

Growing up in Macao: A study of materialistic values among children and adolescents¹

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January 22, 2010

Abstract

Materialism among the younger generation has become a hot topic among parents, educators, marketers and policy makers. 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.

Macau is one of the most dynamic economies in the Asia-Pacific region. The gaming and tourism sector boosted the Macau's economy with a real growth of 13 percent in the third quarter of 2008²⁰⁰⁴, setting new record in the estimates of GDP and per-capita GDP at current prices. The influx of tourists and the expanding gaming facilities bring the potential threat of materialism and the erosion of traditional family values.

Based on a probability sampling of primary and secondary schools in Macau in May and June 2008, we obtained a final sample of 667 respondents studying in grade 4 of primary schools as well as form 1 and form 5 of secondary schools. Their ages ranged from 8 to 20.

Children and adolescents in Macau did not endorse high level of materialism values. The mean score of materialism measured by the Youth Materialism Scale was 2.8 on a five point scale. Analysis of materialistic values scores by demographic groups found

¹ This Project is funded by Cultural Affairs Bureau, Macau SAR Government

that there was no gender difference in materialism. However, respondents in secondary schools were significantly more materialistic than respondents in primary schools. Children and adolescents in the sample were asked how they would like to spend if they were given a windfall of \$1,000 Macau dollars. Materialism values affected respondents' intentions to allocate the windfall money on different uses. Children and adolescents were also asked to use different adjectives to describe a person with or without a lot of material possessions. There were also significant differences in their perceptions of these two imagined persons.

Background

Macao is one of the most dynamic economies in the Asia-Pacific region. The gaming and tourism sector boosted the Macao's economy with a real growth of 13 percent in the third quarter of 2008, setting new record in the estimates of GDP and per-capita GDP at current prices. The influx of tourists and the expanding gaming facilities bring the potential threat of materialism and the erosion of traditional family values.

Materialism among the younger generation has become a hot topic among parents, educators, marketers and policy makers.

Young people are forming the value system, to strive for balance between the pursuit of personal goals and the public goals such as fairness or a greener society.

A study was funded by the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macau SAR government to study materialism among children and adolescents in Macao.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- to study whether children and adolescents in Macao endorse materialistic values

- to examine the influences of age (school level), sex and family' s social economic status on the endorsement of materialistic values
- to examine the influences of media and advertising consumption on young people' materialistic values

Target population

The target population of the study is elementary and secondary schools (probably in the age range 8-20). We select elementary grade 4, secondary school form 1 and form 5 (year 2 of high school).

Sampling

We conduct a system probability sample. We download a list of schools from the government web site. We take away the schools that provide informal or special or vocational education. It resulted in 6 primary schools and 8 secondary schools. Here is the list of schools.

Research method

We have conducted a quantitative survey. A set of survey documents including a covering letter, a set of questionnaires was sent to the school principals. The students completed the questionnaires on their own. All questions were close-ended questions. The study was conducted in April to May 2008.

Questionnaire design

We designed two sets of questionnaires, one for primary schools, and one for secondary schools. As idol worship was not that common among primary school, questions related with peer influence and media celebrities were asked among secondary school students. The following table summarizes the variables included in the questionnaires.

Items in the questions

- All concepts are measured by established scales in the research literature

- Chinese versions are tested in Hong Kong

The following table summarizes the variables included in the questionnaires.

Sample profile

Altogether we have collected 707 completed questionnaires. 40 of them came from respondents aged above 20. We decided to drop them. The final sample was 667 respondents, with almost equal proportions of males and females.

Materialism

Materialism was measured by Goldberg et al. (2003)'s Youth Materialism Scale. It consists of 10 items. Here is the percentage of agreement to these statements and the mean value. Higher mean score means that the respondent is more materialistic.

Finding 1

Endorsement of materialism was not high among respondents. Children and adolescents in Macao did not endorse high level of materialism values. The mean score of materialism measured by the Youth Materialism Scale was 2.8 on a five point scale (below the mid-point of 3.0 in a five point scale). Children and adolescents perceived that they would be happier if they had more money to buying things for themselves. They are aspired to take jobs that can pay them well when they grow up. They have fun in thinking about things they owned. However, they are willing to share things with friends. They are not particularly attracted to buy things their friends have, and they are not obsessed with buying things.

Adolescents in Macao and adolescents in Hong Kong of the same age groups shared similar level of materialistic values.

Materialism by sex

Finding 2: No gender difference in materialistic values

Female respondents enjoy shopping more but male respondents wants to own

expensive goods.

Materialism by school level

Finding 3: secondary kids more materialistic

Materialistic values increased with age. Secondary school students were more materialistic than primary school students. Secondary school students were more likely to want to buy luxurious goods. They would like to spend time on shopping. They perceive a stronger link between money and happiness. However, they are less likely to make friends with those with a lot of possessions. They are less likely to use money as the yardstick in choosing a career

Finding 4: no difference in materialism among respondents who perceived their family income level is lower, similar, no higher than other families in Macau

Finding 5: How do you spend \$1,000 of windfall

Children and adolescents reported that if they were given a windfall of \$1,000 Macao dollars, they would like to spend \$340 on buying things, save \$443, and donate the remaining \$216 to charities.

Finding 5a: High materialism respondents will spend 80% more than low materialism respondents

Materialism values affected respondents' intentions to allocate the money on different uses. The sharpest difference was on the intention to spend money on buying things. Respondents endorsing high materialistic values intended to spend \$429 on buying things, while respondents endorsing low level of materialistic values intended to spend \$236 on buying things.

Finding 5b: High materialism respondents will donate 40% less than low materialism respondents

Respondents endorsing high materialistic values intended to donate \$167, while respondents endorsing low level of materialistic values intended to donate \$266.

Finding 6a Model for secondary school respondents

This part is more theoretical. We use advanced statistical tool, called regression analysis, to analyze the data. A positive regression coefficient means when variable A increases, variable B increases also. A larger regression coefficient means the variable A have a relatively great impact on variable B. For secondary school respondents, we found that

- Communication with friends about consumption and peer influence are positive correlates of social comparison
- Motivation for viewing ads and time spent on the Internet are positive correlates of imitation of idols
- Social comparison and imitation of idols are positive correlates of materialism

Finding 6b Model for secondary school respondents

- Communication with friends and parents about consumption are positive correlates of social comparison
- Time spent on newspapers and attention to TV commercials are positive correlates of liking of ad
- Social comparison and liking of ad are positive correlates of materialism

Finding 7

The two models when combined, give us the following insight:

- Social comparison of consumption and consumption of advertising messages

lead to materialism

- Imitation of idols lead to materialism
- General media usage has no influence on materialism

Perceptions

Children and adolescents held different perceptions about a person described as having many possessions and a person described as not having many possessions (using a vignette approach, for details see questionnaire). A person with many possessions was imagined to be selfish, wasteful, spending money irresponsibly, and envious. A person without many possessions was imaged to be having lots of friends, hard-working, care about others, lovable, and having good academic results. A person who lacks material possessions is beautified.

Based on the research findings, the report proposed the following actions for parents, educators, policy makers, and marketers:

Implications for parents/educators

- Parents and teachers should be aware of the increasing materialism with age (school level)
- The strive for improvement in living standard and the balance of a satisfying life
- When you get money, you also invest in social relations and work for the benefits of those in need
- Help children to cope with own status of material situation, and be contented
- Help children in coping with peer pressure
- “you don’t need that hot item to have good friends”
- Discourage comparison of possessions with wealthy friends

- Discuss the value of branded goods

Implications for government

- Education program for attitude toward money, and money management
- Education for career choice
- Develop a giving culture, make donating and volunteering an integral part of the education (service learning)
- Media education about marketing, advertising, and consumer rights
- Media literacy about functions of media celebrities and the mechanism of product endorsement
- “Does she really likes the brand, or she is paid to say that she likes the brand?”
- Set up a consumer/media education resources centre
- Provide training for parents and teachers

Thank you. This is toward the end of our presentation. Please feel free to ask questions.

Thanks again for your time and your presence at the forum.