Are Modern Chinese Getting More Materialistic?: a Study of Materialism With Longitude and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

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This study makes a unique contribution to the extant body of materialism research. It provides insight of materialism in modern China by applying the MGB and developing cognitive schemas. Two waves of survey were conducted. The first was conducted in both China and US in 1998. Respondents answered a qualitative motive elicitation part in the questionnaire and provided motives for choosing between a materialistic vs. a non-materialist lifestyle. 330 complete questionnaires were obtained in China and 362 in US. The second wave of survey was conducted in China in 2008 with 322 complete questionnaires collected. Respondents responded to an identical qualitative part for eliciting motives for lifestyle choice and a quantitative inventory of closed-ended questions measuring variable in the MGB. The findings showed that subjective norms, anticipated positive emotions and perceived behavioral control are significant predictors of desire and intentions to pursue a materialistic lifestyle for Chinese respondents in 2008. We further developed cognitive schemas to further explore their motivations underlying the choices. A longitude comparison of Chinese materialists shows the development of materialism with increasing affluence. The finding of a cross cultural comparison implies further development of materialism measures needs to cover social influence and social motives.

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Are modern Chinese getting more materialistic? – A study of materialism with longitude and cross-cultural comparisons

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China, as one of the fast-growing developing economies, has experienced strong economic development in recent years. The up-surging materialism brought forth by the economic growth in China has attracted attentions from both practitioners and academics. However, most existent research on materialism has been conducted in Western, developed economies dominated by individualistic values. Few studies on materialism in developing economies are available in the literature. Although there has been some recent attention to the historic rise of consumer culture and materialism in China (Clunas 1991), both the popular and scholarly prototypes of materialism is either Western European or American. Some researchers have also explored cultural variation in materialism to some degree (Ger and Belk, 1996), but there is still a surprising lack of highly culture-specific understandings of materialism. Therefore, a challenging for both practitioners and academics is how to understand the materialism phenomenon in countries with fast-growing economies and dominant collective values (e.g., China).

The aim of this study is to understand the materialism tendency in modern China. We look for answers to such questions as “Is the current Chinese generation becoming more materialistic than the earlier generation?” and “Are they becoming more materialistic than their Western counterparts?” To do so, we first applied the Model of Goal-directed Behavior (MGB) (Perugini and Bagozzi 2001)) to examine the decision making process of people’s actual choice between materialist and non-materialist lifestyles. Then, we developed cognitive schemas to map the motivations underlying such choices. In order to explore how rapid economic growth influences materialism tendencies, we conduct a longitude comparison of cognitive schemas between two samples of Chinese respondents with a ten-year period difference (Year 1998 vs. Year 2008). Finally, a cross-cultural comparison of cognitive schemas between Chinese and American respondents was conducted in order to understand how modern Chinese differ from their Western counterparts in materialism tendencies.

THEORY

Materialism is defined as “a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one’s life” (Richins and Dawson, 1992). It has been treated as general values that are presumed to apply universally across contexts. Richins and Dawson (1992) measured three dimensions of materialism: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, possession-defined success. Further, some researchers explored cultural variation in materialism (Ger and Belk 1996) and claimed people from collective cultures are less materialistic than those from individual cultures. Inglehart (1990) also argued that materialism relates to affluence: materialism will peak and begin to decline after a certain level of affluence is reached and lower order needs have been met.

In this study, instead for studying materialism as general values, we investigate an actual choice between materialistic vs. non-materialistic lifestyles. The model of goal-directed behavior (MGB), an extension of the theory of planned behavior (TPB), was applied to capture the decision making process. In the MGB, anticipated positive and negative emotions and past behavior are included in addition to attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Further, desire is added as the mediator between all antecedents and intentions, and functions as the central motivational process transforming reasons for acting into actual decisions to act.

Cognitive schemas were further developed to map the motivations underlying such lifestyle choices. Cognitive schemas are “learned, internalized patterns of thought-feeling that mediate both the interpretation of on-going experience and the reconstruction of memories” (Strauss 1992). We argue the motives constitute the reasons for behavior and justify or rationalize one’s chosen behavior. They are presented in a hierarchical cognitive schema, connected through means-ends linkages.

METHOD

Two waves of survey were conducted. The first was conducted in both China and US in Year 1998. Respondents from two Chinese Universities in South-eastern China and from one US University in Middle-West answered a qualitative motive elicitation part in the questionnaire and provided motives for choosing between a materialistic vs. a non-materialist lifestyle. 330 complete questionnaires were obtained in China and 362 in US. The second wave of survey was conducted in one Chinese University in Southern China in Year 2008, where 322 complete questionnaires were collected. The survey included an identical qualitative part for eliciting motives for lifestyle choice and a quantitative inventory of closed-ended questions measuring variable in the MGB.

RESULTS

The finding from the MGB (Year 2008) showed that in the decision making process of lifestyle choices, subjective norms, anticipated positive emotions and perceived behavioral control are significant predictors of desire and intentions to pursue a materialistic lifestyle for Chinese respondents. On the other hand, desire and intentions to pursue a non-materialistic lifestyle were significantly affected by attitudes, anticipated positive emotions and perceived behavioral control. In order to understand why social norms are important for Chinese respondents to choose a materialist lifestyle, we developed cognitive schemas to further explore their motivations underlying the choices. The results
of t-tests also provided preliminary evidence supporting the argument that motives and linkages between motives in cognitive schemas can impact variables in the MGB for both Chinese materialists and non-materialists.

We also got interesting results from a longitude comparison of Chinese materialists over a ten-year period with rapid economic growth (Year 1998 vs. Year 2008). The cognitive schemas of Chinese materialists have become more well-defined as their affluence increase over time. While personal motives remained relatively stable over time, social motives are more contingent on economic development. A cross-cultural comparison of Chinese materialists with their American counterparts showed that Chinese materialists not only have a more complex structure of social motives but also have some unique motives such as socially defined success.

**REFERENCE**

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**Transcultural Tourism: Role of Cultural Metaphors in Enhancing Destination Image**

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In recent times, immigration and globalization has resulted in a *transcultural* consumer era (Penaloza, 1994) that calls for enriching transcultural attractions to enhance destination image. *Transcultural* is a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (Epstein, 2009). A destination’s image is the “composite of various products (attractions) and attributes woven into a total impression” (MacKay and Fesenmaeir, 1997, p. 2). This paper investigates transcultural tourism as an alternative to conventional cultural tourism. The paper considers the use of cultural metaphors to influence consumer mental models, which in turn enhances their perception of the destination image. *Cultural metaphors* are associations that convey shared beliefs and understandings of a particular society (Gannon, 2002). The term metaphor refers to associations that relate abstract concepts to physical things and are used to construct conceptual understandings (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The symbolic anthropological construal of metaphor is grounded in cultural images (Hirschman 2007) and has been noted for its ability to create new mental models and to overcome entrenched perspectives (Barret & Cooperrider, 1990). Consumers’ mental models are structures of meaning, which includes beliefs and feelings, activated when a consumption situation takes place (Christensen and Olson, 2002).

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, this study examines how transcultural metaphors enhance the destination image. A number of studies have examined cultural tourism and the enhancement of destination image such as iconic structures (e.g. Thakara, 2002), megaevents (e.g. Allen et al., 2002), thematisation (e.g. (e.g. Arnould and Price, 1993; Joy and Sherry, 2003; Hughes, 2000) and heritage mining (e.g. Russo, 2002). However, there have been minimal studies that diverge from the traditional cultural tourism to discover other non-conventional ways of leveraging culture to enhance the destination image. This study diverges from the traditional cultural tourism perspective to investigate transcultural tourism that enhances destination image by leading consumers to transcend cultural differences and to incorporate new concepts and visions from alternative cultures. This is important because according to Richards and Wilson (2005), consumers are increasingly searching for alternatives to traditional cultural tourism.

Second, this study considers how metaphors can be used to transcend consumer mental models. A number of researchers have examined metaphors and their effects on consumer mental models (e.g. Zaltman and Coulter, 1995; Christensen and Olson, 2002). These studies have exposed the fact that metaphors assist in shaping consumer mental models. However, “what about transformative experiences that falls outside the range of consumer mental models?” The current study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of mental model transcendence. Transcendence is “the capacity of mental models to transcend the limits of their mental models” (Piedmont 1999, p.988). We argue that incorporation of transcultural perspectives has a potential to lead to a transcendent state that falls outside of existing mental models.

Third, this study extends the role of cultural metaphors. Some studies have also been conducted on the role of cultural metaphors as a consumer research tool (e.g. Denny and Sunderland, 2005). Others have examined the role of cultural metaphors in understanding cultural differences (e.g. Gannon, 2002). Although these studies have exposed the fact that cultural metaphors are tools for understanding cultural complexities, they do not explain how the cultural metaphors lead to consumer mental model transcendence. The introduction of mental model transcendence in this paper extends the current literature to include a transcendent experience in the mental models of consumers that is made possible by transcultural metaphors. It also captures the psychological perspectives embedded in transcultural interactions and acknowledges the importance of these perspectives in understanding consumer behavior.

To examine consumer use of cultural metaphors, the investigation was conducted with artisans as well as American tourists in the Pilsen Mexican community in Chicago. A qualitative approach, in the form of phenomenological interviews, observations and photography, was