

## PERCEPTION OF MATERIAL POSSESSIONS AND PERSONALITY TRAITS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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A study was conducted to measure perceived personality traits associated with someone described as owning many or few material possessions. Altogether 469 Chinese adolescents aged 15 to 20 were surveyed using a random sampling of secondary schools and a self-administered questionnaire. Respondents saw photos and read vignette of a person described as having a lot of or few material possessions. They then imagined personal characteristics of such a person. Results indicated that a person with a lot of possessions was more likely to be imagined as spending irresponsibly, selfish and envious of others. Respondents were more likely to perceive a person without a lot of possessions as hardworking, care about others, willing to serve and with good academic results. Seventeen percent of the respondents said they would prefer to be the person with many possessions. The marketing implication is that marketers should be sensitive to the perceived link between possessions and negative personal characteristics of the owner.

**Keywords:** Materialism, Consumer psychology, Perceptions, Adolescents, Macao.

### Introduction

Materialism is defined as the degree to which a person believes that the acquisition and possession of material objects are important to happiness in life or are indicators of success (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Young people often use material possessions as an expression of the extended self (Belk, 1988), and the adoption of materialistic values affects the balance between the private and public choices that they make throughout life (Goldberg et al., 2003). While some may view materialism as a positive value, others suggest that it is undesirable and induced in part by advertising (John, 1999). In our opinion, materialism is a negative value because it works against interpersonal relationships and it is negatively associated with happiness and subjective perceptions of well being (Kasser, 2002). High levels of materialism have been found to create tension between the individual's orientation toward material possessions and a collective orientation toward family and religious values (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002).

The values of consumers and marketers are defined by their cultures (De Mooij, 2004). Many scholars argue that consumption values in China are different from those in Western societies because of Chinese culture's long-standing concern for family and human relations (Zhao, 1997). Traditional Chinese culture values thrift, filial piety, group orientation, social harmony, good manners, "face", and academic achievement (Chan and McNeal, 2003; Yau, 1988). Hu (1944) has analyzed the Chinese concept of face into *lien* (or moral face) that represents one's moral character, and *mianzi* (or social face)

that describes status and success. Valuing *mianzi* will encourage owning symbolic goods which improve personal visibility within the social hierarchy (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). The collective emphasis of Chinese culture encourages the use of material possessions to establish long-term social relations with significant persons.

Macao, China was selected for this study. Macao is a former Portuguese colony and becomes a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China since 1999. It is located between Hong Kong SAR and the Guangdong province of mainland China. Macao is a small city with an area of 30 square km. and a population of 0.5 million. Macao's population is 96 percent Chinese, primarily Cantonese from nearby Guangdong Province. The remainders are of Portuguese or mixed Chinese-Portuguese ancestry. The official languages are Portuguese and Chinese (Cantonese). English is spoken in tourist areas.

Macao is now the world's biggest gaming market. Casinos' gaming revenue surpassed that of Las Vegas in 2006 (Reuters, 2007). Macao is the only place in China where Casino gambling is legal (Chan, 2003). The gaming and tourism sector contributed to 62.9 percent of Macao's GDP in 2015 (Statistics and Census Service, 2016). The influx of tourists and the expanding gaming facilities bring the potential threat of materialism and the erosion of traditional family values. For example, some parents worried that their children were not motivated to pursue university study as the pay for university graduates was not as appealing as jobs offered at the casinos.

In the Western context, scholars have found that adolescents tend to perceive wealthy people to be intelligent and hard-working, while poor people tend to be perceived as lazy and lacking in skills (Dittmar, 1992). However, recent studies of Chinese children and young people have demonstrated different results. These studies have consistently found that other children who own lots of toys or branded goods were perceived as being wasteful and as achieving poor academic results (Chan, 2004a; 2006b; 2006c). A child without many toys was more likely perceived by Chinese children to be hardworking, with good academic results, smart and with lots of friends (Chan and Hu, 2008). However, similar data for adolescents was not collected. 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 material possessions? Do young people perceive a link between possessions, happiness, and success? The current study attempts to provide answers for these questions. The result will enhance our understanding of how Chinese young people perceive people with or without material possessions.

## Literature Review

According to John's consumer socialization model (1999), the perceived value of possessions changes through a child's developmental stages. During the perceptual stage (ages 3-7), children have a general orientation toward the immediate and readily observable perceptual features of their world. The value of possessions is based on surface features, such as being larger or having more of some feature. During the analytical stage (ages 7-11), children master some consumer knowledge and skills, and product categories or prices are conceptualized in terms of functional or underlying dimensions. Children begin to value possessions based on their social meaning and significance. As children enter the reflective stage (ages 11-16), they develop comprehensive knowledge about marketplace concepts such as branding and pricing. They understand fully the value of possessions in terms of their social meaning, social significance, and scarcity. John's (1999) model also describes the changes in brand knowledge through the developmental stages. During the perceptual stage, children can recognize brand names and beginning to associate them with product categories. During the analytical stage, children demonstrate significantly increased brand awareness, especially for child-relevant product categories. As children enter the reflective stage, they develop brand awareness for adult-oriented as well child-relevant product categories and a sophisticated understanding of brands' consumption symbolism.

Chaplin and John (2007) adopted a collage method to measure materialism of children and adolescents aged 8 to 18. Results indicate that materialistic values increased from middle childhood to early adolescents and declines from early to late adolescents. Age differences in materialism were mediated by changes in self-esteem occurring from middle childhood through adolescence.

Children's changing understanding of the value of possessions with age was illustrated in Baker and Gentry's (1996) study of hobby collecting among first and fifth graders. Both groups enjoyed collecting items, but gave different reasons. The younger children said they appreciated collecting because it made them feel they owned more than others. The older children regarded collecting as a way of making themselves unique and feeling good about themselves. The younger children often compared their possessions to those of others in terms of quantity, while the fifth graders compared in terms of specialty. In other words, older children are more likely to use possessions to develop self-identity than younger children.

How people, including children, value possessions and how possessions rank in personal preference are related with the concept of materialism. Scholars have come up with various definitions and measurement scales for materialism. Most of these scales have been used with adults, but some were specifically designed for children. Ward and Wackman (1971) defined materialism as an "orientation emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress" (p. 426). They measured it by summing responses (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to six items such as, "It is really true that money can buy happiness." In Kapferer's (1986) study of children and their parents, materialism was measured in terms of agreement with the single statement, "People are much happier if they can buy a lot of things". Belk (1984) defined materialism as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions, and whether such possessions assume a central place in the consumer's life. Belk's (1985) measure of materialism combined three personality traits: envy, non-generosity, and possessiveness. Richins' (1987) measure of materialism for adults consisted of seven items such as, "It is important to have really nice things" and, "The things I own give me a great deal of pleasure". Richins and Dawson (1992) constructed a Material Values Scale with three dimensions: the belief that possessions define success, the extent to which possessions are at the centre of one's life, and the belief that happiness depends on the possession of goods. Goldberg and his colleagues constructed a Youth Materialism Scale which quantified materialism using ten items such as "The more money you have, the happier you are" (Goldberg et al., 2003). All of these measurement scales for materialism share a common theme: they measure attitudes towards possessions; the link between possessions, happiness and success; or perceptions of people who own or do not own many possessions.

Dittmar and Pepper have proposed that one central component of materialism is that material goods are considered as "symbols of identity whose meanings are socially constituted" (Dittmar and Pepper, 1994, p.235). Belk (1988) provided a variety of evidence to support the premise that "our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (p.139). Certainly, research has shown that people use material goods as an instrument to assess social identity, including social class, status, personality, and social relationships (Belk et al., 1982; Dittmar, 1989, 1991). Dittmar (1992) proposed that people from individualistic cultures attribute wealth and poverty to common sense causal explanations. That means affluent people tend to be considered as intelligent, hard-working and skilful, while poor people may be seen as lazy, unmotivated and lacking in skill. Dittmar (1992) called this "dominant representation". Empirical evidence was found to support a role for dominant representation in a study of adolescents' inferences of personality traits which used short videos and vignettes of persons with or without possessions (Dittmar, 1992; Dittmar and Pepper, 1994).

Christopher and Jones (2004) examined how the endorsement of the Protestant work ethic influence personality traits of a person described in either an affluent or less affluent context. Results indicated that the personality traits comprised of three factors, including sophistication, considerateness, and personal abilities. Respondents with high Protestant work ethic perceived an affluent person more considerate than respondents with low Protestant work ethic.

Chan (2003) examined 246 Chinese children aged six to thirteen in Hong Kong using a materialism scale developed for children (Heerey et al., 2002). Materialism was measured by fourteen items that

prompted children to reveal whether or not they desired more money and more toys, whether they felt happier if they had more toys, and whether they often compared their possessions those of their friends. The results indicated that children in Hong Kong endorse some materialistic values. Their average materialism score was 3.1 on a five-point scale. The children agreed most strongly with “It’s better to have more allowance” and “I want to have things that other kids like” (Chan, 2003).

A quota sample of 256 Beijing children with nearly equal numbers of boys and girls aged six to thirteen was surveyed using the same scale. The results indicate that mainland Chinese children do not strongly endorse materialistic values (Chan, 2005). The average materialism score was 2.4 on the same five-point scale, significantly lower than the mid-point of 3.0. The mainland children least agreed with “I like my friends because they have a lot of good stuff” and “I like to compare myself with my friends to see who got the most unique stuff”. A survey found that urban Chinese children were more materialistic than rural Chinese children. Media exposure to video game was the most influencing factor in respondents’ endorsement of materialistic values (Xu, 2010). Contrary to John’s (1999) model of consumer socialization, young children aged six to seven in both studies showed some understanding of valuing possessions based on their social significance.

In a qualitative study, Chan (2004a) asked fifteen Chinese children in Beijing to draw what came to their mind about a child with a lot of toys and a child without many toys. Respondents were also asked whether these children had friends and whether they felt good about themselves. It was found that children, even at a very young age, were able to express the value of possessions based on their emotional attachment, the item’s social meaning, and inferences about future success and self-esteem. The link between material possessions and social significance was direct for the youngest children, but became more complex for older respondents. Older children believed strongly that having a lot of toys would have a negative impact on scholarly pursuits. Children with a lot of toys were more likely to be perceived as selfish, envious of others, and arrogant.

A similar drawing study among forty-two Chinese children aged 6 to 12 was conducted in Hong Kong (Chan, 2006b). Analysis of the drawings and interviews indicated that there were significant differences in children’s perceptions of someone with a lot of toys and someone without many toys in terms of observable qualities and personality traits. The respondents perceived a child described as having a lot of toys as being more likely to own branded goods, electric toys and computer and video games. A child without many toys was perceived as more likely to own books. Younger children were more likely to relate material possessions with happiness, friendship, and feeling good about oneself. Older children were more likely to relate material possessions with wastefulness.

A qualitative study among Chinese teenagers aged 13 to 19 in Hong Kong demonstrated differences in young people’s perceptions of someone with or without a lot of branded goods in terms of the type of possessions they would own, their leisure activities, observable qualities and personality traits (Chan, 2006c). The respondents were more likely to relate possession of branded goods with happiness, friendship and self-esteem. A person described as having a lot of branded goods, however, was perceived as likely to be arrogant, wasteful, vain and superficial. A person without a lot of branded goods was perceived as easygoing, friendly and down-to-earth.

Chan (2006a) studied the consumption values promulgated in moral education textbooks used in mainland Chinese schools. The texts emphasized that all material goods were the result of human labour, and wasting goods was portrayed as reprehensible. The consumption values reflected a mixture of communist and traditional Chinese values about saving for the future.

The results of prior work in this field thus suggest that children understand the concept of possessions and value them from a young age. Adolescents may use information about a person’s possessions as a basis for inferring his or her socioeconomic status and personal qualities. There are indications that similar inferences are developed among children. The current study was designed to investigate to what extent Chinese young people use information about a person’s possessions as indicators of that person’s happiness, academic success and social relations.

## Hypothesis

According to Chan's (2006b) study, some respondents related material possessions with happiness, and friendship, while some related material possessions with wastefulness. In Chan's (2008) study, children perceived a child described as having many toys differently from a child without many toys in terms of their imagined personal characteristics. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: Young people perceive a person with many possessions differently from a person without many possessions in term of their imagined person characteristics.

## Methods

### Sample

Four hundred and sixty-nine Chinese young people aged 15 to 20 attending grade seven and grade eleven participated in the study. These students came from eight secondary schools randomly selected from a sampling frame of 57 secondary schools offering formal education in Macao. The survey frame was downloaded from the government website in April 2008. Schools offering vocational training and special education for students with learning difficulties were excluded. The schools were situated in various districts of Macao, making it representative in geographic distribution.

### Questionnaire design and procedure

Approval was obtained from the schools to enrol the students in the study. The study was conducted during class time by school teachers. A questionnaire was developed based on Dittmar and Pepper's (1994) and Chan and Hu's (2008) work. The questionnaire featured a photograph of a young person (either a boy or a girl) with a vignette about him or her as follows: "Lee Sin Yin/Lee Siu Keung is a grade 11 student. She/he has a lot of branded goods. She/he uses LV handbag/LV wallet and wear Agnes b clothing/Nike shoes. Her/his mobile phone is a Nokia 2008 model. On a school holiday, she/he goes out and enjoys buffets at hotels with friends. During the summer holiday, she/he and her/his family travel to Japan." We identify her/him as person A in this paper.

Respondents were asked to select from a list of personal characteristics that can describe and the person. Twelve personal characteristics including eight positive characteristics and four negative characteristics were provided. Respondents could check as many answers as they found appropriate. Eleven of the personality trait choices, including happy and hardworking, were taken from Chan and Hu's (2008) study. "Low self-esteem" was added for this study.

The questionnaire continued with a photograph of a second person (again a boy or a girl) with the vignette as follows: "Wong Chun Ha/Wong Yat Ming is a grade 11 student. She/he does not have many branded goods. She/he wears ordinary sports shoes. Her/his mobile phone is a Nokia 2005 model. On a school holiday, she/he goes out and enjoys meals at fast food restaurants with friends. During the summer holiday, she/ he and her/his family travel to Mainland China." We identify her/him as person B in this paper. The same question was asked. Respondents were then asked who he or she wanted to be: the one with a lot of possessions, the one without a lot of possessions, either one, or neither one. The study attempts to measure young people's perception. However, by showing the respondents photos with the description of having or not having a lot of possessions, it measures respondents' inference from the photos and the vignettes, based on their imagination, rather than perception.

In order to correct the ordering effects, two versions of the questionnaire were developed. The first version featured a girl with a lot of possessions followed by a girl without a lot of possessions. The second version featured a boy without a lot of possessions followed by a boy with a lot of possessions. Four schools received the first version and four schools received the second version. Demographic and other information (sex, age, grade, media usage, amount of allowance per week) were asked. The data was collected in 2008.



## Results

Fifty percent of the respondents were boys, and fifty percent were girls. The average age of the respondents was 15.4 years (SD=2.2 years). Seventy-four percent of the respondents received an allowance, and the mean weekly allowance was 125 dollars (equivalent to about 15 U.S. dollars).

### Perceived personal characteristics

Table 1 summarizes the positive and negative personal characteristics attributed to person A and person B. Person A was less likely to be described with positive personal characteristics. Of the eight positive personal characteristics, “happy” was the only one with over fifty percent attribution. In contrast, person B was more likely to be described with positive personal characteristics. Four of the eight positive characteristics had more than fifty percent attribution to person B, including happy, has a lot of friends, hardworking and cares about others. Person A was often described with negative personal characteristics. Eighty-nine percent of respondents consider her/him “spend money irresponsibly”. This personal characteristic received the highest percentage, indicating its strength.

Pair-wise t-tests were conducted to compare respondents’ perceptions of persons described as having a lot or few of material possessions. Results were summarized in Table 1. Eleven out of twelve pair-wise t-tests yield significant difference. “Low self-esteem” was the only characteristic with no significant difference in perception. It indicates that respondents envision a person with a lot of possessions differed from a person with few possessions in terms of personal characteristics. Largest difference were registered for “spends money irresponsibly”, “hard working”, “cares about others” as well as “willing to serve classmates”. Person B was imagined much more positively than Person A. As a result, H1 was supported. Oneway ANOVA tests are conducted to investigate if differences in perceptions of person A and person B depend on sex or age. Results indicated that differences in perceptions did not depend on sex or age of respondents.

**Table 1.** Personal characteristics used to describe person A and person B

Personal characteristic	person A	person B	t-value
Positive			
happy	57	79	-8.1***
has a lot of friends	49	66	-5.5*
smart	14	36	-8.8***
good academic results	11	44	-13.0***
hard-working	6	54	-20.2***
cares about others	8	52	-18.2***
lovable	23	46	-7.7***
willing to serve classmates	6	43	-15.4***
Negative			
spends money irresponsibly	89	3	50.7***
selfish	33	3	12.7***
envious of others	45	12	11.6***
low self-esteem	16	15	0.8

Note: \* Significant at the  $p \leq 0.05$  level; \*\*\* significant at the  $p \leq 0.001$  level.

Person A: A youth described as having many expensive and branded possessions.

Person B: A youth described as not having many expensive and branded possessions

Factor analysis was applied to examine the underlying dimensions of the respondents' attributions of personal characteristics. A principal component factor analysis with a varimax rotation was employed to identify the dimensions of the 12 personal characteristics for person A and person B separately. Both factor analysis yield a three-factor solution. The results of the factor analysis are shown in Table 2. These factors accounted for 51.7 percent and 52.8 percent respectively of the total explained variance in perception responses of person A and person B. The grouping of personal characteristics was exactly the same in the two factor analysis solutions.

**Table 2.** Factor analysis of personal characteristics

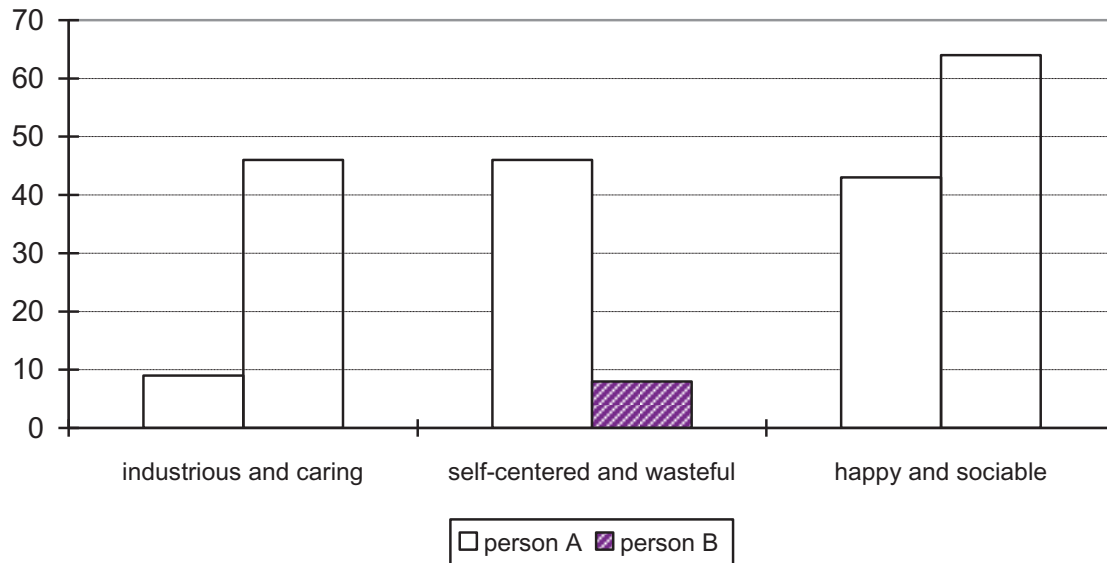
person A/person B	
<i>Factor (1/1): Industrious and caring (30.0%/24.6% explained variance)</i>	
0.76/0.74	Willing to serve classmates
0.82/0.75	Hard-working
0.62/0.68	Smart
0.77/0.67	Cares about others
0.71/0.77	Good academic results
<i>Factor (2/3): Sociable and happy (14.5%/10.2% explained variance)</i>	
0.68/0.71	Happy
0.43/0.58	Lovable
0.78/0.68	Has a lot of friends
<i>Factor (3/2): Self-centred and wasteful (10.2%/18.0% explained variance)</i>	
0.70/0.72	Selfish
0.70/0.61	Envious of others
0.51/0.73	Spends money irresponsibly
0.46/0.62	Low self-esteem

*Note:* The decimal figures are factor loadings (after rotation), which indicate the strength with which a particular item is linked to the factor as a whole. The first set of factor loadings corresponds to person A while the second set relates to person B.

Two of the three dimensions describe positive personal characteristics. The first dimension, accounting for the largest proportion of the total explained variance, is focused on the person's personal efforts to achieve as well as good intentions to serve and care about other people. It was labelled "industrious and caring". The second dimension of the first factor analysis is concerned with a person's charisma, being friendly, happy, and attractive. It was labelled "sociable and happy". The third dimension of the first factor analysis refers to the negative traits of being selfish, envious, wasteful and inferior. It was labelled "self-centred and wasteful".

Based on the results of the factor analysis, mean scores were calculated for the three dimensions. For example, the mean of percentages of respondents selecting selfish, envious of others, spends money irresponsibly, and low self-esteem would give the score for the self-centred and wasteful dimension. The results are summarized in Figure 1. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores for person A and person B. The mean scores for the industrious and caring dimension were 9 percent for person A and 46 percent for person B ( $t = 22.2$ ,  $df = 468$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). The mean scores for the self-centred and wasteful dimension were 46 percent for person A and 8 percent for person B ( $t = 26.1$ ,  $df = 468$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). The mean scores for the sociable and happy dimension were 64 percent for person A and 43 percent for person B ( $t = 10.3$ ,  $df = 468$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). So person B was more likely to be imagined as industrious and caring, sociable and happy than person A. Person A was more likely to be imagined as self-centred and wasteful than person B. These results further support H1.

Figure 1 Perceived personal characteristics of person A and person B



Respondents were asked which person they wanted to be. Seventeen percent of the respondents reported that they wanted to be the person with a lot of possessions. Twelve percent wanted to be the person without a lot of possessions, while forty-five percent wanted to be either one of them and twenty-six percent wanted to be neither.

### Discussions and Conclusions

The study was designed to compare Macao Chinese young people's perceptions of someone with or without a lot of material possessions. A hypothesis developed from Chan's (2006b) qualitative study and Chan and Hu's (2008) survey was tested using a quantitative approach. The results supported the hypothesis. Respondents attributed significantly different characteristics to hypothetical persons described as with or without many possessions. A person with many possessions was visualized as more likely to be selfish and wasteful. He or she would be happy, have a lot of friends, but spend money irresponsibly and enviously. A person without possessions was imagined as happy, have lots of friends, hard-working, care about others, lovable and have good academic results.

The perceived link between material possessions and poor academic achievement found in this study is consistent with the findings of a previous qualitative study of children in mainland China (Chan, 2004a) and a survey of Chinese children in Mainland China (Chan and Hu, 2008). Possessions are perceived as barriers to achieving academic excellence. The perception may come from parents. At a focus group interview of parents of children aged 9 to 12, interviewees expressed the worry that toys and play items would distract children from concentrating on their studies. Parents thought that children should place learning as their top priority (Chan, 2004b).

Similar to previous qualitative studies (Chan, 2004a; Chan, 2006b), the results show that young people were able to express the value of possessions based on emotional attachment (happiness), social meaning (ability to attract friends), and personality association (smart, willing to serve others, or selfish). This provides further evidence to support John's (1999) model of consumer socialization, which says that



young people in the reflective stage (ages 11-17) have developed fully an understanding of the social meaning and significance of material possessions.

The personality traits attributed by Chinese young people to those owning or lacking possessions were very different from those assigned by adolescents in the U.K. Dittmar and Pepper (1994) have shown that British adolescents perceive an affluent person as more intelligent, successful and hard-working than someone less well-off. However, the current study found that Chinese young people in Macao perceived the affluent person as less industrious and caring, less sociable and happy, as well as more selfish and wasteful. In other words, Chinese young people associated possessions with wastefulness and poor social relationships. The link between possessions and wastefulness may stem from the strong emphasis on thrift and frugality socialized by parents. It may also come from the negative reporting of people who get rich easily and spend money lavishly in the media. Chinese parents also indicate a preference for their children to live within their means and refrain from buying luxury goods (Chan, 2004b). The observed association between lack of possessions and positive personal characteristics suggests that poverty is romanticized. The results illustrate that the perception of possessions is culturally based.

Results of the current study showed many similarities with a survey of attitudes toward material possessions among children in mainland China (Chan and Hu, 2008). The only difference was that in the current study, a person without many possessions was perceived to be even less industrious and caring than a child without many toys in Chan and Hu's (2008) study.

As the respondents associated possessions with wastefulness, envious personality, and poor academic performance, it was quite natural that they were not aspiring to having many possessions. This was supported by the low percentage (17 percent) of respondents who expressed the wish to be the person with a lot of possessions.

To conclude, this study found that the perceived link between material possessions and personality traits differ in Western and Chinese contexts. Chinese young people in Macao hold perceptions of someone with or without a lot of possessions which are different from those of Western children in terms of the personal characteristics the possessions imply. The respondents were more likely to imagine such a person as spending irresponsibly, selfish and envious of others. Respondents were more likely to imagine a person without many possessions to be hard working, care about others, willing to serve, and with good academic results.

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