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Young consumers and perception of brands in Hong Kong: A qualitative study

Keywords: youth – brands – consumer socialization – cognitive development

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Young consumers and perception of brands in Hong Kong: A qualitative study

Structured Abstract

Research paper

1. Purpose: The purpose of the article is to explore young people's perceptions of the desirability of brands and brand ownership in Hong Kong using drawings and open-ended questions.
2. Methodology/Approach: Forty-eight Chinese children aged 13 to 19 were asked to draw what comes to their minds for two statements: "This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods"; and, "This young person does not have a lot of branded goods". After drawing, respondents were personally interviewed to answer four questions associating possessions of branded goods with happiness, friendship, and personality traits.
3. Findings: Analysis of the drawings and interviews indicated that there were significant differences in young people's perceptions of someone with or without a lot of branded goods in terms of type of possessions, leisure activities, observable qualities and personality traits. Respondents were more likely to relate possessions of branded goods with happiness, friendship, and self-esteem. A person with a lot of branded goods however, was perceived as arrogant, wasteful, vain and superficial. A person without a lot of branded goods was perceived as easygoing,

friendly and down-to-earth. Results demonstrate that respondents were able to appreciate the value of possessions based on emotional attachment, personality association and social meaning. The results supported John's (1999) model of consumer socialization that children and young people in the reflective stage of consumer socialization could understand fully the value of possessions.

4. Research implications: Based on these findings, three hypotheses were proposed about young people's perceptions of possessions that can be further tested in a quantitative survey.
5. Practical implications: Markets and advertisers that target young Chinese consumers should be sensitive to their negative association of personality traits and possessions of branded goods with arrogance and wastefulness. They can encourage the instrumental materialism of how to use branded goods to enhance friendship and to achieve self-defining goals..

Young consumers and perception of brands in Hong Kong: A qualitative study

Introduction

Materialism among the younger generation has become a hot topic among parents, educators, marketers and policy makers. Because of the enormous purchasing power of the minors and their parents in many developed countries, the youth market is important to advertisers. While marketing professionals are keen to promote spending, parents and policy makers are concerned with protecting young consumers from perceived declining moral standards. Educators want to develop a better way to communicate with young people about wealth. Increasing stress to differentiate people who 'have' from people who 'have not' may sometimes be so strong that young consumers may even adopt illegal ways to possess products (Chan, 2003). In the first nine months in 2004, shoplifting cases in Hong Kong increased and more than one third of crime suspects involved were elementary and secondary school students (Hong Kong Economic Daily, 2004). Media reports attributed the rise in youth crime to the down turning economy, poor educational system and increasing materialism among young people (Sun Daily, 2002).

One of the major concerns about consumer socialization is the undesirable influence of advertising on children's desire for material goods as a means of achieving success, happiness, and self-fulfillment (John, 1999). In the past, materialism has been treated as a negative value, connected to possessiveness, envy, lack of generosity, greed

and jealousy (Belk, 1983). Surveys indicate a dramatic increase in individual materialism as a life goal and on a sharp decline in emphasis on personal self-fulfillment among U.S. high school students from the early 1970s through the 1980s (Easterlin and Crimmins, 1991). Hong Kong citizens generally perceived that most advertising encourages materialism in the society (Chan, 2006).

Despite the interest in understanding more about materialism, there is a lack of research examining the relationship between young people's social-cognitive development and consumption values, such as materialism (John, 1999). A key factor affecting the development of materialistic values is the perception of materialistic possessions. Are possessions associated with happiness and good social relations? How do young people perceive people with or without possessions of branded goods? Do young people want to be like those with a lot of branded goods? This study attempts to examine young consumers' perceptions about possessions of branded goods and their materialistic value orientation using a drawing method. Specifically, we wanted to study how young people associate possessions of branded goods with happiness, friendship, and personality traits. The study adopts John's (1999) model of consumer socialization of children. This model suggests that children of different ages adopt different consumption motives and values.

Hong Kong is an ideal place for the study of consumer socialization and in particular, materialism. This is because it is an affluent city with abundant advertisements. Per capita GDP of Hong Kong in 2005 was US\$ 23,608 (compared to US\$ 39,935 of the United States). Wealth is highly visible and high-end luxurious brands are aggressively marketed. Shopping malls are in close proximity to schools and residential areas. Because of the good public transportation systems, young consumers can easily go shopping alone or with peers. Materialistic values are prevalent in the mass media in Hong Kong. The core themes of television dramas are often about the striving for success and status. Characters on television enjoy a luxurious living standard that is far more affluent than an average member of the working class (Cheung and Chan, 1996). A content analysis of cultural values in print advertising from 1946 to 1996 found that modernity, popularity, and social status were among the top five dominant values in Hong Kong (Chan, 1999). Materialistic values can be a potential threat to the traditional value of filial piety. A commercial for personal loans broadcast in August 2005 was condemned by the regulatory body for conveying wrong message to children because of its explicit glorification of materialism (Hong Kong Broadcasting Authority, 2005). The commercial showed a working class father picking up his son after school. The son turned away from his father because of his lowly looks. When the father dressed well (probably by securing a personal loan), the boy returned to his arms.

This study is of theoretical interest because Hong Kong is a place where Western and Eastern values meet. Young consumers in Hong Kong are subjected to a value structure that embraces Confucian, capitalist, as well as feudalist values (Cheung and Kwok, 1999). Studying how young people perceive possessions of branded goods in Hong Kong sheds light on the complex interaction between Confucian, capitalist and feudalist values.

Literature review

In John's (1999) model, consumer socialization is viewed as a developmental process that changes through different stages as children mature into adult consumers. During the perceptual stage (ages three to seven), the value of possessions is based on surface features, such as having more of anything. During the analytical stage (ages seven to 11), children begin to understand the value of possessions based on social meaning and significance. As the children enter the reflective stage (ages 11-16), they understand fully the value of possessions based on social meaning, significance, and scarcity.

In an experimental study, participants (boys aged four to five) exposed to an ad for a new toy were more likely to choose a hypothetical playmate who was "not so nice" but owned a new toy, than a playmate who was "very nice" but did not own the toy (Goldberg and Gorn, 1974). The study demonstrated that children at a very young

age can place a value on the possession of branded goods, and accessing a new toy could often be favored over playing with friends.

In a study of reasons for collecting as a hobby among first and fifth graders, it was found that the younger children appreciated collecting as it made them believe they owned more than others. Older children appreciated collecting as a way of making themselves unique and for feeling good about themselves. Younger children often compared their possessions to those of others in terms of quantity while older children compared possessions in terms of their specialty (Baker and Gentry, 1996). John (1999) elaborated that at the age of eleven, children were moving into the analytical stage. They would systematically place value on possessions of branded goods to help them develop social relations, achieve social status, and attain self-fulfilment.

Leahy (1981) asked 720 children and adolescents aged 5 to 18 to describe rich and poor people. Results demonstrated that the use of peripheral descriptions decreased with age and the use of central and sociocentric descriptions increased with age.

Adolescents perceived that rich and poor people differ in observable qualities as well as in personality traits. Mistry (2000) asked 260 children aged 7 to 13 about what it means to be rich or poor, and how much they agreed with statements describing behavioral and affective attributes of both rich and poor children. Results indicated that descriptions of wealth and poverty were based on possessions of branded goods,

lifestyle characteristics, and personal attributes. Rich children were generally rated higher on cleanliness, health, popularity, happiness, and as not worrying. Poor children were generally perceived to be better at sports, not as lazy or spoiled, caring more about others, and more hardworking than their rich children counterparts. Younger children seemed to idealize wealth. Older children displayed more favorable evaluations of the poor and somewhat unfavorable evaluations of the rich. Dittmar and Pepper (1994) surveyed 168 working-class and middle-class adolescents and found that both working-class and middle-class adolescents perceived the affluent person as more intelligent, successful and hard-working than the less well-off person. Respondents also reported that they aspired to the lifestyle of the affluent person.

A qualitative study of 48 low and middle-income children aged five to 14 found that even at an early age, children hold popular prejudices about wealth and poverty. For example, imagined poor children were perceived to be isolated and rejected. The imagined middle class children were perceived to be clean, conforming to rules and having good manners.

Another survey of 102 children aged seven to 17 found that the concept of possession becomes more sophisticated and “realistic” with age. The type of favorite possessions changed with age from toys to sound and sports equipment, computers and clothes. Older children focused more on the importance of positive acquisition, single

ownership, and social influence than younger children (Furnham and Jones, 1987).

In three studies with children aged eight to 18, Chaplin and John (2005) found that self-brand connections developed between middle childhood (ages seven to eight) and early adolescent (ages 12 to 13). Older children developed a deep connection between one particular aspect of the possession (brand name) and self concepts. They perceived that brands have personalities and could be used as a way to symbolize group membership.

The current study uses a drawing method to explore young people's perception of possessions. Asking young people to draw an idea, an object, or an event, is a research technique that has been used by researchers for various purposes. These drawing studies enable researchers to study the state of mind, cognitive abilities, and the nature and extent of visual memory that is held by them (Goodenough, 1926; Jolley and Thomas, 1995; Levy, 1950; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). More recently, researchers have used the drawing method to study young consumers' perceptions about media and consumer related behaviors, including image of celebrities (Gauntlett, 2005), perceptions of market places (McNeal, 1992), and visual memory of product packaging (McNeal and Ji, 2003). These drawing studies are based on the premise that young people will draw what they value; what they like; and, what they favor (Dennis, 1966; Golomb, 2004).

In conclusion, the review of literature demonstrates that children understand the concept of possessions and value possessions from a very young age. The concept of materialism consists of factors including perception and attitudes toward possessions; the link between possessions and happiness and success; the relative importance of possessions and other life goals; and the attitudes toward other people who own a lot of possessions. There is, however, a lack of studies of young people's perceptions of the possessions of branded goods using qualitative methods of inquiry. This exploratory study attempts to fill this gap. As young consumers in Hong Kong have high awareness of fashion brands and durable brands (Chan, 2005), the current study explores young consumers' perceptions of someone who owns or does not own a lot of branded goods.

Method

Participants

The participants were 48 Chinese teenagers studying in forms one to seven of secondary schools (equivalent to U.S. education system grade seven to 12 and first year of university). Respondents were recruited through personal sources. There were 15 males and 33 females. Twenty-two of them were aged 13 to 17 and the remaining 26 were aged 18 to 19. Undergraduate students of Hong Kong Baptist University were trained to understand the objectives of this study and how to conduct the interviews.

Interviewers asked for verbal permission from the respondents' parents for those aged 13 to 17 to participate in this survey. The study was conducted in October 2005 at the participants' homes, or at the interviewers' homes. According to information from the interviewer, most of the participants came from lower to middle income classes.

Procedure

The current study replicates a similar drawing study for children in the context of Chinese culture conducted in Beijing (Chan, 2004). Each respondent was supplied with a piece of plain white A3 paper (size: 11.5 inches in height and 16 inches in width) and a black pencil. Each piece of paper had two blank boxes of equal size. On top of each box was a statement. On the left, "This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods". On the right, "This young person does not have a lot of branded goods".

The respondents were asked to draw what came to their mind for each of the two statements. The instructions were as follows: "I would like you to draw a young person with a lot of new and expensive branded goods in the left hand box, and a young person who does not have a lot of branded goods in the right hand box. It doesn't matter if it looks like a real person or not. It is more important that it fits the descriptions that I have just mentioned. There are no right or wrong drawings, and your drawings will not be graded. Do you understand?" After the drawing, the

interviewers thanked the respondents. The interviewers then conducted follow-up personal interviews with them. Four questions were asked: “Are these two persons happy?”, “Do they have friends?”, “What kind of persons are they?”, and “If you have a choice, which one do you want to be?” The drawing took approximately 15 minutes and the interview took about 15 to 20 minutes. The study was conducted in Cantonese (a dialect spoken in Hong Kong). The interviewers recorded the interviews and later transcribed them in Chinese. The author translated them into English. Transcriptions of interviews were analyzed question by question across interviews for dominant themes. These themes become the focus of this article.

Coding the drawings

A male university graduate employed as research assistant acted as coder. Visual components of objects and facial expressions of the human characters for both pictures were identified and coded. Twenty percent of the drawings were coded by the author independently. Inter-coder reliability for the visual components varied from 0.9 for handbag and shopping bag to 1.0 for all other visual items.

Results

Visual elements in the drawings

Table 1 summarizes the visual components in the drawings. Because of the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study, we did not analyse the

visual items by age group or by sex. The drawings showed differences between the two illustrations in terms of quantity of branded items. There were on average 5.0 brands on the left-hand side and 0.3 brands on the other side ($t = 7.6, p < 0.001$). The differences in terms of types of products and facial expressions were also noteworthy. Respondents paid high attention to the clothing, handbags, shoes, jewellery and eye glasses. The first picture on the left (corresponds to the statement “This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods”) was jammed with fashion brands. There were 43 pictures showing at least one branded item. One picture shows a dissection of a human brain with 26 brand names in it. Altogether 76 different brand names and brand identifications appeared 238 times in the drawings. Brands with the highest frequency of occurrence were LV, Gucci, Nike, Apple, Vivienne Westwood, Dior, Sony and Adidas. Fashion brands occurred more often than brands for consumer durables. New media such as iPod, MP3, PSP, DV, DC and computers occurred frequently in the first picture. Male respondents were more likely to include electronic goods, mobile phones and sportswear in the drawings (see Figure 1). Female respondents were more likely to include handbags, jewellery, shopping bags, and cheering in the drawings (see Figure 2). Five pictures had no brand at all. In three of these pictures, a pile of \$1000 dollar notes, dollar signs, and sparks were drawn to symbolize wealth. One picture showed a car and one picture showed a

person smiling.

[Table 1 about here]

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

The second picture on the right (corresponds to the statement “This young person does not have a lot of branded goods”) was quite empty. Forty-one pictures did not show any brand or any brand identification. The remaining seven pictures showed at least one branded item. Altogether 22 brands or brand identifications were drawn. Among these brands, seven were identified as fake products of fashion brands. Respondents either labelled them as fake or made minor changes in the brand names or brand logos, such as Adxxas and Nibe. No new media were drawn. Slippers, environmentally friendly bags, books, libraries, and sports equipments appeared only in the drawings corresponding to a person without many branded goods. Patches were drawn on clothes probably to emphasize thrift.

A total of forty-six out of 48 drawings corresponding to the statement “This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods” contained human figures. Twenty-two human figures showed smiling faces. For the 14 human figures that did not show smiling faces, ten did not have any recognizable facial expression, three did not have a face, and one was a young male with his mouth wide open. Six pictures

showed the presence of other human figures. Cheering and peer approval were shown in five pictures in the form of speech balloons, thought balloons or signage. Forty-six of 48 drawings that correspond to the statement “This young person does not have a lot of branded goods” contained human figures. Among these human figures, twenty-two of them showed a smiling face while twelve of them showed a sad or crying face. For the remaining 12 human figures, seven did not have any identifiable facial expression, three did not have a face, and two stood in strong wind with mouth wide open. Four pictures showed the presence of other human figures. Two of the pictures showed peer disapproval (see Figure 2). One showed family and peer approval for good academic performance, and one showed peers without recognisable facial expression.

The interviews

Possessions and happiness

Table 2 summarizes respondents’ responses to three of the four questions.

When asked whether the two young persons in the drawings were happy, twenty-three respondents perceived that both of them would be happy. Most of them perceived that the young person with a lot of branded goods was rich. They thought that s-he would be happy because of his/her material satisfaction (having a carefree life and everything s-he wants) and psychological gratification (sense of superiority

gained by showing off his/her wealth and being the focus of attention). Respondents believed that the young person without a lot of branded goods would be happy because of his/her psychological gratification attributed to his/her personality trait of content, excellent academic achievement, satisfying family relation and genuine friendship.

“The one with a lot of branded goods is happy because of her possessions of branded goods. She is proud of her possessions. She feels good about buying things all the time as shopping can satisfy her desire for branded goods. She is happy to show off her possessions to friends. The one without a lot of branded goods is happy because she doesn’t pursue possessions of branded goods. She enjoys spiritual satisfaction through reading and participation in cultural activities.” (Female, 16)

“The one with a lot of branded goods is happy because she is rich and her desires for possessions of branded goods are fully satisfied. The one without a lot of branded goods is happy because she has many friends. Although she is not affluent, she is close with her family and feels warm all the time. Therefore, she is happy.”
(Female, 13)

These quotes show that respondents perceived a link between possessions and happiness but at the same time perceived that happiness can come from sources other than possessions.

Sixteen respondents perceived that the young person with a lot of branded goods would be happy while the one without a lot of branded goods would be unhappy. Eight of them perceived that the young person with a few possessions was

poor. They thought that s-he would be unhappy because of his/her low living standard, his/her striving for survival, and unsatisfying social relations.

“The young person without a lot of branded goods is not happy. He doesn’t and can’t have the things (branded goods) that others have. He has little friends as people tend to ignore him. This makes him feel inferior.” (Male, 17)

Eight respondents perceived that the young person without a lot of branded goods would be happy while the one with a lot of new and expensive branded goods would be unhappy. Four of them thought that the one with lots of possessions would be unhappy because s-he could hardly have genuine friendship and fulfilment in all of his/her desires.

“I think the young person with a lot of new and expensive branded goods is not happy as she is not welcomed by others. Everybody hates her. People approach her just because they want to take advantage of her. Besides, I think branded goods are not necessary. The joy brought by possessions of branded goods is temporary. It does not last long.” (Female, 17)

“The desire for material is infinite. The one with lots of branded goods would keep buying in order to satisfy her new desires. The feeling of satisfaction could not last. Desire will emerge again in a moment. Finally s-he would be unhappy since s-he could never have all of the desires satisfied.” (Female, 19)

One respondent did not respond to the question directly. She stated her view about happiness.

“I don’t think owing branded goods will bring happiness. Happiness depends on many things such as relation with family, friendship and academic achievement.” (Female, 15)

Possessions and friends

When asked whether the two young persons in the drawing have friends, twenty participants perceived that the one with a lot of possessions would have friends, while the one with a few possessions would not. Respondents perceived that the first young person is attractive to friends as those friends could take advantage of him/her or share his/her prestigious image. Respondents also thought that the second young person would be despised and ignored by others.

“The young person with a lot of branded goods is rich. She can always buy snacks or little gifts for her friends and invite them to visit her house to play. Her friends will feel good and superior when being associated with her. Therefore she has more friends. The one without a lot of branded goods has few friends as people despise her and don’t like to play with her.” (Female, 13)

Fourteen respondents perceived that both persons would have a lot of friends. They thought that the young person without a lot of branded goods is friendly, approachable, and possessing many good personality traits.

“The one with a lot of branded goods is attractive because of his possessions. His possessions make others jealous. The one without a lot of branded goods is attractive because of his personality.”
(Male, 18)

Ten respondents reported that the second young person with few possessions

would have friends while the first young person with a lot of possessions would not.

They perceived that the negative personality traits of the first young person would drive away friends.

“Possessions mean wealth. Rich people are demanding, snobbish and calculative. They look down others with lower social status. The young person with less possession will have more friends as she is easygoing and approachable.” (Male, 19)

Three respondents did not respond to the question directly. They perceived a stronger link between friendship and personality than friendship and possessions. One respondent perceived that neither of them would have friends.

“I think having too much material possessions or too little will make them difficult to get along with.” (Female, 18)

This quote demonstrates a traditional Chinese wisdom of going for the middle and avoiding extremes.

More than one-third of the respondents reported that friends of the young person with lots of possessions are not genuine.

“I think many of those friends of the young person with a lot of branded goods are not genuine. They are fair-weather friends only. They intend to take advantage of that young person.” (Female, 19)

Possessions and personality traits

In response to the question “what kind of persons are they?” we collected a total

of 149 personality traits for the first young person and 134 personality traits for the second young person. Just the sheer number of personality traits reported gives us the impression that respondents have strong and vivid mental pictures that links possessions with personality. Table 3 summarizes the traits reported for the person with a lot of branded goods. Three quarters of the personality traits used to describe the young person with a lot of new and expensive branded goods were negative. S-he was perceived as arrogant, showy, spending extravagantly, vain, and superficial. In terms of social relations, s-he was perceived as self-centred and not easy to get along with. One-quarters of the personality traits reported were positive. S-he was perceived as having high self-esteem, cheerful and optimistic. Thirty-three out of 48 respondents reported negative personality traits only and nine respondents reported positive personality traits only. The remaining six respondents gave both positive as well as negative traits.

[Table 3 about here]

More than two-thirds of the personality traits used to describe the young person without a lot of branded goods were positive. Table 4 summarizes the traits reported. S-he was perceived as easygoing, friendly, simple, down-to-earth, and sincere. One-third of the personality traits reported were negative. S-he was perceived as inferior, inward and pessimistic. Thirty out of 48 respondents reported positive

personality traits only and nine respondents reported negative personality traits only.

The remaining nine respondents gave both positive as well as negative traits.

[Table 4 about here]

Aspiration for possessions

The last question asked the respondents which person she wants to be. This question attempts to measure their materialistic value orientation. Twenty-seven interviewees reported that they wanted to be the first one: i.e., the one with a lot of new and expensive branded goods. Most of the respondents reported that they want an easy, care-free and affluent life. Some respondents said that they enjoyed the higher status and the envy of others. Male respondents were more likely to report that they want to be someone with a lot of possessions than female respondents.

“I suppose everyone will want to enjoy an affluent life, with high living standards, quality products and services, lots of friends and a happy life.” (Male, 15)

“If you have branded goods, you will earn a lot of respect. People will not laugh at you. Branded goods make people pretty, like those movie stars. I want to become pretty and receive a lot of attention.” (Female, 17)

“I want to be the one with abundant possessions. People nowadays face many problems originates from the family, health, study, friendship and love. If we want to live a happy life, we need to cut down or reduce the sources of problems. Money plays a significant role. Although money can't do anything, but if you don't have money, you can do nothing. If you don't have money, your family may argue over financial issues. You can't get prompt medical treatment when

you are sick. There will be a lot of arguments with your friends and lovers. It is sad to link everything with money but unfortunately, this is the fact of life.” (Female, 17)

The first two quotes indicate that the respondents aspire to the lifestyles of wealthy people or to the benefits that possessions of branded goods can bring. The third quote indicates that the respondents put strong emphasis of the convenience of an affluent life.

Seventeen respondents (among them 15 girls) stated that they wanted to be the one without a lot of possessions. The reasons were that they didn't want to waste money or they place a higher priority on non-material goals, such as genuine friendship and a meaningful life.

“I wish to be the second one, because an ordinary person will have more real friends. This is more important than the vanity of possessions of branded goods. Worshipping brands are wasteful.” (Female, 19)

“The one with a lot of branded goods are often lost. They rely heavily on how others look at them. A person without a lot of branded goods is unique. They are happy in heart. They are independent and do not need to follow the trend. ” (Female, 19)

Discussion

This study attempts to explore young consumers' perceptions of people with or without possessions of branded goods using qualitative methods. The drawings of the

respondents indicate that respondents are highly brand conscious. The sheer number of brands they drew showed that they could recall a large number of brand names and their visual identifications without aids. They were knowledgeable about fashion brands and electronic consumable brands. Most of the brands they recalled were global brands. The high awareness of fashion brands may be attributed to a high proportion of female respondents in the sample.

The drawings identify two remarkable differentiations between those who have a lot of possessions of branded goods and those who have a few possessions. First, clothing and accessories, such as handbags and jewellery were most often used to differentiate between those who “have” and those who “have not”. These products share a common characteristic of having physical contacts with the body. It seems that young consumers perceive these products as extensions of their self-identities. The strong self-brand connection expressed in the drawings echoed findings in Chaplin and John’s (2005) study. In their study, clothing brands were selected by respondents aged 8 to 13 to be the easiest or most helpful product category to create and express one’s self-concept. Besides clothing, respondents indicated that electronic consumables are new and expensive branded goods while television sets are unbranded goods. New media only occurred in the drawings of a person with many possessions of branded goods. Slippers and clothing patches only occurred in the drawings of a person with

few possessions of branded goods. The occurrence of fake clothing brands indicates that respondents are aware of the illegal and fake products in the market. This may be due to the prevalence of pirated clothing made in mainland China and sold in Hong Kong. Respondents used cheering and disapproval in drawings to show the importance of peer pressure in evaluations of worth. Books and libraries occurred only in the drawings of a person without any branded goods. This result is similar to that found among Chinese children in Beijing that someone with a lot of toys would have poor academic results (Chan, 2004). It indicates that young consumers associate absence of branded goods with academic pursuit. In our interviews, some respondents mentioned that people who were fancy with branded goods would be distracted from school works. This indicates that possessions are perceived as rivals to study among Hong Kong adolescents. Because of the small sample size, it is difficult to generalize results obtained in the current study to a general youth population.

The second remarkable difference between a person who has a lot of branded goods and a person who has few was the emotion displayed by the facial expressions. None of the drawings of a person with a lot of branded goods showed a sad or crying face. About one quarter of the drawings of a person with few branded goods showed a sad or crying face. An analysis of the interviews yielded similar results. The current study found that respondents perceive people with a lot of branded goods as happy and

having more friends. The result was similar to Chan's (2004) study of Beijing children.

These results demonstrate that young consumers at the age of 13 to 19 were able to express the value of possessions based on emotional attachment and social meaning.

Possessions are important to respondents and to the way they perceive themselves and

others. So, the current study shows evidence to support John's (1999) model of

consumer socialization that hypothesizes children in the reflective stage understand

fully the value of possessions. When compared with a similar study of Hong Kong

children aged 6 to 13 (---, forthcoming), the current study reveals that young people in

the reflective stage differ significantly from children in the perceptual and analytical

stages on the complexity of the perceived relationship between possessions of branded

goods, social meaning and significance. Younger children were found to be

single-minded and direct. They perceived that more possessions would mean more fun,

more friends and higher self-esteem (---, forthcoming). Respondents in the reflective

stage in this study perceived a more complex relationship between possessions of

branded goods and its social and symbolic significance. They perceived that

possessions could bring them fun and friends. However, the fun can be short-termed

and the type of friends possessions attract may not be genuine. A majority of

respondents demonstrated a distinction between happiness that stemmed from

possessions and from social relations.

Results of the interviews showed that respondents' perceptions of personality traits of a person with or without possessions were very different. A person with many branded goods was associated with negative personality traits, such as arrogance, wasteful and self-centeredness. The positive personality traits associated with a person with branded goods were high self-esteem and positive attitudes toward life. On the other hand, respondents associated a person without many branded goods with positive personality traits, such as nice and down-to-earth. The negative personality traits associated with a person without branded goods were lack of self-esteem. The result was in sharp contrast to children's idealized perception of wealthy people reported by Mistry (2000).

We think that the perceived negative personality traits of wealthy people are due to three reasons. First, branded goods are perceived to be used mainly for showing off and boasting about. By adopting goods as status symbols, it will create a distance between the two parties involved in social comparison. The one who doesn't own the possessions will see the other as arrogant. The one who owns the possessions will see himself/herself worthy. As our sample mainly came from the lower social economic class, they are more likely to be those without many branded goods. Second, creative advertising strategy often establishes a link between branded goods and self-confidence. Typical advertising copy always stresses that owning the product will

make you stand out from the crowd, receive respect from others, and invites an envious look. Third, we think that it can be attributed to the Chinese culture. China is an impoverished country where saving is treasured over spending (McNeal and Yeh, 2003). Chinese parents are frugal and spending on luxurious goods is discouraged (Chan, 2002). So people spend a lot on branded goods will be seen as wasteful. We hypothesize that Chinese parents play a dominant role in discouraging materialistic values and teach young consumers that abundant possessions of branded goods are linked with wastefulness. Further research is needed to explore the sources of influence of young people's perception of possessions of branded goods.

In terms of materialistic value orientation, a majority expressed that they want to live an easy life with high living standard. The finding shows that young Chinese consumers had mixed feelings toward possessions of branded goods. They are attracted by the lust of owning branded goods but at the same time, have negative perceptions of people who own a lot of branded goods. Using an Aesop's Fables metaphor, branded goods sound like "sour grapes".

To global marketers and brand managers, the current study demonstrated that their advertising effort seems to be well-received among the young people in Hong Kong. Branded awareness and aspiration of owning branded goods are generally high. They should be sensitive to the negative association of branded goods with arrogance

and wastefulness. They should consider employing public relations and event management skills to communicate the friendliness of branded goods owners.

Based on the findings of the current study and Chan's (2004) study, we propose the following model of consumer socialization for children. In all three stages of social-cognitive development, children have some understanding of the value of possessions based on emotional attachment, social significance and inference on personality traits. During the perceptual stage, children place a lot of emphasis on surface features, such as quantity of possessions. They perceive that possessions are closely connected with happiness and ability to attract friends. During the analytical and reflective stages, children develop a complex perception about possessions, and its social significance and symbolic meaning. Possessions of branded goods are perceived as both good and evil. Depending on the culture, children and young consumers will develop certain shared beliefs of possessions of branded goods.

Based on the findings of this study, we propose the following hypotheses that can be tested in a quantitative study:

H1: Young people perceive a person with a lot of possessions different from a person without possessions in their ownership of luxurious or branded goods.

H2: Young people perceive a person with a lot of possessions different from a person without possessions in their leisure activities and academic achievements.

H3: Young people perceive a person with a lot of possessions different from a person without possessions in their personality traits.

It is expected that data collected through a quantitative survey should be helpful to investigate the link between possessions of branded goods and its social implications and consequences.

The current study has a weakness in the research design. It would be better controlled if half the respondents at each age group complete the drawing of a young person with very few branded goods first, followed by the drawing of a young person with a lot of branded goods. This will eliminate the possible bias due to ordering of stimulus.

Table 1 Visual components in drawings

	Frequency		Frequency
“This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods”		“This young person does not have a lot of branded goods”	
Clothing	42	Clothing	41
Shoes	37	Smiling face	22
Jewellery	34	Handbag	17
Smiling face	32	Sad / crying face	12
Handbag	30	Slippers	6
Belt, hat, mobile phone string	25	Book	4
Watch	15	Fake branded clothing	4
Mobile phone	14	Mobile phone	3
iPod	11	Price tag	3
Eye glasses	10	Sports equipment	3
PSP	7	TV set	3
Shopping bag, mall	6	Disapproval	2
Cheers	5	Dollar sign	2
Car, motorcycle	3	Environmentally friendly shopping bag	2
Price tag	3	Library	2
Computer	2	Patch	2
Dollar sign	2		
DV, DC	2		
MP3	2		

Table 2 Summary of the interviews

Response to questions	Male (n=15)	Female (n=33)	Total (n=48)
Are they happy?			
A* is happy	8	8	16
B* is happy	2	6	8
Both are happy	5	18	23
Both are not happy	0	0	0
Don't know	0	1	1
Do they have friends?			
A has more friends	9	11	20
B has more friends	3	7	10
Both have friends	2	12	14
Both have few friends	0	1	1
Don't know	1	2	3
Which one do you want to be?			
A	12	15	27
B	2	15	17
Both	0	1	1
Neither	0	2	2
Don't know	1	0	1

**Note:* A refers to a young person with a lot of new and expensive branded goods;
 B refers to a young person without a lot of branded goods;
 Coded from open-ended questions.

Table 3 Personality profile of a person with a lot of new and expensive branded goods

Positive traits	Frequency	Negative traits	Frequency
High self-esteem, confident	12	Arrogant	40
Cheerful	6	Showy	7
Optimistic	4	Spend extravagantly	5
Active	2	Vain	5
Sociable	2	Following trend	4
Easy-going	1	Self-centred	4
Generous	1	Snobbish	4
Helpful	1	Swollen	4
High class	1	Seeking a life of pleasure	3
Love to read	1	Selfish	3
Naïve	1	Calculative	2
Outward	1	Dominating	2
Quiet	1	Lazy	2
Sensitive	1	Love "face"	2
Smart	1	Mean	2
Total	36	Superficial	2
		Unable to take care of oneself	2
		Unsociable	2
		Aggressive	1
		Bad manner	1
		Bad-tempered	1
		Crafty	1
		Discontent	1
		High sounding	1
		Inferior	1
		Love being accommodated	1
		Not caring	1
		Not practical	1
		Not respecting others	1
		Not sympathetic	1
		Picky	1
		Self-indulge	1
		Self-satisfied	1
		Short-sighted	1
		Unfriendly	1
		Ungrateful	1
		Total	113

Note: Classified by the author

Table 4 Personality profile of a person without a lot of branded goods

Positive traits	Frequency	Negative traits	Frequency
Easygoing	11	Inferior	11
Approachable, friendly	8	Inward	6
Cheerful	8	Pessimistic	5
Down-to-earth	8	Unsociable	3
Simple	8	Glum	2
Sincere	6	Jealous	2
Thrift	5	Coward	1
Hardworking	4	Greedy	1
Nice	4	Lonely	1
Optimistic	4	Old fashion	1
Caring, helpful	3	Passive	1
Active	2	Vain	1
Detail minded	2	Total	34
Good manner	2		
Obedient and proper	2		
Outward	2		
Quiet	2		
Sympathetic	2		
Accommodating	1		
Careful	1		
Content	1		
Enjoy shopping	1		
Fair	1		
Filially pious	1		
Forth sighted	1		
Humorous	1		
Independent	1		
Naïve	1		
Positive	1		
Responsible	1		
Sociable	1		
Strong	1		
Study hard	1		
Talkative	1		
Unique	1		
Total	100		

Note: Classified by the author

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Figure 1 This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods

This young person does not have a lot of branded goods



Age: 18 Sex: M

Figure 2 This young person has a lot of new and expensive branded goods

This young person does not have a lot of branded goods



Age: 16 Sex: F