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Exploring children's perceptions of material possessions: a drawing study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to explore children's perceptions of material possessions in Hong Kong using drawing and open-ended questions.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 42 Chinese children aged 6-12 were asked to draw what comes to their minds for two statements: "This child has a lot of new and expensive toys"; and, "This child does not have a lot of toys." After drawing, children were personally interviewed to answer four questions associating material possessions with its social meaning and symbolic significance.

Findings – Analysis of drawings and interviews indicated that there were significant difference in children's perception of someone with a lot of toys and someone without many toys in terms of observable qualities and personality traits. Younger children were more likely to relate material possessions with happiness, friendship, and feeling good about oneself. Older children were more likely to relate materialistic possessions with wastefulness. There is evidence that young children were able to appreciate the value of possessions based on emotional attachment, personality association and social meaning. It was contradictory to John's model of consumer socialization that young children could only understand the surface value of possessions.

Research limitations/implications – Based on the findings, this paper proposed three hypotheses about children's perception of material possessions that can be further tested in a quantitative survey.

Originality/value – The paper may be of value to markets and advertisers who target at Chinese children. They should be sensitive to children's negative association of material possessions including wasteful and showing off. They can encourage the instrumental materialism of how to use material goods to protect the Earth's resources, to enhance friendship, and to achieve self-defining goals.

Keywords Children (age groups), Children (kinship), Cognition, Socialization, Consumerism, Hong Kong

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Advertising today penetrates into the life of every person, including children. Because of the enormous purchasing power of the children and their parents in many developed countries, the children's market is important to advertisers. According to [McNeal \(1998\)](#), the marketing efforts put to children aged 4-12 made the expenditures and purchase influence of this age group doubled in the last ten years. Increasing stress to differentiate children who "have" from children who "have not" may sometimes be so strong that children 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 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 preference 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-fulfilment among US high school students from the early 1970s through the 1980s (Easterlin and Crimmins, 1991). Research findings indicate that television viewing is positively related with endorsement of materialistic values among children (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Kapferer, 1986). Influence of other factors that include age and socioeconomic status, did not have consistent results (John, 1999).

Despite the interest in understanding more about materialism, there is a lack of research to examine the relationship between children's social-cognitive development and consumption values, such as materialism (John, 1999). One of the key factors that affect children's development of materialistic values will be their perception of materialistic possessions. How do children perceive people with or without material possessions? What is the perceived association between material possessions and personality traits? Do children want to be like those with a lot of material possessions when they grow up? This study attempts to examine children's perceptions about material possessions and their materialistic value orientation. The study adopts John's (1999) model of consumer socialization of children. This model suggests that children in different ages adopt different consumption motives and values.

Hong Kong is an ideal place for the study of consumer socialization because it is an affluent city, with abundant advertisements. Wealth is highly visible and many brand-name products are readily available. This study is of major interest to both marketers and to public policy makers. Marketers are keen to know if their advertising is effective, while policy makers are concerned with protecting the interests of the children. This study is particularly important as there is a paucity of empirical evidence on this topic within the context of children from Asian cultures. This is quite surprising, especially at a time when marketing academics are making continuous pleas for international studies on marketing concepts and consumer behaviors (Lee and Green, 1991).

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 3-7), the value of possessions is based on surface features, such as having more of anything. During the analytical stage (ages 7-11), 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 4-5) were divided into three groups. One group saw an advertisement for a new toy twice in one television program while another group saw the ad once each day for two days. A third group is the

control group that did not see the ad. It was found that participants exposed to the ad were more likely to choose a hypothetical playmate who was “not so nice” but own a new toy, than a playmate who is “very nice” but did not own such a toy (Goldberg and Gorn, 1974). Children were also asked to choose between two play situations: either playing alone with the new toy, or playing in a sandbox with friends. Again, participants exposed to the ad were more likely to choose playing with the new toy than participants in the control group. The study demonstrated that children in very young age can value the possession of material goods, and accessing a new toy could often be favored over playing with friends.

In a study of reasons for hobby collecting among first and fifth graders, it was found that the younger appreciated collecting as it made them feel that they own more than others. Older children appreciated collecting as a way of making themselves unique and as 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 11, children were moving into the analytical stage. They would systematically place value on material possessions to help them develop social relations, achieve social status, and attain self-fulfillment.

Leahy (1981) asked 720 children and adolescents aged 5-18 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 rich and poor people differ in observable qualities as well as in personality traits. Mistry (2000) asked 260 children aged 7-13 about what it means to be rich or poor, and how 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 material possessions, 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- and middle-class adolescents on perception of people owning or lacking expensive possessions. Results indicated that both working- 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 5-14 found that even at early ages, children hold popular prejudices about wealth and poverty. For example, the imagined poor children were perceived to be isolated and being rejected. The imagined middle class children were perceived to be clean, conforming to rules and having good manner.

Another survey of 102 children aged 7-17 found that the concepts of possession become 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. Attitudes towards theft become

harsher among older children, because possessions were closely associated with self-concept for these older children (Furnham and Jones, 1987).

Seeing the importance of the concept of materialism and materialistic values in consumer socialization, many scholars have developed psychological scales to measure materialism. For example, a youth materialism scale was developed with ten items like "When you grow up, the more money you have, and, the happier you are" (Goldberg *et al.*, 2003). Chan (2003) conducted a survey of 246 grade two to six children in Hong Kong using a children materialism scale with 14 items like "I like to compare myself with my friends to see who's got more toys." A survey of 256 children aged 6-13 in Beijing was conducted using the same materialism scale (Chan, 2005). In both studies, it is found that even the youngest children aged six to seven in Hong Kong and Beijing showed an understanding of value of possessions based on social significance. Hong Kong children were found to be more materialistic than children in Beijing. The data support the notion that materialism is more prevalent in an affluent society than in an economically developing society.

The current study uses a drawing method to explore children's perception of possessions. Asking children 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 children (Goodenough, 1926; Jolley and Thomas, 1995; Levy, 1950; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). More recently, researchers have used children's drawing to study their 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 children will draw what they value; what they like; and, what they favor (Dennis, 1966; Golomb, 2004) and that children can better express what is in their minds using visual drawings than they can with words (Cox, 1992).

In conclusion, the review of literature demonstrates that children understand the concept of possessions and value possessions from a very young age. These concepts of materialism consist 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 a lack of study of children's perceptions of material possessions using qualitative method of inquiry. This exploratory study attempts to fill this gap. As children are most familiar with toy possessions, the current study explores children's perceptions of someone who owns or does not own a lot of toys.

Method

Participants

The participants were 42 grade 1-6 Chinese children recruited through personal sources. There were 20 boys and 22 girls, with 15, 13 and 14 children in the age range of 6-8, 9-10 and 11-12, respectively. According to information from the interviewers, most of the participants came from lower to middle income class. The study was conducted in Cantonese (a dialect spoken in Hong Kong). 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 children's

parents to participate in this survey. The study was conducted in October 2004 at the participants' homes, or at the interviewers' homes.

Procedure

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

The children were asked to draw what comes to their mind for each of these two statements. The instructions were as follows:

I would like you to draw a child with a lot of new and expensive toys on the left hand box, and a child without many toys on the right hand box. It doesn't matter if it looks like a real child 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 children. The interviewers then conducted follow-up personal interviews with them. Four questions were asked: "Are these two children happy?", "Do they have friends?", "Do they feel good about themselves?", and "If you have a choice, which one do you want to be?" The drawing took about 15 minutes and the interview took about ten minutes. 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 paper.

Coding the drawings

The author and a female university graduate employed as research assistant acted as coders and each code the drawings independently. About 28 visual components of objects and facial expressions of the human characters for both pictures were identified and coded. Inter-coder reliability for the 28 visual components varied from 0.93 for media character to 1.0 for 18 visual components.

Results

Visual elements in the drawings

The drawings showed significant differences between the two illustrations in terms of quantity of toys and facial expressions. The first picture on the left (corresponds to the statement "This child has a lot of new and expensive toys") was jammed with toys and games (Figure 1). Table I summarizes the visual components in the drawings. There were 37 pictures showing at least one toy. On average, there were five toys or play items. Only one drawing carried branded items. It was a pair of Nike shoes and a "Bathing Abe" T-shirt drawn by a ten-year old girl. Six media characters, including Superman and Pokemons, were drawn. Four children included price tags in the drawing. The price ranged from \$50 (about seven US dollars) for a flower to \$10,290 (about 1,300 US dollars) for a teddy bear. Gameboys, remote control toys, and playstations occurred most frequently in the first picture. Gameboys and playstations, occurred evenly in boys' as well as girls' pictures. Boys were more likely to include trains, guns, swords, tankers, robots, videogames, and CD-ROMs in the drawings. Girls

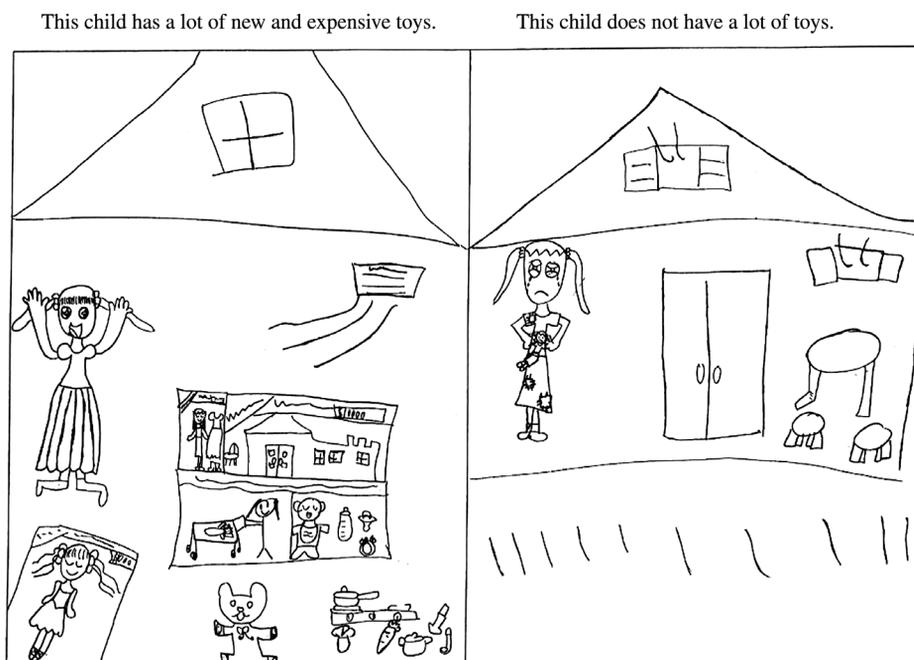


Figure 1.

were more likely to include stuffed animals and dolls in the drawings. Five pictures had no toys at all. Four of these pictures showed a child with a happy face. One picture showed a bus passing by the signage of a shopping mall.

The second picture on the right (corresponds to the statement "This child does not have a lot of toys") was quite empty. About 13 pictures showed the absence of any toy or play items. The remaining 23 pictures showed at least one toy. On average, there were two toys or play items. Toys included stuffed animals, toy cars, kites, balls, small rice bags, chess games, jumping ropes, and slingshots. None of these pictures contained gameboys, remote control toys or videogames. Two pictures carried branded items. A boy drew a Barbie doll and a girl drew a Welcome supermarket bag. Two children included price tags in the drawing. The prices ranged from nine dollars (about one US dollar) for a plane, to ten dollar for a boat. No media characters were drawn. Patches were drawn, mainly by older children, on clothes or toys in eight pictures.

Of the drawings, 35 out of 42 corresponded to the statement "This child has a lot of new and expensive toys" contained human figures. All except two of the human figures showed smiling faces. For the two human figures that did not show smiling faces, one was a boy who seemed to be pretty excited by his surrounding toys, with the mouth wide open. The other picture showed a boy whistling. Of the drawings, 35 out of 42 that correspond to the statement "This child does not have a lot of toys" contained human figures. Two human figures did not have any identifiable facial expression. For the remaining 33 pictures, 12 showed a sad face and ten showed a crying face. A total of 11 showed a smiling face. Girls were much more likely to draw a crying face while boys were more likely to draw a sad face. Figure 1 shows a typical drawing by a girl aged 11-12.

Visual component	Total (n = 42)	6-8 (n = 15)	Age	
			9-10 (n = 13)	11-12 (n = 14)
<i>This child has a lot of new and expensive toys</i>				
Happy face	33	14	9	10
Gameboy	10	0	6	4
Remote control toy	9	1	7	1
Playstation	7	1	5	1
Media character	6	4	1	1
Computer	5	0	2	3
Price tag	4	4	0	0
CD, VCD, videogame	4	0	3	1
Friend	2	2	0	0
Speech balloon	2	0	0	2
Brand name	1	0	1	0
Musical instrument	1	1	0	0
Stationery	1	0	1	0
<i>This child does not have a lot of toys</i>				
Sad face	12	5	4	3
Smiling face	11	4	4	3
Crying face	10	3	2	5
Patches on clothes	5	1	1	3
Patches on toys	4	1	1	2
Musical instrument	4	1	2	1
Book	4	1	1	2
Tree/grass	3	1	1	1
Stationery	3	1	0	2
Brand name	2	1	0	1
Crossing out possession	2	0	1	1
Price tag	2	2	0	0
Speech balloon	2	0	0	2
Friend	1	1	0	0
Computer	1	1	0	0

Table I.
Visual components in
children's drawings

Most of these drawings showed that the children were playing alone in both boxes. One picture showed two playmates in both boxes. One picture showed a playmate on the left hand side but no playmate on the right hand side. Two pictures carried speech balloons on both sides. These two pictures were both drawn by girls aged 11-12. In one picture (Figure 2), a girl on the left hand side said "Mom, I want new toys again." A speech balloon from a person not shown in the picture responded "OK! OK! OK! I'll go and buy it right now." On the right hand side, a television set was announcing, "Introducing the newest toy that both adults and children will love! Available in all Toys R us shops now." A girl with tears said, "Mom, I want to buy toys." A speech balloon from a person not shown in the pictures responded "Bad girl, there is no money." In another picture, there was a couple on the right hand side. The wife said, "When I was young, I didn't have a lot of toys. But now I am wealthy." The husband said, "You don't need to be so boastful!" On the left hand side, the wife cried and said, "The children now are so fortunate. When I was young, we didn't have these kinds of toys." The husband said, "I will probably work as a slave for my wife for the rest of my life."

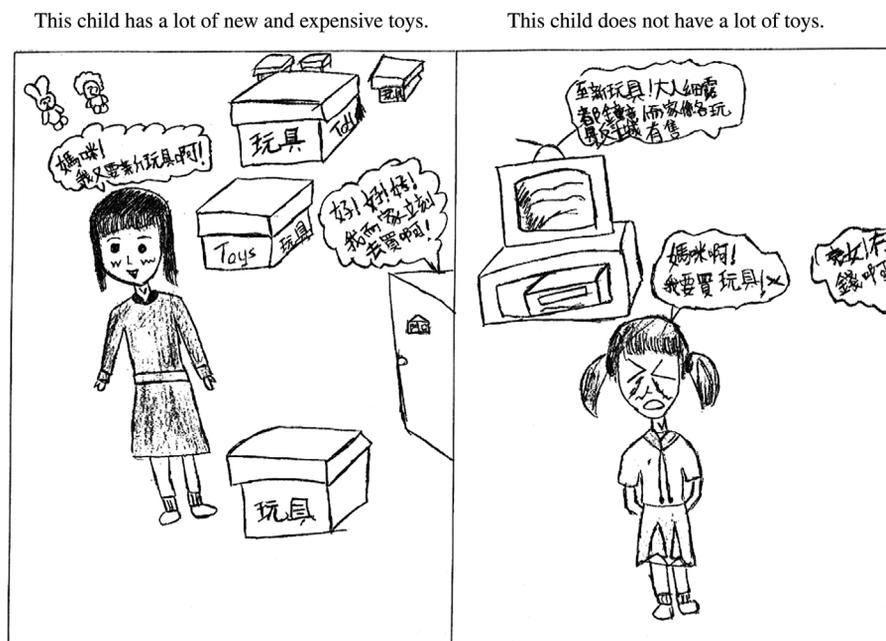


Figure 2.

The interviews

Possessions and happiness. Table II summarizes participants' responses to the four questions. When asked whether the two children in the drawings were happy, nearly two third of participants perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be happy while the child with a few possessions would be unhappy:

The first child is happy because he has a lot of toys. He can play different toys everyday. The second one is not happy because he has very few toys. He always plays with the old stuff (Boy, 9-10).

Of the participants, 13 perceived that both of them would be happy. They perceived that a child with a few possessions would get pleasure from other means, such as going to the park, playing with friends, drawing pictures, or reading books:

I think both of them are happy. The first kid can play with friends. The second child can read books and draw pictures (Girl, 6-8).

I think both of them are happy. The first kid has many toys and he won't feel bored. The second one is happy because he can go to play at the park (Boy, 9-10).

Two children perceived that both would be unhappy:

The child with a lot of toys will be unhappy. As she gets more and more toys, she will be tired of playing toys. Life is becoming meaningless. The child with no toy is not happy because her mom refuses to buy toys for her. She soon gets bored at home (Girl, 11-12).

Both of them will be unhappy. The child with a lot of toys will desire more toys. The child without toy will be unhappy because of no toy (Girl, 11-12).

Response to questions	Total (n = 42)	6-8 (n = 15)	9-10 (n = 13)	11-12 (n = 14)
<i>Are they happy?</i>				
First child ^a is happy	27	10	9	8
Second child ^a is happy	0	0	0	0
Both are happy	13	5	4	4
Both are not happy	2	0	0	2
<i>Do they have friends?</i>				
First child has more friends	19	8	8	3
Second child has more friends	8	1	3	4
Both have friends	13	6	2	5
Both have a few friends	2	0	0	2
<i>Do they feel good about themselves?</i>				
First child does	22	9	5	8
Second child does	1	1	0	0
Both do	18	4	8	6
Both do not	0	0	0	0
Neither proud of nor inferior	1	1	0	0
<i>Which child do you want to be?</i>				
First child	28	12	8	8
Second child	10	3	4	3
Both	1	0	1	0
Neither	3	0	0	3

Table II.
Summary of interviews

Notes: ^aFirst child refers to a child with a lot of new and experience toys; second child refers to a child without a lot of toys

Possessions and friends. When being asked whether the two children in the drawing have friends, 19 participants perceived that the first child with a lot of possessions would have many friends, while the second one with a few possessions would not. Participants perceived that toys mean fun and friends are looking for fun. Meaning a child with more toys will attract more friends:

Children like to play with the first kid, because they are very curious about new things. Also, the first child will be energetic and active. The second one with fewer toys enjoys some quiet activities like collecting stamps, reading and playing piano alone (Boy, 9-10).

Of the participants, 13 perceived that both children would have a lot of friends because they were both willing to share toys with friends. Eight participants reported that the child with few possessions would have more friends. They perceived that the child with many possessions would be self-centered and would look down on others. Also, his friends would hardly keep up with all of the new toys that he had. The child with few possessions would have many friends because s-he was kind, sensible, and modest:

The first kid doesn't have many friends. She is afraid that her friends may break the toys. So, she doesn't allow them to play with her toys. The second one has more friends, because she is willing to share toys with others (Girl, 6-8).

The second kid has more friends. The first one always plays alone at home and seldom makes contacts with other children. The second kid often goes out and makes friends (Boy, 9-10).

Two participants perceived that both of them would have few friends:

Both of them have few friends. The first child is overbearing and arrogant. The second child has few toys and friends do not like to play with him (Boy, 11-12).

Both of them have few friends. The first child always plays with toys alone at home. The second child does not have money to go out and play with friend (Girl, 11-12).

The link between possessions and friends seems to be stronger among younger children. Older children appreciate more complex states of mind, and perceive that friendship depends less on possessions and more on personality.

Possessions and self esteem. When being asked whether the two children in the drawings feel good about themselves, 22 participants perceived that the first child would feel good about himself/herself, while the second one would not:

The first one feels good about himself because he can share toys with friends. He looks like a big brother. The second one does not because he has few toys. He has no contribution among friends as he has no toy to share with others (Boy, 6-8).

Of the participants, 18 perceived that both children would feel good about themselves. The first child would be proud of his wealth while the second child would be proud of his good academic results, friends and health:

Both of them feel good about themselves. The first kid with many toys got many friends. So, his life is very excited. The second one spends more time on study and obtains good academic results (Boy, 9-10).

Both of them are proud of themselves. Because the first child is proud of his money and toys, and the second child is proud of having many friends (Girl, 9-10).

Both of them feel proud of themselves. The first kid can boast about his toys while the second one is proud of his health (Boy, 11-12).

Only one respondent indicated that the second child would be proud of herself while the first child would not. One respondent perceived that both children would neither feel good nor bad about himself/herself. Perceptions about self-esteem were similar among younger and older children:

The second one is proud of herself because he does well in music and computer. The first one is not because he knows nothing other than play (Boy, 6-8).

Aspiration for possessions. The last question asked the participants which child s-he wants to be. This question measures children's value orientation. Of the participants, 28 out of the 42 participants reported that they wanted to be the first one: i.e. the one with a lot of possessions:

I wish to be the first one because he is very happy. Many friends come and play with him (Boy, 6-8).

Ten participants stated that they wanted to be the second child with few toys. The reasons were that they did not want to waste money, they wanted to have friends, and they wanted to spend more time on music and books.

I wish to be the second one, because if you have too many toys, it becomes not much fun. But if you only have one piece of toy, you will cherish it a lot and be happy (Boy, 9-10).

I want to be the second child because she has a lot of good friends. Friends are most important (Girl, 11-12).

Three of the participants wanted to be neither of the two children. The remaining one respondent was ambitious. She wanted to have the good qualities of both children:

I don't want to be either of them. The first child doesn't have friends and the second child doesn't have toys (Girl, 11-12).

I don't want to be either one. Having enough toys is good. Only greedy child wants more new and expensive toys (Boy, 11-12).

Younger participants were more likely to report that they wanted to be the child with a lot of possessions. Older participants were more likely to choose neither one.

Discussion

This study on children's drawings identifies two remarkable differentiations between those who have a lot of material possessions and those who have a few possessions. First, they differed in types of possessions. Children identified that remote control toys, gameboys, videogames, and computers are new and expensive toys while balls, chess games, and slingshots are inexpensive toys. Media characters only occurred in the drawings of a child with many material possessions and patches only occurred in the drawings of a child with few material possessions. Patches on clothes, and on toys, indicated that children want to emphasize thrift. Young children use price tags showed not only an understanding of the quantity of toys but also the importance of price in evaluations of worth. Children with few toys do not have just one good or expensive item. Quantity and quality of toys seem linked even at young age. The other remarkable difference between children who have a lot of material possessions and children who have few was the emotion displayed by the facial expressions. None of the drawings of a child with a lot of material possessions showed a sad or crying face. About half of the drawings of a child with few material possessions showed a sad or crying face. An analysis of the interviews yielded similar results. Similar to [Chan's \(2004\)](#) study of Beijing children, the current study found that children with a lot of possessions were perceived to be happy, having more friends, and feeling good about themselves. These results demonstrate that children, even at very young ages, were able to express the value of possessions based on emotional attachment (having fun), social meaning (ability to attract friends), and personality association (willing to share). Possessions are important to children and to the way they perceive themselves and others. So, both studies show evidence to question John's (1999) model of consumer socialization that hypothesizes children in the perceptual stage will only understand the surface value of possessions such as having more of something.

The analysis of drawings suggests that there are age differentiations between the drawings of older and younger children. Price tags and media characters were more likely to occur in drawings of younger children while speech balloons, patches and computers were more likely to occur in drawings of older children.

The analysis of interviews reveals that children in the perceptual stage differ significantly from children in the analytical and reflective stages on the complexity of the perceived relationship between material possessions and social meaning and significance. Younger children were single-minded and direct. They perceived that

more possessions would mean more fun, more friends and higher self-esteem. Older children perceived a more complex relationship between material possessions and its social and symbolic significance. They perceived that more possessions could bring them more fun and more friends. However, these very same possessions could also lead to selfishness, greed and arrogance. Three children aged 11-12 specifically mentioned that the child with a lot of toys would show off and boast about their possessions. Some children perceived that having a lot of toys was wasteful and mean, not treasuring what they had. There was a sharp drop in number of older children who perceive that the first child will have more friends.

Younger children appeared to idealize wealth, while older children displayed some unfavorable evaluation of personality of the child with a lot of possessions. The result was similar to children's perception about rich and poor people reported by Mistry (2000).

When compared the findings of the current study with that reported in Chan's (2004) study, we found much similarities in Hong Kong and Beijing children's perceptions of material possessions and its association with fun and friendship. However, unlike Chan's (2004) study, the current study did not find Hong Kong children associating toy possessions with poor academic performance. This indicates that toys are not perceived as rivals to study among Hong Kong children. Because of the small sample size, it is difficult to generalize results obtained in the current study to a general children population.

The findings in this study and Chan's (2004) study seem to differ in many significant ways from John (1999) model of consumer socialization. We think that part of it could 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 are discouraged (Chan, 2002). We hypothesize that Chinese parents play a dominant role in discouraging materialistic values and teach children that abundant material possessions are linked with wastefulness. Further research is needed to explore the sources of influence of children's perception of material possessions.

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. Depending on the culture, children will develop positive or negative associations of material possessions.

While the drawing part of the study reveals children's perception of material possessions, the interviewing part of the study reveals children's materialistic orientation. Younger children were more likely to report that they wanted to be the child with a lot of possessions more than the older children. So, younger children seem to be more materialistic. These findings are consistent with results reported in a previous survey of Chinese children in Hong Kong that younger children were more materialistic (Chan, 2003). Chan (2003) attributed this to consumer dissatisfaction with

possessions among older children, and the understanding of the value of possessions that goes beyond quantity. Results obtained in the current study provide us with another explanation. As older children are more likely to attach negative connotations to material possessions, they will be discouraged from endorsing materialistic values.

In view of the strong perception that owning a lot of toys is wasteful, and is related with showing off, these concepts should be explored further in the study of materialism of children in the Chinese context. Statements such as “owning a lot of toys will be wasteful” and “owning a lot of toys will make a child boast” should be added in future studies of children’s advertising and consumerism.

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

- H1. Children perceive a child with a lot of toys differ from a child without toys in their types of possessions.
- H2. Children perceive a child with a lot of toys differ from a child without toys in their leisure activities.
- H3. Children perceive a child with a lot of toys differ from a child without toys in their personality traits.

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

The current study has a weakness in the research design. It would be better controlled if half the children at each age group complete the drawing of a child with very few toys first, followed by the drawing of a child with a lot of toys.

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