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Chan, Kara; Zhang, Cong

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Living in a celebrity-mediated social world: The Chinese experience

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Dr. Kara Chan*

Professor

Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

Fax: (852) 3411-7890

Telephone: (852) 3411-7836

E-mail: karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

Cong Zhang

Mphil Student

Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

E-mail: 06458734@hkbu.edu.hk

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*Please send all correspondence to this author.

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Living in a celebrity-mediated social world: The Chinese experience

Research Paper

Abstract (192 words)

Purpose—The purpose of this paper is to examine the influence of peers and media celebrities on young people's endorsement of materialistic values in China. As the Chinese culture is said to be collective, it is expected that social relations, both personal and celebrity-mediated, play an important role in the establishment of consumption values.

Design/methodology/approach—A survey of 299 university students aged 18 to 24 in Beijing was conducted using a structured questionnaire. Constructs were measured using established scales.

Findings—Peer communication and susceptibility to peer influence were positively related to social comparison. Motivation for viewing advertisements was positively related to imitation of celebrity models. In turn, both social comparison and imitation of celebrity models were positive predictors of materialism.

Research limitations/implications—The city selected for this study is highly advanced in terms of economical and advertising development when compared with most other Chinese cities.

Practical implications—As we argue that materialism is a negative value orientation, the current study sheds light on de-marketing to young consumers. Media educators should help young consumers to reflect on how their purchase decisions are influenced by the social relations, including both personal interaction and celebrity-media communications. Discouraging upward social comparison and imitation of idols is expected to discourage the endorsement of materialistic values.

Originality/value—The paper offers insights about the complex patterns of youth attitudes in a former socialist society migrating to a capitalist society. It is a pioneer work on the study of influence of celebrities on materialistic value orientations.

Living in a celebrity-mediated social world: The Chinese experience

INTRODUCTION

One concern about consumer socialization is the undesirable influence of advertising on young people's preference for material goods as a means of achieving success, happiness, and self-fulfillment (John, 1999). The adoption of materialistic values by young people affects the balance between the private and public choices that children make throughout life (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchis & Bomossy, 2003). Longitudinal studies of U.S. high school students from the early 1970s to the 1980s indicate a dramatic increase in private materialism as a life goal and a sharp decline in emphasis on personal self-fulfillment (Easterlin & Crimmins, 1991). In our opinion, materialism is a negative value because it works against interpersonal relationships and it is negatively associated with happiness and subjective well being (Kasser, 2002). High levels of material values have been found to create tension between the individual orientation toward material values and a collective orientation toward family and religious values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

A central issue in studying materialism, especially amongst young people, is that of social comparison and the intention to imitate media figures. Due to the combination of rapid body growth and puberty, the early self-identity formed in childhood is no longer appropriate, and teenagers enter a period of identity crisis (Erikson, 1980). Young people need to formulate a new identity and to establish autonomy from their parents. They become more independent in decision making. As a result, young people tend to seek personal relationships that give value to their perspectives and ensure that their feelings are understood. Peer groups, with their shared experience, are an inevitable source of these relationships. Consequently, young people prefer to identify with their peer groups. The frequent interaction with peers, even more frequent than with parents, can lead to peers becoming the primary basis for social comparison. A generalized social comparison theory states that individuals compare their own material possessions with those owned by significant others to ascertain their social status (Saunders, 2001).

Apart from comparing themselves to peers, young people may also compare themselves to celebrities. Celebrity worship has become common amongst young people around the world (Yue & Cheung, 2000) and may stem from a developmental need for identification and intimacy (Josselson, 1991). Celebrities are idolized by young people because celebrities are more attractive than ordinary individuals. They are carefully packaged by the media through makeup, photo-editing, glamorous clothing, flattering lighting and cosmetic surgery. Celebrities are extremely wealthy, and often demonstrate their wealth through the cars, houses, jewelry, as well as expensive possessions. Young consumers attempt to imitate them in terms of clothing and other ways. Young viewers' response to celebrity appearances in television commercials sometimes goes beyond emulation. For instance, some research suggests that young admirers spoke of celebrities as if they had a "real" relationship with them. The celebrity's messages became part of the individual's social construction of reality (Alperstein, 1991). Celebrity worshipping could thus have a prevalent influence on shaping their followers' values, attitudes and behaviors (Schultze et al., 1991). Advertisers and marketers also capture the opportunity to encourage young followers to consume the products endorsed by their celebrities. Research on celebrity worshipping of young people focuses mainly on antecedents to celebrity worshipping (e.g. Greene & Adams-Price, 1990; Sobel, 1981) or the juvenile deviant behaviors resulting from celebrity worshipping (e.g. Martin, Clarke & Pearce, 1993). As far as we know, there is no study specifically analyzing the relationship between imitation of celebrities and the endorsement of materialistic values. The purpose of the current study is to understand how communal discourse about celebrities among young people affects the construction of their social status.

Studying materialism, social comparison and celebrity worship in a Chinese culture involves a context quite different from Western culture. Many scholars argue that mass consumption in Chinese society is different from that in Western societies because of the long-standing values concerning families and human relations (Zhao, 1997). The Confucian characteristics of Chinese culture cultivate strong habits of thrift, filial piety, group orientation,

good manners, face, and an emphasis on academic achievement (Chan & McNeal, 2003; Yau, 1988). As hierarchy is legitimate and conformity to group norms is acceptable in Confucian tradition (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998), social comparison of goods as a means to locate an individual's position in the social hierarchy is therefore encouraged. The value of social face will encourage the owning of symbolic goods to improve personal visibility within the social hierarchy (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). The collective characteristic of Chinese culture encourages the use of material possessions to identify associates for establishing long-term social relations.

At issue, then, is whether social comparison and imitation of celebrity models contributes to the endorsement of materialistic values amongst young Chinese people. The specific objectives of this study were to test a theoretical model of the endorsement of materialistic values amongst Chinese youth. We examine the influence of peer communication on social comparison and the influence of advertising viewing on imitation of celebrity models. In turn, we examine how both social comparison and imitation of celebrity models contribute to young people's endorsement of materialistic values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Our basic thesis is that peer communication influences social comparison while advertising communication influences imitation of celebrity models. And both social comparison and imitation of celebrity models, in turn, influence materialistic values. This is consistent with Kasser et al.'s (2004) argument that individuals learn to adopt materialistic values through social learning from family members, peers, and the materialistic messages that are frequently found in television programs and their commercial messages (Kasser et al., 2004).

According to Kasser et al.'s (2004) model, consumers (including young people) develop materialistic value orientation through experiences that induce feelings of insecurity, and from exposure to materialistic models and values. When the psychological needs of individuals are not

met, they tend to move toward materialism as a type of compensatory strategy to lessen the distressing effects of insecurity. Kasser et al.'s (2004) model focuses on the individual's internal status. This study attempted to replace the insecurity and exposure to materialism in that model with variables related to social comparison and imitation of media celebrities. This is because social comparison and imitation of media celebrities are variables that measure the active mental processing of incoming messages about materialistic value. Figure 1 shows the proposed theoretical framework.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Previous studies have shown that young people who communicate frequently with their peers (Moschis & Churchill, 1978) and those who are more susceptible to peer influence are also known to be more materialistic (Achenreiner, 1997). A recent study of 281 Chinese secondary school students in Hong Kong found high positive correlation between peer communication, susceptibility to peer influence and materialism (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). Susceptibility to peer influence reflects a willingness to comply with the wishes of others (normative influence) and a willingness to accept and internalize information from others (informative influence). It also reflects a person's need to identify or enhance one's image with significant others through material possessions (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989).

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people have a drive to evaluate themselves by comparing with others when objective means are not available. Consumer researchers extend the theory to include the comparison of material possessions to determine individuals' relative social standing. Individuals can decide to compare themselves with others who are worse off (downward comparison) to bolster their self-esteem, with others who are better off (upward comparison), or with idealized media images (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). People who engage in social comparison with remote referents such as idealized media images create inflated and unrealistically high expectations of their models' standards of living. As a result, the larger gap between the ideal and their actual standard of living triggers the desire for materialistic

possessions (Sirgy, 1998). A study of young Japanese adults found that upward social comparison was related to dissatisfaction with one's possessions for female respondents. Also, female respondents engaged in social comparison demonstrated a higher desire for more possessions and willingness to take action to get those products (Ogden & Venkat, 2001).

Adolescents often form secondary attachments to media figures in addition to relations with family and peers. These attachments facilitate adolescents' transition to adulthood and the formation of a mature adult identity (Erikson, 1968). Using an ethnographic analysis, Caughey (1984; 1985; 1994) found that young admirers consider celebrity idols as their idealized self-images. Admirers want to develop or refine personality traits that are similar to their idols. Young people reported that they wanted to revise their physical appearance, abilities, values and attitudes in order to imitate that of their idols. Caughey (1984) found that people developed powerful emotions toward media celebrities even they did not have any face-to-face interaction with them. Caughey (1985) concluded that people's "imaginary" relationships with media figures will shape both their own self-identities and their subjective evaluation of self-worth.

A survey of 75 young people aged 17 to 35 found those who reported that they shared a bond with their idols (all were media figures) were more likely to attribute their idols in guiding their choice of identity and shaping their feelings of self-worth. A majority of the sample reported that their idols had influenced their attitudes and personal values, in particular beliefs about work ethic and morality (Boon & Lomore, 2001). Empirical research indicated that direct role models (e.g. fathers & mothers) and vicarious role models (e.g. favorite entertainers) affected adolescents in brand selection, brand switching and lodging consumer complaints (Martin & Bush, 2000). Young consumers reported that they were more likely to use products endorsed by entertainers or famous athletes (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999). Materialism is likely to be related to young people's amount of attention to and level of exposure to advertising.

Overall, social comparison (with friends and media figures) and imitation of celebrity models (through advertising consumption) may influence the youth to be more materialistic. In

this study, social comparison and imitation of celebrity models were proposed to be mediating variables that reflect the active processing of information from peers and the media. By internalizing the information and making choices, social comparison and imitation of celebrity models leads to the endorsement of materialistic or non-materialistic values.

The Chinese context

Since the Chinese Communist Party adopted the economic reform policies in 1978, China has been liberalizing its economy by allowing private businesses to develop, attracting foreign investment (Paek & Pan, 2004). With this rapid economic growth, China develops rapidly into one of the largest consumer markets in the world (Cui & Liu, 2000). As a result, the consumer culture and people's lifestyles have undergone rapid changes. Surveys, academic and media reports suggest that money and a moneyed lifestyle play increasing roles in urban Chinese aspirations (Stanley, 2004). Consumers in urban China display well-developed individualistic tastes and a strong inclination to embrace Western consumer lifestyles (Paek & Pan, 2004). Young consumers in China were subjected to the influence of three sets of values, including communistic values that emphasize on personal sacrifice and to contribute to the state and mankind, Confucian values about frugality and saving up for long-term needs, and materialistic values about spending money for personal enjoyment (Chan, 2005a). While urban Chinese young people in the 1980s often searched for life's meaning, contemporary youth in urban China are success-oriented and openly seek the good life (Luo, 2002). A survey conducted by the State Statistical Bureau among people with income levels above 60,000 yuan a year (equivalent to 7,700 US dollars) found that the largest cluster of this income group people were aged from 30 to 40, called China's yuppies. This group had become a publicized role models, replacing the "model workers" serving unselfishly for the Party and the State (Gaigne neican, 2001, cited in Rosen, 2004). The Chinese consumers, who used to perceive consumption was a manifestation of decadent bourgeois influences, are now surrounded by an increasing abundance of consumer goods and services, as well as persuasive commercial messages and

activities (Li, 1998). Advertising has made an important function in emerging consumer society in China. Commercial interests played an increasingly crucial role in the operation of media organizations (Zhao, 1998). Results from a survey in the three largest Chinese cities shows that consumption-related media messages play a major role in shaping the consumer orientations (Paek & Pan, 2004).

Because of the one-child policy, Chinese children and adolescents have become the focal point of the family, exerting tremendous influence on household purchases (McNeal & Yeh, 1997). Children and adolescents in China are increasingly exposed to mass media for information and entertainment. Television now reaches over 92 percent of China's households (Bu, 2001). Adolescents in China reported that they watched television mainly for getting news and for companionship (Bu, 2001). Young Chinese consumers are now exposing more to commercial sources, rather than interpersonal sources, for new product information (Chan, 2005b; McNeal and Ji, 1999).

The current study tries to explore whether and how television viewing and advertising exposure influence young people's materialistic values mediated by social comparison, and whether peer communication influences young people's materialistic values mediated by imitation of celebrity models. The study is of significance as it reveals the complex patterns of youth attitudes and behaviors in a former socialist country migrating to a capitalist country.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Peer communication reflects the level of interaction with friends. Young people who communicate frequently with peers may be exhibiting a strong need for peer approval. Therefore we offer the following hypothesis:

H1: Peer communication is positively related to social comparison.

Susceptibility to peer influence reflects a willingness to comply with the wishes of others (normative influence) and a willingness to accept and internalize information from others

(informative influence). It also reflects a person's need to identify or enhance one's image with significant others through material possessions (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel, 1989). As susceptibility to peer influence reflects the need to enhance the image that significant others hold of the individual, we expect that they will be positively related to social comparison. Therefore we offer H2:

H2: Susceptibility to peer influence is positively related to social comparison.

According to the Kasser et al. (2004) model, materialistic values are frequently found in popular culture, the media, and advertisements. People who are exposed to materialistic models are more likely than those who are not to take on materialistic values through modeling (Bandura, 1971) and internalization (Ryan & Connell, 1989). According to the cultivation theory of Gerbner et al. (1986), repeated television viewing shapes viewers' attitudes to be more consistent with the world presented in television programs.

As television often portrays an idealized picture of celebrities and their lives, it will encourage viewers to imitate the lifestyles of celebrity models. Empirical data shows that television exposure is positively correlated with materialism amongst children and adolescents in Western societies (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003; Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Kapferer, 1986; Moschis & Moore, 1982) and in Asian societies including those of China, Hong Kong, and South Korea (Chan, 2003; Cheung & Chan, 1996; Kwak, Zinkhan & DeLorme, 2002; Yang & Ganahl, 2004). Empirical data also shows a positive correlation between the influence of vicarious role models (favorite entertainers, favorite athletes) and adolescents' purchase intentions (Martin & Bush, 2000). Therefore we offer the following hypotheses:

H3: Young people who watch television more often will be more likely to imitate celebrity models.

Another pervasive source of materialistic models is advertising messages. Advertisements encourage consumption by using images of attractive and/or famous product users, demonstrating social reward through using products, and associating products with wealthy lifestyles (Kasser et

al., 2004). Empirical data demonstrates that young adult females often compare their physical attractiveness with that of the models in fashion and cosmetic advertisements (Richins, 1991).

We therefore suggest the following hypotheses:

H4: Young people who attend more to television commercials will be more likely to imitate celebrity models.

H5: Young people who have a higher motivation to view advertisements will be more likely to imitate celebrity models.

People who engage in upward social comparison have inflated expectations of their models' standards of living. The large gap between the ideal and actual standard of living triggers the desire for material possessions (Sirgy, 1998). Also if young people find the models in advertisements appealing and want to imitate these models, they will be more materialistic.

Hence, we offer the following two hypotheses:

H6: Social comparison will be positively related to materialism.

H7: Imitation of celebrity models will be positively related to materialism.

METHOD

To examine materialism, social comparison and imitation of celebrity models amongst young people, a survey was conducted in Beijing for a period of two weeks in October/November 2005. The target population was young people aged 18 to 24. The target respondents were undergraduate and graduate students. A student sample was justified because they were at the epicenter of the cultural phenomena being studied. One of the authors conducted the survey at Peking University and Beijing Normal University by distributing the questionnaires in classrooms immediately before or after class sessions, student dormitory and libraries. The questionnaires were self-administered by the respondents. It took about five to seven minutes to finish the questionnaires. Altogether 305 completed questionnaires were collected. Six

questionnaires were not included in the final sample because respondents were older than 24 years. The final sample size was 299.

There was nearly an equal distribution of males and females in the sample. A total of 20 percent of the sample was aged 15 to 19 and 8 percent was aged 20 to 24. All the respondents were university students. Fifty-two percent of the respondents had monthly household income below 2,000 RMB Yuan. Thirty-six percent had monthly household income ranging from 2,001 to 5,000 RMB Yuan. The remaining 13 percent had monthly household income more than 5,000 RMB Yuan.

A questionnaire was constructed based on a study of Chinese young consumers in Hong Kong (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). All of the constructs in the model were measured by multiple items, with the exception of respondents' attention to television commercials. That construct was measured by responses to the item "How often do you watch television commercials?" on a five-point scale (1 = never, 5 = nearly every time). Generally, the respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale the extent to which they agreed with the statements (1 = disagree very much, 5 = agree very much) or how frequently they engaged in a specific form of behavior (1 = never, 5 = nearly every time). Amount of television viewing was obtained by asking the number of hours of television viewing on a typical day.

Materialism was measured using the Richins and Dawson's (1992) conceptualization of materialism as a mind-set of attitudes regarding possessions as symbols of success, possessions occupying a central part of lives, and the belief that more possessions lead to more happiness. A shortened six-item version suggested by Richins (2004) was used. The inter-item reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.76. Factor analysis of the six items generated a one-factor solution that accounted for 46 percent.

Peer communication was measured by asking respondents to rate two items: "I discuss with my friends about advertisements", and "I discuss with my friends about buying things" on

five-point scales (1 = never, 5 = nearly every time). These items were selected from the Moschis and Moore (1982) study. The inter-item reliability was 0.62.

Susceptibility to peer influence was measured by asking respondents to rate six items: “if I don’t have a lot of experience with a product, I often ask my friends about it”, “I usually ask my friends to help me choose the best product”, “I look at what my friends are buying and using before I buy”, “it is important that my friends like the products and brands I buy”, “I only buy those products and brands that my friends will approve of”, and “I like to know what products and brands make a good impression on my friends”. These items were from a study by Mangleburg and Bristol (1998). The inter-item reliability was 0.71.

Motivation for viewing advertisements was measured by asking respondents to rate seven statements such as “I consume advertisements to know what brand has the product features I need” on five-point scales. Other motives include “...to know what I can buy to impress others”, “...to help me decide what things to buy”, “...to find out where I can buy some things I want”, “...to learn about the in-things”, “...to have something to talk about with others”, and “...to learn about the images of the hot-people”. These statements were selected and modified from Moschis and Moore’s (1982) study. The inter-item reliability was 0.79.

Social comparison was measured by asking respondents to rate four statements: “I pay attention to what my close friends buy”, “I pay attention to friends who are richer than me, and see what they buy”, “I pay attention to what brands my favorite movie stars and pop singers are using” and “I pay attention to the fashion styles of celebrities”. These statements were developed from Lennox and Wolfe’s (1984) scale of attention to social comparison information. The inter-item reliability was 0.72.

Imitation of celebrity models was measured by asking respondents to rate four statements: “I want to be as smart as movie idols”, “I want to be as stylist as people appearing in ads”, “I want to be as trendy as models in magazines” and “I do not aspire to the lifestyle of celebrities

(reverse coded)". These statements were developed based on the concept "exposure to materialistic models" in Kasser et al's (2004) framework. The inter-item reliability was 0.71.

Television viewing was measured by calculating the average number of hours spent watching TV per day. For obvious reasons, radio was not included in this study since radio carries no visuals, hence making imitation of celebrity models difficult. Youth magazine was not included in this study either, since young magazines are not popular among youth in Beijing.

Using these scales, a draft questionnaire was prepared. One of the authors translated the questionnaire from English to Chinese and it was back-translated by a graduate employed as research assistant to check for translation accuracy. The questionnaire was pre-tested and revised for clarity and accuracy by personally interviewing five young people aged 18 to 20 in Beijing.

RESULTS

Respondents, on average, watched television for 0.8 hours per day (equivalent to 5.6 hours per week). Descriptive statistics on the measured variables are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2 summarizes respondents' response to the statements about materialism. They are sorted in descending order of the mean scores. The statements that they agreed with most indicated that respondents like to buy more possessions and perceived that possessions can reflect their conditions in life. The statement with the lowest mean indicated that respondents did not have a high aspiration to own luxurious possessions. The mean and the standard deviation of materialism scores were 3.0 and 0.7 respectively.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Table 3 shows the correlation matrix of all variables involved in the regression analysis. Path analysis was used to test the theoretical model shown in Figure 1. There were three steps in the regression models. In the first step, peer communication and susceptibility to peer influence

were used to predict social comparison. In the second step, television viewing, attention to television advertisements and motivation for viewing advertisements were used to predict imitation of celebrity models. In the third step, social comparison and imitation of celebrity models were used to predict the materialism scores of the respondents. Table 4 shows the results of the multiple regression analysis, and Figure 2 shows the resulting path diagram.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In the first step of the regression analysis, the two variables accounted for 14 percent of the variance in social comparison. Both the two predictors were significant. Respondents who frequently engaged in communication with friends were more likely to compare possessions with others. As a result, H1 was supported. Respondents who reported higher levels of peer influence were more likely to engage in social comparison. As a result, H2 was supported.

In the second step of the regression analysis, the three variables (TV viewing, attention to television commercials, motivation for viewing advertisements) together accounted for 17 percent of the variance in imitation of celebrity models. Only one predictor, i.e. motivation for viewing advertisements, had a positive and significant beta value. The other two predictors were not significant. The average hours of watching television and attention to television advertisements were not related to the imitation of celebrity models. As a result, H3 and H4 were rejected. However, respondents who had a high motivation for viewing advertisements were more likely to imitate celebrity models. As a result, H5 was supported.

In the third step of the regression analysis, the two variables accounted for 35 percent of the variance in materialism. Both social comparison and imitation of celebrity models had significant beta values. Respondents who frequently compared possessions with others were more materialistic. As a result, H6 was supported. Respondents who had a high intention to imitate celebrity models were more materialistic. Therefore, H7 was supported.

As the R squares of all three steps of regression analysis were significant at the 0.05 level, the model shown in Figure 1 was supported. The total effect of a particular path can be compiled

by multiplying the corresponding standardized beta coefficients. According to the total effects compiled, the effect of motivation for viewing advertisements via imitation of celebrity models had the highest total effect (0.20), followed by peer communication via social comparison (0.03) and the effect of susceptibility to peer influence via social comparison (0.03). The materialism scores were higher for those who had a higher motivation for viewing advertisements and who were more eager to imitate the lifestyles of celebrity models, as well as those who had higher levels of peer communications and social comparison.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our research question addressed the effect of peer and advertising communication on materialism. We first examined the impact of peer communication on materialism. As we hypothesized, peer communication was positively correlated with social comparison. The level of peer communication reflects the frequency of peer interaction. Respondents who frequently communicate about advertisements and consumption with friends are more likely to engage in social comparison. This may be because much of their communication is about possessions and brands.

The findings indicate that susceptibility to peer influence was related to social comparison. This shows that respondents who attempted to comply with the expectation of friends were more likely to engage in social comparison. This may be because when someone needs to comply with others, s-he will have a higher need for information about the desirable images from others.

Contrary to what we hypothesized, exposure to television had no correlation with imitation of celebrity models. We think this may be because the national (i.e. CCTV) and the major regional television stations are owned by the state government and it has strict rules about the contents of television programming. A recent content analysis indicated that television programs

for children and adolescents in China are highly educational and they reflect traditional collectivism, high power-distance and masculine values (Chan & Chan, 2004). Domestic television programs often present model children performing unselfish deeds for the nation (Donald, 2002). We speculate that the prevalence of traditional values in television programs in China may explain why spending more time on watching television does not trigger more materialistic values. Attention to television advertisements also had no correlation with imitation of celebrity models. However, attention to television commercials was measured by only one item. Amongst the three variables, motivation for viewing advertisements of was the only significant predictor of imitation of celebrity models. Respondents who had a strong motivation to consume advertisements were more likely to adopt celebrities as their role models. This indicates that advertisements were used by respondents as forms of information about idealized self-images. A snapshot of television commercials for young consumers in China found that famous sports athletes, popular singers and movie stars were often adopted as endorsers for clothing, soft drinks and shoes. For example, Liu Xiang, the 110-meter hurdles Olympic winner, endorsed Nike shoes and Coke.

As we hypothesized, social comparison had a positive correlation with materialism. Respondents who compare their possessions with the possessions of friends and media celebrities come to believe that possessions are related to success and happiness, and that possessions occupy a central position in life. It can also be interpreted as showing that those who place a high importance on material possessions are keen to engage in social comparison. The measurement of social comparison in this study included upward comparison only. So, the findings support the idea that upward social comparison encourages materialistic aspirations.

Also as we hypothesized, imitation of celebrity models had a positive correlation with materialism. Media celebrities are heavily used by advertisers to endorse products. Imitation of celebrity models was a better predictor of materialism than social comparison. This may be because celebrity models are more likely to be associated with upscale spending and consumption

of luxurious brands. As all the respondents are students and none of them have full time jobs, it is expected that their disposable incomes will be equally low. Peer communication and peer influence are not as prominent as media images in triggering social comparison and materialism. As a result, imitation of celebrities has a closer link with the importance of possessions than social comparison.

To conclude, our study has examined the extent to which young consumers in urban China endorse materialistic values, and provides empirical support for a proposed theoretical model.

The current study has two limitations. First, it is important to note that the sample used in this study was not a probability sample, so the findings cannot be generalized to an entire target population. Second, the use of reverse-worded statements may cause confusion in the East Asian context (Wong, Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2003). Nonetheless, it is possible to draw significant conclusions from the study. As the materialism score for the sample was not significantly differed from the mid-point ($t = -0.01$, $df = 298$, $p = 0.99$), we can conclude that Chinese young consumers have neutral materialistic values. Further cross-cultural study is needed to compare materialism amongst young people and working adults to examine whether there is a significant change with important life events, such as entering the work force or forming a new family. Further research is also needed to explore the details of social comparison, including whether same-sex or opposite-sex models are being used for comparison. Finally, the types of goods being compared and the motivation for social comparison should be explored qualitatively.

Limitations aside, our study has shown that when youth have higher levels of communication with peers, and are more vulnerable to their influence, they tend to engage in social comparison more often. And, when youth are highly motivated to use advertisements as a guide for what products to buy, they tend to have a stronger desire to imitate celebrity models. In turn, both social comparison and imitation of celebrity models predicted materialism. Based on our argument that materialism is a negative trait, our study has shed light on the possible influences that might be the focus of attention of those who are interested in reducing levels of materialism amongst youth. Media educators should

help young consumers to reflect on how their purchase decisions are influenced by the social relations, including both personal interaction and celebrity-media communications. Discouraging upward social comparison and imitation of idols is expected to discourage the endorsement of materialistic values.

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Figure 1 Theoretical framework

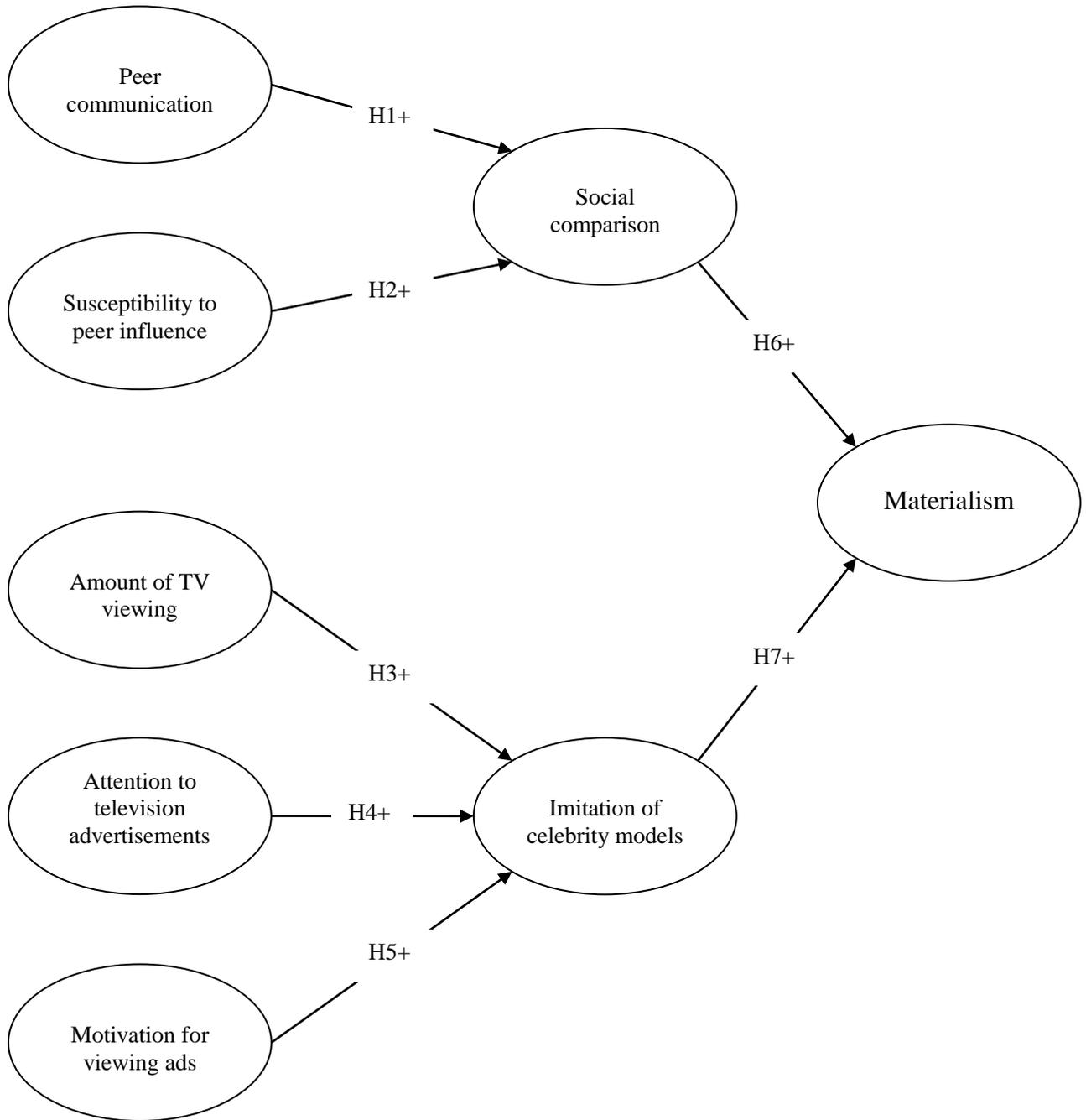
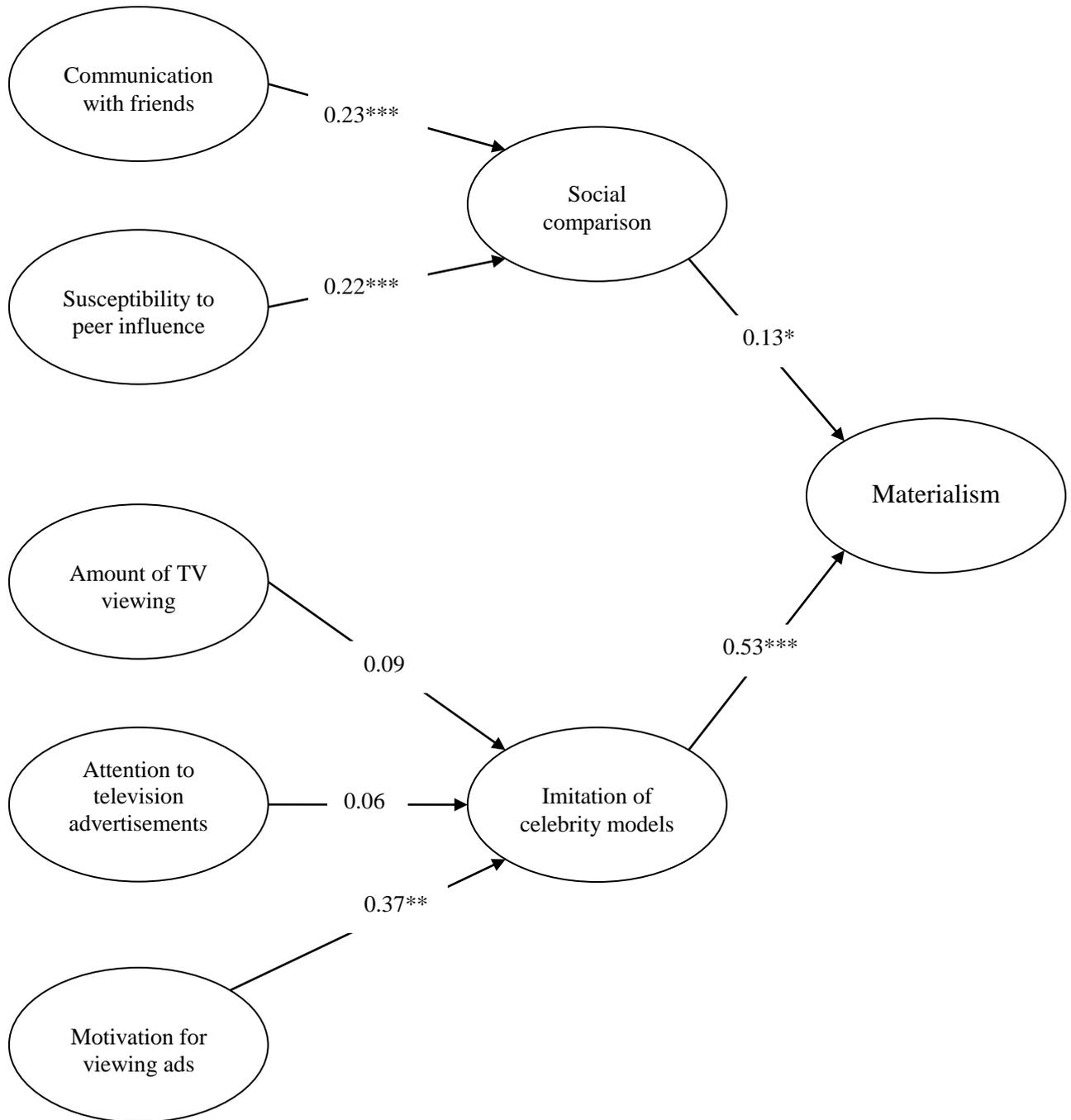


Figure 2 Results of path analysis



*p < 0.05

**p < 0.01

***p < 0.001

Table 1 Summary of descriptive statistics:

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness
Peer communication	3.0	0.7	-0.6
Peer influence	3.0	0.6	-0.9
Social comparison	2.4	0.7	0.3
Television viewing (hours per day)	0.8	1.4	8.5
Attention to TV advertisements	2.8	0.9	-0.4
Motivation for viewing ads	2.8	0.6	-0.7
Imitation of celebrity models	2.6	0.7	0.2
Materialism	3.0	0.7	-0.4

Table 2 Respondents' materialistic value orientations

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	3.5	1.0
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	3.2	1.0
My life would be better if I owned things I don't have.	3.2	1.0
Buying things gives me a lot of life.	3.0	1.1
I admire people who own expensive houses, cars and clothes.	2.7	1.1
I enjoy a lot of luxury in my life.	2.5	1.1

Table 3 Pearson correlation of variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
materialism, 1		0.17**	0.36***	0.33***	0.08	0.27***	0.46***	0.58***
peer communication , 2			0.38***	0.32***	0.04	0.18***	0.31***	0.06
peer influence, 3				0.31***	0.05	0.23***	0.49***	0.19***
social comparison, 4					0.15*	0.25***	0.47***	0.39***
TV viewing, 5						0.10	0.13*	0.14*
attention to TV advertisements, 6							0.40***	0.20***
motivation for viewing ads: 7								0.39***
imitation of celebrities, 8								

*p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p<0.001

Table 4 Summary of the regression analysis for the theoretical model

Step/predictors	Standardized beta	t stat for beta = 0
Step 1 (to predict social comparison)		
Peer communication	0.23	4.0***
Susceptibility to peer influence	0.22	3.8***
Step 2 (to predict imitation of celebrity models)		
TV viewing	0.09	1.7
Attention to TV advertisements	0.06	1.0
Motivation for viewing ads	0.37	6.4***
Step 3 (to predict materialism)		
Social comparison	0.13	2.5*
Imitation of celebrity models	0.53	10.4***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

R square = 0.14 for Step 1 ($p < 0.001$); R square = 0.17 for Step 2 ($p < 0.001$);
R square = 0.35 for Step 3 ($p < 0.001$)

Biography

Dr Kara Chan is Professor at the Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University where she teaches course in advertising. She worked in the advertising and public relations profession and as a statistician for the Hong Kong Government. She is author of over thirty articles on advertising and consumer behavior in Hong Kong and China. She is a Fulbright Scholar at Bradley University, Illinois for 1999 to 2000. She co-author *Advertising to Children in China* (Chinese University Press, 2004) with Professor James McNeal and is the editor of *Advertising and Hong Kong Society* (Chinese University Press, 2006).

Cong Zhang is Master of Philosophy graduate student at the Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. She graduated from the Peking University.