then go and retrieve it.

Mary provides an example of a focal character that is the catalyst for emotional healing and material survival within her community. She works to reorient her Aboriginal reserve away from a complete reliance upon the minimal amount and low quality of available western-style products, and to a partial emphasis on traditional methods of acquisition through nature. Mary comes to the decision to become an advocate for change following an agonizing emotional return to her original home after the death of her mother. She decides to abandon life among the material white culture in Australia, and as the excerpt reveals, Mary vows to help her people rise above their externally imposed culture of poverty:

Mary started her campaign without announcing it to anyone. She worked tirelessly for the children of the community as an advocate at the local school, as an aide with the public health



nurse, and as an organizer of sports and other events in the community center. Once the children accepted her unconditionally, the men in the community gave their approval and the women joined her in these activities as well as others. For example, they started a program to clean up the grounds within the reserve and mend some of the older homes that were in disrepair. After several initial successes a few of the men allied with them, signaling a level of acceptance for Mary and her activities that no woman had ever achieved. She ran unopposed for the commissioner's position in the next election and began a three-year term.

Her first order of business was to re-engage the community with their cultural heritage. Mary started weekly events where the community elders discussed or performed traditional dances or ceremonies with the young people in the reserve. Over time these events blossomed into a series of field trips to places that represented sacred sites to Aborigines. Mary was surprised by how many young persons showed up for these excursions and how little they actually knew about the meaning of land to their people. The next step involved offering formal classes in their native language. Several of the older women got together to develop visual aids to help the children understand the meaning behind each of the words. The community elders remarked with pride that they could hear their native tongue spoken widely within the reserve for the first time in recent memory.

The health issues were thorny problems, and Mary decided to tackle them one at a time. She recognized that they would never have a full time physician, nurse, or dentist in their community, so it was up to them to take charge of their own health. To this end, Mary worked with the local store to broaden its offerings to include more healthful alternatives. Additionally, she involved the elders by having them teach young people how to hunt, fish, and otherwise seek food using traditional Aboriginal methods so that they could supplement their diets with lean meats and fresh produce. In order to instill a sense of community with regard to these activities, Mary made sure that each party of hunters and gatherers was given a big sendoff by their kin and returned to a hearty welcome home. The foods often were prepared and consumed communally, further enhancing Aboriginal self-respect and independence.

Discussion and implications

Summary of findings

The results of this analysis are summarized through five interrelated thematic categories that describe the relationship between the culture of poverty and the broader consumer culture across six distinct impoverished subpopulations. The consumer lives of the focal characters in the stories are defined by the *meager possessions* at their disposal. The poor quantity and quality of these goods and services are below what is acceptable to more affluent consumers, and this relative poverty often extends to their family, friends, and communities. The impoverishment of these focal characters is caused by *consumer restrictions* that severely limit their consumption options. Loss of income, lack of financial support from significant others, and institutionally-enforced control are at the heart of these limitations.

The *role of the media* in this process is to elucidate the standards for material accumulation within society. This benchmark is clearly communicated to the focal characters through television, movies, and music, demonstrating the vivid contrast between their culture of poverty and the material world that surrounds



them. The *consumer reactions* of the focal characters to these circumstances are a variety of negative emotional states. From anger to fear to despair, these feelings often mature into a lengthy depression or an emotional deadening. Nonetheless, the focal characters typically employ *survival strategies* that are designed to reduce their psychological discomfort and improve their material lives. Fantasies of enhanced consumption opportunities are prevalent, but material support from within and outside their communities is more likely to create lasting change.

Implications for the marketing community

Marketing theory. The scholarly community recognizes the pervasiveness of marketing within developed economies, and its growing influence among peoples living in developing countries. For example, Coulter et al. (2001: 1) report that, 'On any given day, the typical U.S. consumer is exposed to between 3,000 and 5,000 advertisements.' Additionally, Belk and Ger (1996) believe that the widespread use of mass media globally has led to a universal consumer culture and the homogenization of consumption patterns. The end result is consistent with scholarship on the culture of poverty and this investigation, suggesting that material needs are uniform regardless of one's socioeconomic status (e.g. Jones and Lou, 1999).

The underlying premise of much of this research is that all consumers share the relative affluence necessary to partake in the abundance available within the material world. Thus, their primary dilemma is that the consumer culture provides *too much*. For example, there is too much information to process efficiently and effectively from the marketing promotions that bombard society, and too many choices are offered to evaluate, select from among, and use (Hill, 2001a). Unfortunately, this perspective fails to depict accurately the consumption options of a significant minority of the world's citizens. Approximately 12 percent of the population in the US lives in poverty, totaling about 32 million Americans (Hill, 2002b). The poverty rate for children is even worse, with nearly one in five young people living in homes without adequate income or access to affordable rents, nutritious foods, and proper health care. Globally, one-third of the developing world, or 1.3 billion human beings, survive on less than the equivalent of one dollar a day, and about double that number survive on less than two dollars a day (UNDP, 2001).

Given this theoretical premise, scholars concentrate most of their attention on understanding and improving the influence of marketing tactics on consumer decision-making. Investigations of potential negative consequences typically are focused on issues such as racial and ethnic stereotyping in promotions (e.g., Taylor and Stern, 1997) as well as the portrayal of unrealistic body images, especially among women, in advertisements (Martin and Gentry 1997). Within the consumer-behavior literature, these deleterious effects have been broadened to include the impact of materialism on human values, the environment, and social comparisons (see the edited volume by Rudmin and Richins, 1992). However, these studies typically rely upon a generic middle-class consumer as

the exemplar of consumption possibilities, with only a few notable exceptions (e.g. Chin, 2001).

This investigation provides a more complete picture of the material lives of impoverished consumers. It explores how the culture of poverty is embedded within the larger material culture, emphasizing the negative emotional consequences for the poor. These consequences are the result of explicit or implicit comparisons of their material circumstances to media portrayals of available consumption opportunities, and the undeniable outcome that they fail to meet the standards for a successful consumer existence. While these resulting affective states are quite severe, this study reveals that they often motivate the impoverished to seek consumption adequacy using fantasy and the resources available within the larger environ (see Hill, 2002a for more on the concept of consumption adequacy).

Marketing practice. The practitioner community has suffered harsh criticism for its role in the creation and maintenance of the consumer culture (see Berger, 2000; Ritzer, 2000). Much of this criticism centers on the media's continual linkage of *who we are* with *what we have*, showing material abundance as essential to personal and societal success. As implied by the opening quote to this article, the products and services we have or consume literally define one's sense of self in the broader material world. Yet this indictment begs the question asked in marketing ethics courses through time: Does marketing practice lead the consumer culture or does the consumer culture drive marketing practice?

Of course, the answer to this question is beyond the scope of this investigation; nonetheless, the results indicate that the point may be moot. Regardless of the direction of causality, the impoverished view the media as articulating the standards by which they judge their material success. Since the poor cannot possibly achieve parity with the relatively affluent consumer advanced by marketers, practitioners cannot disavow their role in fostering the negative consequences revealed in this paper. Thus, while it seems unlikely that any ad agency will embrace this perspective and run a series of advertisements counter to the basic tenets of the material culture, the industry as a whole must accept its legitimate share of responsibility (see UNDP, 2001).

This extreme example notwithstanding, there are genuine opportunities for marketers to exercise discretion in order to avoid doing additional harm. For instance, Rhoda Karpatkin (1999), former President of Consumers Union, describes three forms of sub-prime lending or 'fringe banking' that exploit the poor: The first is second mortgages where high-interest loans are approved as a function of homeowners' equity rather than their ability to make regular payments. The second is car-title lending or car-title pawn, a practice that requires car owners to turn over title to their vehicles in exchange for cash at interest rates as high as 25 percent per month. Finally, the third involves the rent-to-own (RTO) industry, where retailers make a wide variety of products available to poor consumers at many times the manufacturers' suggested prices and at undisclosed interest rates. These practices, as well as others, take advantage of the restricted



access to the larger material culture by the poor, and ethical marketers should avoid promoting their services.

Nonetheless, there are opportunities for marketing practitioners to do more than just avoid harm. The findings of this investigation demonstrate ways in which the advertising industry can enhance the lives of the impoverished. For example, marketers should recognize that the survival strategies of the poor include fantasies of improved material circumstances. However, these fantasies are unlikely to reflect reality unless internal and external community support is advanced on behalf of poor consumers. Consistent with this discovery, marketers may employ promotional themes of human generosity, sharing, and reciprocal-giving as appropriate avenues for the acquisition of generic goods and services by consumers. While such themes have been used to advance altruistic and gift-giving behaviors, their use to validate receiving within individualistic cultures represents a novel approach to meeting the needs of the impoverished.

Note

- 1 This section is based on material previously published by Hill (2001a; 2002a). However, the research purpose and resulting themes are unique to this investigation

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