Determinants For Consumption Materialism Among Late Adolescents in China

Flora Fang Gu, University of Hong Kong
Kineta Hung, University of Hong Kong
David K. Tse, University of Hong Kong

EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Past research examining materialism and adolescence has often focused on investigating the relationship between materialism and the adolescent's personality traits and consumption patterns (Achenreiner 1997; Goldberg et al. 2003). Further, researchers found that, from a developmental perspective, parental values are the primary means of socializing adolescents to specific values (Kilby 1993). For example, adolescents that value material possessions more than they value self-acceptance, affiliation, or community feelings are associated with more materialistic and less supportive parents (Kasser, Ryan and Zax 1995). In this study, we aim to build on this line of research by exploring historical/environmental factors that could influence the adolescent's development of materialist value. We investigated this issue in the context of China for two reasons. First, past research has seldom explored these issues in non-Western countries. Also, the dramatic economic and social changes in contemporary China provide us with a unique opportunity to understand the extent societal forces could help shape teenagers' values.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Past research examining materialism and adolescence has often focused on investigating the relationship between materialism and the adolescent’s personality traits and consumption patterns (Achenreiner 1997; Goldberg et al. 2003). Further, researchers found that, from a developmental perspective, parental values are the primary means of socializing adolescents to specific values (Kilby 1993). For example, adolescents that value material possessions more than they value self-acceptance, affiliation, or community feelings are associated with more materialistic and less supportive parents (Kasser, Ryan and Zax 1995). In this study, we aim to build on this line of research by exploring historical/environmental factors that could influence the adolescent’s development of materialist value. We investigated this issue in the context of China for two reasons. First, past research has seldom explored these issues in non-Western countries. Also, the dramatic economic and social changes in contemporary China provide us with a unique opportunity to understand the extent societal forces could help shape teenagers’ values.

We use the historical generation approach as our theoretical foundation to examine the shift in materialistic values from one generation to another in China. Rogler (2002) postulates that cataclysmic events could cast strong images on the “coming of age” group and give birth to a brand-new historical generation. We hypothesize that the late adolescents in China, who were born under the One-Child policy and exposed to the global culture that embraces individualism, consumerism, free market, and openness to changes (Arnett 2002) would be more materialistic. In contrast, we hypothesize that the parent generation who endured much misery and hardship during Cultural Revolution during their adolescent years would be less materialistic.

Our study also examined the driving forces underlying the development of materialistic values, especially among adolescents. Based on a survey of 43 societies in 1990-1993, Inglehart and Carballo (1997) found a very strong correlation between economic development and values. Other research suggests that working-class people prefer instrumental and recreational possessions to solve short-term problems, while middle-class people value possessions that serve symbolic needs in terms of status, personal history and self-expression, thereby showing a longer-term perspective (Dittmar 1991). While the aforementioned studies were conducted on adults, studies involving young people seemed to show a different pattern. For example, youths that were more materialistic were likely to have come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Kasser et al. 1995; Goldberg et al. 2003). As well, research on perceptions revealed that in spite of their differential socio-economic backgrounds, adolescents formed similar impressions, favoring the person that owns, rather than lacks, expensive possessions (Dittmar and Pepper 1994). Given the sociocultural force in China that is very child-centered (McNeal and Yeh 1997) exacerbated by the one-child policy, we hypothesize that family income would have significant impact on the parent generation’s level of materialism but no impact on the adolescents in China.

Instead of their socio-economic background, we hypothesize that what drives the Chinese adolescents’ materialistic values is the extent of globalization they are exposed to. Meanwhile, the media is the channel through which people in developing countries are exposed to global culture (Arnett 2002). Therefore, we propose that the extent of media exposure would exert significant impacts on the adolescents’ orientation towards materialism. Since the parent generation has formed relatively stable values, we propose no parallel effects for the adult group.

The survey data for this study was collected between 1999 and 2001 in 15 major cities in China. It covers 2,860 adolescents age 15-19 and 11,920 adults age 40-49. We confine our subjects to urban dwellers, because demographers and psychologists have pointed out that the “spoiling” trend is a distinctly urban phenomenon in China (Cutler 1987). As well, globalization tends to reach urban dwellers with much greater intensity (Arnett 2002). Controlling for the effects of other demographic variables, we use family income as the proxy for the subjects’ family background. The media exposure measure includes the exposure to TV as well as the Internet. Drawing on the literature on materialism, we focused on examining three dimensions of consumption materialism: Acquisition Centrality, Novelty, and Susceptibility to Social Influence.

Results of the study provided strong support for the hypotheses outlined earlier. Adolescents in China were more centrality-oriented in their purchase, more novelty-seeking in new product adoption, and more susceptible to the influence of peers and marketing promotions, thus resulting in an overall higher tendency for consumption materialism. In contrast, the parent generation displayed significantly lower levels of materialistic values. The result is evidenced by controlling various demographic variables including gender, age, education, family income and city tier. Most importantly, in a series of regressions on three dimensions of consumption materialism, media exposure emerged as a consistently significant factor in shaping adolescents’ materialistic values, while family income is only significant for the adult group and is statistically indifferent on all three dimensions of materialism for the teenagers. Implications for the developmental research on adolescents’ consumption materialism are discussed.

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