

# A Study on the Role of Materialism in Triggering Conspicuous Consumption among Emigrants from Kerala

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## ABSTRACT

Conspicuous consumption involves the overt display of possessions that denote wealth and status, to communicate a distinctive self-image to others. Here, product satisfaction is often derived from audience reaction as opposed to utility from product use. Materialism is the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. Materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the centre of their lives. Several studies have established that various personality traits such as materialism and social factors like susceptibility to social influence explain conspicuous consumption. This paper examines the extent of influence of materialism on conspicuous consumption tendencies of a convenience sample of 640 emigrants from Kerala. The study validates that materialism significantly relates to conspicuous consumption which means materialism is positively related to buying products that confer status. It is also seen to be instrumental in triggering conspicuous consumption among the expatriate community. Variation in conspicuous consumption with respect to gender, age, education, occupation, and income levels are also examined. The study provides interesting insights for marketers in developing consumer-centric approach towards product-development, pricing and promotions and also assists in psychographic segmentation of status seekers. It proposes means to develop and manage meaningful engagement with consumers by exhorting marketers to assume greater social responsibility and focus on societal outcomes stemming from promoting a lifestyle centred on materialism and conspicuous displays of wealth.

**Keyword:** Materialism, Conspicuous Consumption, Emigrant, Kerala, Consumer, Status

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign remittance is the direct transfer of funds from an emigrant residing in the host country to his home country through formal and informal channels. Household remittances stand for that part of total remittances (cash and commodities included) that are sent to emigrant households for subsistence. These are private transfers by individuals to their families in the source country. These remittances are used for household consumption for activities like construction of houses, purchase of land, vehicles, for ceremonial functions etc.

The top five remittance recipient countries in the world in terms of value of remittances continue to be India, China, Philippines, Mexico, and Nigeria in that order with India receiving US\$70.3 billion in 2014. Of this, Kerala accounts for 33% of all India remittances (World

Bank, 2014). Total remittances to Kerala for the period 2013-14 stand at a staggering Rs.72680 crores, of which household remittances alone sum up to Rs.24374 crores. This indicates a 46% jump from the corresponding figures of 2011(Kerala Migration Survey [KMS], 2014). The average amount of foreign remittance received annually per household in Kerala was Rs.86843 as per Kerala Migration Survey, 2014. This is a 43% surge from the corresponding figure in 2011. Around 50 lakh individuals in Kerala are dependent on remittance income from emigrants for their livelihood (Pravasi Malayali Census, 2013). With 24 lakh Keralites working overseas, Kerala tops the country in a key indicator of living standards called MPCE (monthly per capita expenditure). Indeed, in the NSSO household consumer expenditure survey of 2011-12, Kerala not only tops the country by MPCE in rural areas but also exhibits the least rural-urban differential among all states.

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In Kerala, migration must have contributed more to poverty alleviation than any other factor including agrarian reforms, trade union activities, and social welfare legislation. Remittances are 36.3 percent of the state's net domestic product, 1.2 times the revenue receipt of the Kerala Government and 1.5 times the Government's annual expenditure (KMS, 2014).

Today, consumption has become the yardstick to gauge socio-economic status in Kerala (Zachariah & Irudaya Rajan, 2015). The housing and shopping practices that Kerala society follows are indicative of the consumerist culture prevailing in the state (Nair, 1986; Moorthy, 1977; Zachariah, Mathew, & Irudaya Rajan, 2003). Apart from being a significant source of development income to the state, remittances have a very positive impact on the quality of life and purchasing power of emigrant households in Kerala, as is evident from the findings of KMS, 2014 depicted in Table 1. Migrant households score much higher than their non-migrant counterparts on parameters indicative of living standards. Thus there is a strong positive relation between remittances and consumerism in Kerala.

**Table 1: Table Comparing Migrant Households and Non-Migrant Households On 'Possession of Goods/ Services' Indicative Of Living Standards**

	<i>Goods/Services Owned</i>	<i>Non emigrant household (%)</i>	<i>Emigrant household (%)</i>
1	Red Ration Card	35	20
2	RSBY membership	34	25
3	Luxurious house	30.4	52.6
4	Use of LPG for cooking	55.3	64.3
5	Consumer Durables (AC, Laptop)	48.5	72

Source: Kerala Migration Survey, 2014 RSBY: Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana

## PURPOSE OF STUDY AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Against this background, a study on the emigrant community of Kerala assumes much relevance. The construct 'Materialism' is of interest, because it uniquely identifies with consumption more than other personality traits and values (Richins & Rudmin, 1994). There is

limited academic literature on the relation between materialism and conspicuous consumption orientation, not just in the Indian context but also globally and this paper attempts to fill this void.

In line with this purpose, broadly three research objectives are examined:

1. To examine which dimensions of materialism influence conspicuous consumption among emigrants in Kerala.
2. To study materialism among emigrant Keralites in the context of various demographic influences
3. To examine conspicuous consumption tendencies of emigrant Keralites in the face of various demographic influences

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This paper looks to examine materialism and its relatedness to conspicuous consumption in the context of emigrants from Kerala. The paper first examines materialism, conspicuous consumption, and its related literature. The study addresses the relationship between these constructs for emigrant Keralites. The findings are based on data obtained from 640 non-resident Keralites with dependent families in Kerala. Results are discussed as are limitations and future directions. The following sections discuss the relevant researches in each domain.

## Conspicuous Consumption

The examination of conspicuous consumption in the modern world gained momentum during the Industrial Revolution, facilitated by Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class. Thorstein Veblen (1899) proposed that once basic needs are met, excess income or wealth would be devoted to the pursuit of status-promoting goods and services used to distinguish the upper class from the lower classes. Veblen introduced this concept to describe the lifestyle of members of the upper class who purchase goods and services not out of necessity but as indicators of wealth and status.

The key objective of conspicuous consumption is to impress others by the ostentatious display of wealth and to demonstrate the superior status of the individual to others (Riquelme, 2011). Consumers in a consumption-based society may be led to believe that possession of certain

conspicuous goods is required for upward social mobility. Here the primary need satisfied is prestige (Belk, 1988), and product satisfaction is often derived from audience reaction as opposed to actual product use (Wong, 1997). Researchers such as Chaudhuri, Majumdar, & Ghosal (2011) have acknowledged the correlation between the status-seeking behaviour of consumers and their conspicuous consumption intentions. Ger and Belk (1996) found that because of a demonstration effect, less economically developed nations tend to imitate the more extravagant and symbolic consumption of economically developed ones. Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, and Ramachander (2000) reported that because consumers in developing countries are relatively less affluent, they naturally feel a sense of insecurity and inferiority. To overcome this, they emulate the Western materialistic philosophy by purchasing Western brands they are exposed to through media, their own kin gone overseas, and their travel abroad. Their study posits that there is an established link between exposure to global standards and conspicuous consumption tendencies.

## Materialism

Materialism is a prominent individual difference variable viewed by some as a personality characteristic (Belk, 1985) and by others as a unique set of values (Kasser, 2002; Richins, 2004). All researchers agree that materialism upholds a focus on individualistic goals over collective well-being. Belk (1985) defines materialism as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions”. Materialists believe that success is judged by the things people own. Materialism is assumed to have three dimensions, namely possession-defined success (how much does one use possessions as an indicator of success), acquisition centrality (how much does one place acquisition of possessions at the centre of ones’ personal well-being) and the pursuit of happiness (the belief that possessions are necessary for happiness) as per Richins and Dawson (1992).

### Possession-defined Success

Materialists tend to judge their own and others’ success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated. Materialists view themselves as successful to the extent they can possess products that project these desired images in society. Handa and Khare (2013) report a significant

relationship between fashion clothing involvement and materialism among Indian consumers. Fashion clothing conveys individuals’ status in society and is significantly related to materialism.

### Acquisition Centrality

Materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the centre of their lives and view these as essential to their personal well-being (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

### Pursuit of Happiness

Richins and Rudmin (1994) posit that acquisition and consumption give pleasure and happiness to individuals having high materialistic tendencies.

Increase in materialism can have negative consequences on society where people may borrow and acquire debt to impress others by their material possessions (Dittmar, 2005; Kellett & Totterdell, 2008). Materialism has been found to be inversely related to wellbeing, quality of life, and satisfaction with life in general (Roberts & Clement, 2007). The negative consequences include rising and unmanageable consumer debt, depleted savings, consumer bankruptcy, depression, psychological disorders, substance abuse, unhappiness (Roberts, Tanner Jr. & Manolis, 2005; Roberts & Clement, 2007). Because of its effects on greater society and the individual, which are seen as potentially negative, there exists a strong urge to study the phenomenon of materialism.

## Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous consumption maybe related to materialism because it focuses on the acquisition of specific material goods that confer status. Early evidence suggests that more materialistic individuals tend to value items that are consumed publicly and possess public meaning (e.g. the ability to convey status or success) rather than personal or subjective meaning (Richins & Floyd, 1994; Kim, 1998). With respect to consumption, materialism will influence the type and quantity of goods purchased. Mason (1981) found a positive correlation between materialism and degree of conspicuous consumption. Richins (1994) found that highly materialistic people are more likely to value expensive and publicly displayed possession items, which signal success and social status. Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn (1999) showed that their measure

of status consumption had a statistically significant correlation with Richins and Dawson's (1992) measure of materialism. According to Fitzmaurice and Comegys (2006), materialism is positively related to conspicuous consumption motivation and consumer spending. Fournier and Richins (1991) argued that materialistic urges are related to the desire for status and prestige. Goldsmith and Clark (2012) found that materialism is positively related to buying products that confer status and improve self-image. That is, consumption is used as a tool to enhance public image. As materialistic people value possessions, Belk (1985) found that they tend to buy more luxury products. People in countries that allow high levels of advertising, especially transformational advertisements (involving symbols of social status, wealth and conspicuous consumption), are, according to Larsen, Sirgy, and Wright (1999) likely to be more materialistic. Eastern Asian consumers' attraction to products like Chanel, Gucci and Louis Vuitton has raised the suspicion that they may be more materialistic than their Western counterparts (Wong & Ahuvia, 1995). Coming to Kerala, emigration has played a very positive role in bringing about a broader distribution of income and wealth in the society as also ensuing social mobility and fostering an emulation tendency among the Keralite community (Pushpangadan, 2003). The tendency to emulate 'significant others' is an antecedent to conspicuous consumption (Marcoux, Filiatrault, & Cheron, 1997).

## HYPOTHESIS CONSTRUCTION

### Materialism and Conspicuous consumption

The current culture of consumption in the world is one where materialism is often seen as a measure of success, and is supported by increasingly easy access to credit and debt. This has given rise to a growing trend of non-essential purchasing being the norm among consumers (Penman & McNeill, 2008). Clark, Zboja, and Goldsmith (2007) found that the more consumers seek status through consumption, the more likely they are to conform to group norms, to pay attention to the opinions of others, and to compare themselves with other consumers. It is hypothesized that materialists are especially attuned to the social meanings of products. Therefore, they are more likely to desire and acquire possessions that are regarded as better within the context of economic viability and cultural acceptability. Conspicuous consumption motivation (also

known as social consumption motivation) includes an element of social influence and conformity in its items, apart from mere impression management. According to Kasser (2002), materialistic people are motivated by external rewards and praise, they are self-conscious and have a strong concern with how they appear to others. So there could be a positive relationship between materialism and motivation for conspicuous consumption.

Based on these observations, the following set of hypotheses regarding the relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption tendencies among emigrant Keralites is examined:

**H1a:** Materialism defined as possession-defined success will have a positive influence on emigrant Keralites conspicuous consumption tendencies.

**H1b:** Materialism defined as acquisition centrality will have a positive influence on emigrant Keralites conspicuous consumption tendencies.

**H1c:** Materialism defined as pursuit of happiness will have a positive influence on emigrant Keralites conspicuous consumption tendencies.

### Materialism and Demographic Variables

According to Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton (1997), materialism is rooted in early life for many consumers. Thus childhood family experiences shape and mould degrees of materialism in later life. However a study by Volkan and Torlak (2014) associates materialism with certain demographic variables such as socio-economic status (SES) and gender. The female participants, the single participants, the participants with higher monthly income and the younger participants are found to be more materialistic than their counterparts (Volkan & Torlak, 2014).

Literature has suggested that men are more materialistic than women as posited by Kamineni (2005), Eastman, Calvert, Campbell, and Fredenberger (1997), Achenreiner (1997), Churchill and George (1979). This is further validated by Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) who posit that men may be more likely to feel that owning material goods increases their happiness and promotes self-expression. Robert and Clement (2007) found that male respondents were more likely to equate such material possessions with happiness than female respondents.

O’Cass and McEwen (2004) found that young men place more importance than women on the conspicuousness of product use. These findings were also supported by Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989) who found that men are more materialistic and have a stronger orientation towards external validation as shown through visually portraying accomplishment and prestige by means of material goods.

Based on this literature, the following hypotheses regarding the relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption with respect to gender are proposed:

**H2a:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels based on gender.

**H3a:** There is a significant difference in conspicuous consumption tendency based on gender.

Materialism is related to age and nationality (Schaefer, Hermans, & Parker, 2004). Larsen *et al.* (1999) propose that children are likely to be more materialistic than young adults, and young adults more materialistic than older adults. A study by Penman and McNeill (2008) did not record any explicit differences between the responses of males and females with regard to conspicuous consumption, with both groups exhibiting similar motivations for non-essential consumption and seemingly both enduring the same pressures to consume.

However the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2b:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels across age groups.

**H3b:** There is no significant difference in conspicuous consumption levels across age groups.

Research suggests that globalisation and increase in income levels have an impact on materialism. Societies tend to grow materialistic as they progress and become economically well off (Chan & Joseph, 2000; Chan, Zhang, & Wang, 2006; Goldsmith & Clark, 2012). Research on Indian consumers’ preference for luxury products indicate that affluent consumers are increasingly influenced by materialistic values (Handa & Khare, 2013). As affluence grows, so does consumer willingness to spend money on products that satisfy more symbolic and sensory needs (Roth, 1995). On the contrary, research by Kahle (1995) questions the relationship between affluence and materialism saying that affluent consumers are less materialistic than their counterparts.

Based on these studies, the following set of hypotheses regarding the relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption tendency based on income levels of emigrant Keralites was examined:

**H2c:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels across income groups

**H3c:** There is a significant difference in conspicuous consumption across income groups

Volkan and Torlak (2014) found that the respondents’ levels of materialism differed with respect to gender, age, education, occupation, religion and monthly income.

**H2d:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels based on education.

**H3d:** There is a significant difference in conspicuous consumption levels based on education

**H2e:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels based on emigrant religion.

**H3e:** There is a significant difference in conspicuous consumption based on emigrant religion.

**H2f:** There is a significant difference in materialism levels based on occupation of emigrant.

**H3f:** There is a significant difference in conspicuous consumption based on emigrant occupation.

There exists a strong relation between emigration and consumerism in Kerala stemming from the socio-economic impact of remittances (Abdulla, 2014). This trans-nationalisation of work and residence deserves special mention in driving conspicuous consumption. The socio-cultural context of consumption, involving the extended family of migrants is very relevant in South Indian states. For South Indian migrant families, the consumption of goods may begin abroad and finally end up in homes in their home country due to close family ties. The migrants’ sense of dual residence – one in Kerala and one abroad- makes it difficult to distinguish between luxury and necessity. Overtime, consumerism becomes a normal part of life. Prolonged exposure to global standards in consumption ultimately serves to normalize luxury consumption for migrants and eventually fosters its transfer back to migrant families in Kerala (Wilhite, 2001). The following hypotheses are thus postulated:

**H2g:** There is a significant relationship between materialism levels of emigrants and their tenure of stay abroad

**H3g:** There is a significant relationship between conspicuous consumption levels of emigrants and their tenure of stay abroad

## METHODOLOGY

### Measurement Instrument

This study utilised survey data which was collected using a pre-tested survey instrument with existing scales found in the literature. The objective of the research was to understand the influence of materialism on the tendency to conspicuously consume. Two scales adapted from different studies were used in the research process. All responses were taken on a 5-point Likert scale, with 5 indicating strongly agree and 1 indicating strongly disagree.

A 15 item Scale developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) was used to measure materialism construct. It included items to measure acquisition centrality, the role of possessions in the pursuit of happiness, and the role of possessions in defining success. This particular scale was chosen because it has been used in literature with a high degree of reliability (Ahuvia & Wong 2002). Richins and Dawson's (1992) scale of materialism exhibits construct validity - high reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

The scale used to measure conspicuous consumption was adopted from Chung and Fischer (2001). The Chung and Fischer scale was recently utilised with high reliability among U.S. consumers in a study conducted by Podoshen, Li, and Zhang (2011).

### Sample and Data Collection

The objective of the study is to examine factors influencing conspicuous consumption among emigrants from Kerala. Certain assumptions have been made in choosing the sample in order to facilitate this objective. According to a study on Indian Americans by Gupta (2009), factors such as household income of expatriate, family size, number of dependents in India, family ties in India, plans to relocate

to India and transaction costs of remittances are found to affect remittance behaviour. Remittances are seen to be heavily dependent on the number of dependents for the emigrant in the home country (Markova, 2006). So it can be said that emigrants with dependents in the home country indirectly facilitate conspicuous consumption by way of foreign remittance. In this study, it has been assumed that emigrants who have dependent families in Kerala are more likely to visit the state regularly compared to emigrants with fewer family ties in the state. Only emigrants who visit Kerala regularly are likely to make discretionary purchases here and thereby directly facilitate conspicuous consumption. This logic is used to justify the choice of emigrants with dependent families in Kerala as the sample.

In lieu of this logic, the 'emigrant' is defined as an individual from Kerala who has been residing abroad for a minimum period of one year and continues to financially support his/ her family members in Kerala. The respondent in the survey is an earning member/provider for the emigrant household who has been residing abroad for at least a year (at the time of the study) and remains the key influencer in the family's household purchase decisions in Kerala. The operative definition of "emigrant household" in this study is a household that is partially or entirely dependent on foreign remittance income received from the emigrant family member residing outside India, for its sustenance.

A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from 640 emigrant Keralites. Due to constraints in accessing the sample, respondents were chosen by way of purposive sampling from six districts in Kerala namely Kannur, Trichur, Ernakulam, Kottayam, Kollam, and Thiruvananthapuram. As per Kerala Migration Survey 2014, these are among the top districts in the state with reference to size of remittances. Purposive sampling is where the researcher decides on the purpose that the respondents must serve and then pursues respondents who fulfill the purpose (Bernard, 1994). Although purposive sampling may introduce some bias to the study and limit the external validity, due to the personal nature of the questions in this survey and the screening criteria for respondents, a random sample would be unlikely to generate a sufficient number of willing respondents from across Kerala to enable a valid conclusion to be drawn. The sampling size criterion was estimated as 634 and hence satisfied (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

**Table 2: Table Showing Reliability Measures for Scale Items**

<i>Construct tested for reliability</i>	<i>Sub-scale</i>	<i>No. of items</i>	<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>
Materialism	Possession defined Success	5	0.835
	Acquisition centrality	5	0.700
	Pursuit of happiness	5	0.771
Overall Materialism Score		15	0.876
Conspicuous Consumption Score		5	0.853

Source: Survey data

## RESULTS

### Test of Reliability

The reliability of the scale items was determined by means of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Table 2). Coefficient alpha was 0.835 for 'possession defined success' sub-dimension, 0.7 for the 'acquisition centrality' sub-dimension and 0.771 for the 'pursuit of happiness' sub-dimension. Scale reliability was found to be within acceptable levels for all scales with materialism reliability at 0.876 and conspicuous consumption at 0.853 suggesting

that all the dimensions are internally consistent (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009).

### Detailing of Respondent Demographic Variables

Respondents between age groups of 22 and 60 who are employed were chosen for the study. The mean age of all respondents was 35.85 with a standard deviation of 6.487 and skewness 0.647. In terms of gender breakdown, 59.5% were men and 40.5% were women. All demographic variables have been represented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Demographic Description of Respondents**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Gender	Male	381	59.5
	Female	259	40.5
Marital status	Married	586	91.6
	Single	54	8.4
Monthly Household Income	<INR 50000	76	11.9
	INR 50,001-1,00,000	102	15.9
	INR 1,00,001-3,00,000	233	36.4
	INR 3,00,001-5,00,000	130	20.3
	>INR 5,00,000	99	15.5
Religion	Christian	234	36.6
	Hindu	210	32.8
	Muslim	196	30.6
Education	Post Graduate (General)	171	26.7
	Post Graduate (Professional)	241	37.7
	Four year college graduate	105	16.4
	Three year college graduate	83	13
	High school/Diploma	40	6.3
Occupation	Salaried	547	85.5
	Self employed	93	14.5

Source: Survey data

### Test of Dependency between Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption

Consumer materialism, as measured by success, centrality, and happiness, has a significant influence on the variable of consumers’ conspicuous consumption. Pearson correlations were run on the dataset. The Pearson correlation between the score on the materialism scale and conspicuous consumption scale is found to be statistically significant at 1% significance level (Table 4). Path analysis was performed using AMOS 17 to test whether the three sub-dimensions of materialism influence conspicuous consumption (Fig. 1). The path in the model between all three sub-dimensions of materialism (namely success, acquisition and happiness) and conspicuous consumption are both positive and statistically significant. Thus conspicuous consumption is seen to be positively influenced by all the three materialism variables and

hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c stand accepted. Possession-defined Success was the most relevant dimension of materialism associated with conspicuous consumption among the emigrant community with standardised regression weight of 0.483 followed by Pursuit of Happiness with regression weight of 0.225 (Table 5). This supports earlier postulates that the focus on continuously increasing the value of personal possessions is tied to both a perceived higher status in society and increased happiness (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012). The variable ‘Acquisition centrality’ is seen to cast the lowest impact on conspicuous consumption with standardised regression weight of 0.078.

### Test of Difference in Means between Groups Using ANOVA and t-test

Preliminary tests in SPSS version 21 were performed to examine the influence of demographic variables such as

**Table 4: Table Showing Correlation between Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption**

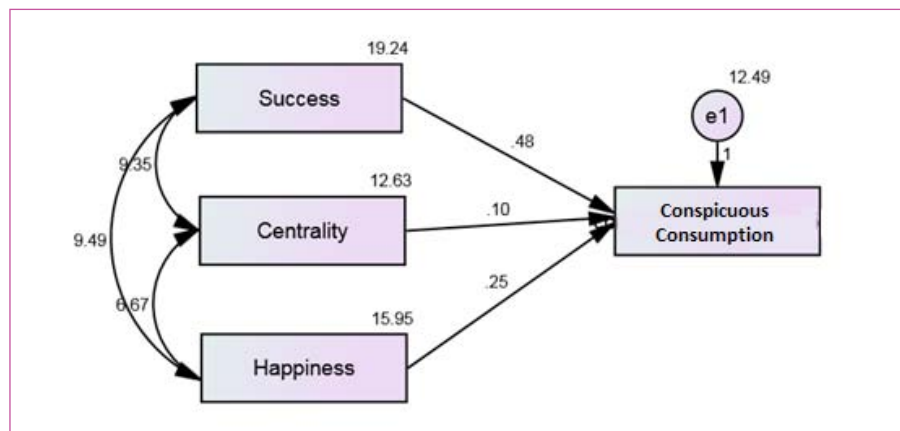
Item	Correlation coefficient	Significance	Decision
Materialism as Possession defined Success	0.559	0.000*	H1a supported
Materialism as Acquisition Centrality	0.318	0.000*	H1b supported
Materialism as Pursuit of Happiness	0.450	0.000*	H1c supported

\*Denotes significance at (P < 0.01).

**Table 5: Table Showing Item-Wise Regression Weights for the Relationship between Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption**

Item	Regression Weight	Standardised Regression Weight	P value	Decision
Possession- defined Success	0.482	0.483	***	Significant
Acquisition Centrality	0.095	0.078	0.048	Significant
Pursuit of Happiness	0.246	0.225	***	Significant

\*\*\*Denotes significance at (P < 0.001).



**Fig. 1: Path Diagram for Model Linking Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption**

gender, age, income, and education level. Conspicuous consumption is significantly different for gender groups ( $F=16.457$ ) with males being more prone to conspicuous consumption than females (Table 6).

Analysis of variance tests were run to compare the materialism and conspicuous consumption scores for emigrants from different income groups. The difference in means was found to be significant for the variable 'income' (Tables 6 and 7). From post-hoc analysis, it can be inferred that the respondents in the higher income brackets contributed most to this difference with both

materialism and conspicuous consumption seen to be higher for higher income groups. Similar tests were run to check for difference in means across different age groups and education levels. The analysis did not find any difference in the materialism or conspicuous consumption levels for either of these demographic variables (Tables 6 and 7). An interesting observation is that conspicuous consumption tendency and emigrants tenure of stay abroad are not related. It is the psychological variable 'materialism' that predicted conspicuous consumption to a large extent. Among demographic characteristics only gender, income, religion, and occupation seem to moderate relationships (Table 8).

**Table 6: Table Showing Difference in Conspicuous Consumption Based on Demographic Indicators**

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Independent variable</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>F-value</i>	<i>P value</i>
Conspicuous consumption	Gender	Male	17.01	16.457	0.000*
		Female	12.54		
	Income	<50000	13.46	14.489	0.000*
		500000-1,00,000	12.48		
		1,00,001-3,00,000	15.82		
		3,00,001-5,00,000	16.65		
		>5,00,000	15.98		
	Religion	Christian	15.72	82.200	0.000*
		Hindu	12.12		
		Muslim	17.87		
	Occupation	Salaried	15.19	5.422	0.020*
		Self-employed	15.20		
	Age			0.371	0.774
Education			0.604	0.660	
Duration of stay abroad			0.920	0.431	

\*Denotes significance at ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Table 7: Table Showing Difference in Materialism Based on Various Demographic Indicators**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Materialism(Success)</i>			<i>Materialism(Centrality)</i>			<i>Materialism(Happiness)</i>		
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>F-value</i>	<i>P value</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>F-value</i>	<i>P value</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>F value</i>	<i>P value</i>
Gender	Male	16.29	8.424	0.004*	16.08	6.490	0.011*	16.10	11.125	0.001*
	Female	12.50			12.37			12.50		
Income	<50000	13.12	8.786	0.000*	12.79	11.094	0.000*	12.86	9.984	0.000*
	500000-1,00,000	12.69			12.26			12.57		
	1,00,001-3,00,000	15.34			15.21			15.29		
	3,00,001-5,00,000	15.97			16.10			15.88		
	>5,00,000	15.17			14.86			14.99		
Religion	Christian	15.35	42.464	0.000*	15.03	44.514	0.000*	15.20	44.936	0.000*
	Hindu	12.30			12.09			12.20		
	Muslim	16.69			16.71			16.60		
Occupation	Salaried	14.86	3.213	0.047*	14.71	5.293	0.022*	14.74	4.637	0.032*
	Self-employed	14.13			13.80			14.05		
Age			0.755	0.519		0.779	0.506		0.582	0.627
Education			0.900	0.463		1.562	0.183		1.337	0.255
Duration of stayabroad			1.359	0.254		2.269	0.079		1.439	0.230

\*Denotes significance at ( $P < 0.05$ )

**Table 8: Summary of Results from Hypothesis Testing**

<i>Dependent Variable</i>	<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>
Materialism	Gender	H2a Supported
	Age	H2b Not Supported
	Income	H2c Supported
	Education	H2d Not supported
	Religion	H2e Supported
	Occupation	H2f Supported
	Duration of stay abroad	H2g Not Supported
Conspicuous Consumption	Gender	H3a Supported
	Age	H3b Supported
	Income	H3c Supported
	Education	H3d Not Supported
	Religion	H3e Supported
	Occupation	H3f Supported
	Duration of stay abroad	H3g Not Supported
Conspicuous Consumption	Materialism (Success)	H1a Supported
	Materialism (Centrality)	H1b Supported
	Materialism (Happiness)	H1c Supported

Source: Survey data

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

*The results reaffirm earlier empirical findings of Tatzel (2002) that postulate a positive relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption. The influence is seen to be stronger for the 'success' and 'happiness' dimensions. This may be because people with strong materialistic values are typically most concerned with appearing successful to others and maintaining their sense of self-esteem (Kasser, 2002). Therefore these individuals tend to value items that are consumed publicly and possess public meaning (i.e. the ability to convey status or success) rather than personal or subjective meaning (Richins & Floyd, 1994; Kim, 1998). As the study used expatriates as respondents, its results also confirm earlier findings by Batra *et al.* (2000) that there is an established link between exposure to global standards and conspicuous consumption tendencies.*

The demographic dependency of materialism questions the postulates of Richins and Dawson (1992) who view materialism as a personal value system inherent in an individual rather than acquired from environment. As O'Shaughnessy (2002) emphasized, it is widespread prosperity, which fuels materialistic behaviour further. This stands validated as there is a significant difference in

materialism levels at higher income groups, as is evident from comparison of means. The tendency to conspicuously consume, while being significantly influenced by income levels, is also found to be influenced by gender, with males showing greater proneness to ostentatious display of wealth in line with findings of O'Cass and McEwen (2004). Females' greater interest in people and males' interest in objects (Larsen *et al.*, 1999) could be a reason. This may also be a fall-out of the societal pressures linking a man's wealth to his position within a status system. The positive association with income is relevant because as resources increase, so does consumer willingness to spend money on products that satisfy more symbolic and sensory needs (Roth, 1995). Both conspicuous consumption and materialism is more prevalent among Muslims followed by Christians. This can be verified from the size of remittances to Kerala, with the highest remittances being received in Muslim dominated districts in North Kerala (KMS, 2014). Similarly self-employed individuals are seen to be more prone to conspicuous consumption than their salaried counterparts probably because entrepreneurs are under greater social pressure to appear successful. An interesting observation is that conspicuous consumption tendency and emigrants tenure of stay abroad are not related. As conspicuous consumption is a function of identity crisis and insecurity (Braun & Wicklund, 1989),

it is possible that the financial and emotional security achieved by prolonged stay abroad mitigates the tendency for ostentation. The relationship for materialism is not significant which could imply that materialism maybe an inherent individual personality trait rather than one which is imbibed from external exposure.

Understanding the set of institutional and structural variables that underlie consumption behaviour is paramount for marketing managers, public policy makers and greater society. This study is of interest to retailers pursuing continuous patronage from materialists as well as for consumer interest groups and policy makers interested in the causes and consequences of materialism. Globalisation has brought significant changes in peoples' lifestyles. Foray into international brands and services has redefined the aspirations of Indians. In societies where money conveys prestige and position, it may lead to irresponsible spending (Abdulla, 2014). Kerala is rightly known as a consumerist state. Emigration has fuelled increase in disposable income at household levels. This, along with global exposure through migration, has led to conspicuous consumption culture taking shape in Kerala as other avenues for investment do not exist here (Zachariah and Irudaya Rajan, 2015). Keralites have begun to use products to hide their insecurities and failures and are willing to incur financial risk to acquire high-priced brands. Marketers need to understand the social implications of encouraging consumers to borrow and purchase products on credit. Marketers may look toward the consumer mortgage and consumer credit industries in the USA to see how the encouragement of overspending and a focus on conspicuous consumption helped spark a collapse of not only the lives of the consumers they serviced but also the firms themselves, and the global economy in 2008. By reinforcing these behaviours in the Indian context, marketing managers might find themselves indirectly harming sustainable consumption practices.

It is recommended that marketing managers reconsider existing strategies that may not gel particularly well with corporate social responsibility. In this regard, firms that implement strategy and marketing communications that are less contextualised in materialism, may actually enjoy an advantage over competing firms that are not in tune with social responsibility and consumers' long-term well-being (Podoshen & Andrzejewski, 2012).

A counter perspective is that the high levels of consumption brought about by materialist cultures can increase not only

businesses' profits, but can generate capital for research and development. Greater research and development can in turn lead to higher productivity, technological breakthroughs and higher living standards for all (Richins & Rudmin, 1994). As observed by Zachariah and Irudaya Rajan (2015), emigration and emigrant remittances continue to sustain much of the Kerala economy. The fact that respondents' conspicuous consumption differed with respect to gender and monthly income has a significant implication for marketing professionals in the process of targeting this lucrative emigrant community and positioning themselves well. It is wise for luxury brands to emphasize high-status image as their positioning strategy when targeting Kerala's expatriate consumers. By focusing on the prestige-value of products, it is possible to create a need within this community.

Goldsmith (2012) found that youngsters who are materialistic tended to shop more, have more knowledge about products and services, and are most responsive to advertising and promotional efforts. The materialists could turn into early adopters, trendsetters, and opinion leaders among their peers. These findings can aid marketers and advertisers to appeal to materialistic shoppers. With unprecedented global migration from developing countries, marketers need to understand that there is a huge market for status products outside the developed world and focus on countries such as India that are just as interested in consuming for status.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A significant limitation of this study is that materialism and its related values have been studied in the context of Kerala only. Therefore it cannot be assumed that these results carry over to consumers of other natives. As Podoshen *et al.* (2011) have demonstrated, materialism and conspicuous consumption may be very different across nationalities and culture. Purposive sampling was used and it may not be representative of the expatriate population at large. The data for this study were obtained from emigrants only from chosen districts in Kerala. Value systems and consumer lifestyles may be different in other parts of the state and future researchers may wish to examine materialism and its related values in other geographic contexts. Future research can factor in the influence of other geographic and demographic variables like country of expats current residence and family size. It would be beneficial to complete the conspicuous

consumption model by testing other personality traits and social influences apart from materialism alone (For example: the influence of media exposure, self-monitoring trait, collectivism, concept of face in individuals etc.) However, it is hoped that this study acts as a springboard for future examinations of materialism and conspicuous consumption.

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