

## Material world

Chan, Kara

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## **Children's perceptions of material possessions in urban China**

Keywords: China -- children -- perception -- materialism

Dr. Kara Chan  
Associate Professor  
Department of Communication Studies  
Hong Kong Baptist University  
Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong  
Phone: (852) 3411 7836 Fax: (852) 3411 7890  
email: karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

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## **Children's perceptions of material possessions in urban China**

### **Abstract**

To explore urban Chinese children's perceptions of material possessions, fifteen elementary school children ages 6 to 12 were asked to draw pictures to illustrate two statements: "This child has a lot of new and expensive stuff," and "This child does not have much cool stuff." Children were personally interviewed to elaborate on their drawings, and to answer four questions about material possessions to happiness, friendship, and feeling good about oneself. The results suggest that most respondents, even young children associated material possessions with happiness, friendship, and feeling good about themselves. On the negative side, abundant material possessions are perceived to be wasteful, selfish, and weak in academic results. Nine out of the fifteen respondents reported that they would choose to be the child that did not have much cool stuff. Sources of socialization of these values are discussed.

## **Children's perceptions of material possessions in urban China**

Parents and educators have been increasingly concerned about the adoption of materialistic values among children as it will affect the balance between private and public choices children make throughout life (Goldberg, Gorn, Peracchio & Bamossy 2003). Rapid commercialization of childhood as a result of economic restructuring, new affluence and innovative retailing practices is occurring in both western and Asian societies. However, the one-child policy and the soaring economic development in China have enabled materialism to grow at a fast pace across all social strata in China (Davis & Sensenbrenner 2000).

There are 57 million children aged 4-12 in urban China alone. Chinese children have become the focal point of the family and they exert tremendous influence on household purchases (McNeal & Yeh 1997). The new generation of young Chinese consumers are more exposed, to and more open to, commercial sources than interpersonal sources for new product information (McNeal & Ji 1999). Chinese children were subjected to the influence of (1) communistic values that emphasized personal sacrifice and to contribute to the state and mankind (2) Confucian values about frugality and saving up for long-term needs, and (3) materialistic values about spending money for personal needs. Previous study of materialistic values among children in the Western societies did not take into account the communistic and the Confucian values. China is going through a period of rapid economic development and important social changes are occurring. The study of meaning and perception of material

possessions among Chinese children will yield important insights into the evolution of value systems in developing nations and the socialization of such kind of values.

The objective of the current study is to investigate how children in urban China perceive about material possessions. Do more possessions mean more happiness, more friends, and higher self-esteem? As children are most familiar with possession of toys, the study will ask children how and what they think about children with or without a lot of toys and other cool stuff.

### **Literature review**

In John's (1999) model, consumer socialization is viewed as a developmental process that navigates 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 something. During the analytical stage (ages 7-11), children begin to understand the value of possessions based on social meaning and significance. They place value on material possessions that help them to develop social relations, achieve social status and enhance self-fulfilment. As the children enter the reflective stage (ages 11-16), they fully understand the value of possessions based on social meaning, significance, and scarcity.

In an experimental study, three groups of boys aged four to five (the first two groups saw an ad for a new toy while the third group was a control) were more likely to choose a hypothetical playmate who was "not so nice" but owned the new toy, than a playmate who was "very nice" but did not own the new

toy (Goldberg & Gorn 1974). In a similar setting, children were also asked to choose between two play situations: either playing alone with the new toy or playing in a sandbox with friends. About one third of the control group chose to play with the new toy, while the majority of the two experimental groups chose to play with the new toy. The study demonstrated that very young children value the possession of material goods and accessing a new toy could sometimes be favoured over playing with friends.

In a study of reasons for collecting among first and fifth graders, it was found that younger children liked collecting because it made them feel that they owned more than others. Older children liked collecting as a way of making themselves unique and feeling good about themselves. Younger children often compared their possessions to those of others in terms of quantity while older children compared in terms of specialty (Baker & Gentry 1996).

Seeing the importance of the concept of materialism and materialistic values in consumer socialization, scholars have proposed various conceptual and operational definitions for it. Ward and Wackman (1971, p.426) operationally defined materialism as “orientation emphasizing possession and money for personal happiness and social progress”. It was measured by summing responses (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to six items like “It is really true that money can buy happiness.” This measure has been used in many studies (Buijzen & Valkenburg 2003; Churchill & Moschis 1979; Moschis & Moore 1982). 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 consisted of three factors (envy, non-generosity, and possessiveness).

Richins and Dawson (1990) conceptualize materialism to consist of success, centrality, and happiness.

To conclude, the review of literature shows that children understand the concept of possession and value it from a very young age. The concept of materialism embraces perception and attitudes toward possession, the link between possession, happiness and success, the relative importance of possession and other life goals, the willingness to share, and the attitudes toward people who own a lot of possessions.

### **Consumer environment in urban China**

Despite the rapid economic growth in China, a majority of its urban population had monthly household incomes below 10,000 yuan (equivalent to USD1,200). An analysis of China's urban consumers based on a national sample survey in 1997 found four distinctive market segments that were labelled as working poor, salary class, little rich and yuppies. The largest group was working poor who made up 55 percent of the population, and was the least satisfied with their current conditions. They refrained from costly leisure activities and were the least brand conscious. Most of their income went to necessities (Cui & Liu 2001). Until recently, a wide range of consumer goods was not available to the average Chinese consumer, and the consumption of goods and services was very limited (Kim, Forsythe, Gu & Moon 2002). Mass consumption in China assumes Confucian characteristics that place strong emphasis on family and personal relationships. A dominant share of a family's income is spent on the child as a necessary investment in the child's health and intelligence. The investment in the child is

expected to pay off to the parents and the extended family when the child grows up to be a success (Zhao 1997).

As a form of social and cultural communication, advertising is a carrier of consumer cultural values (Pollay 1986). An analysis of children's television advertisements in China indicates that they reflect China's traditional cultural values and its social and economic conditions. For example, the presentation mode and information content reflect China's high uncertainty avoidance tendency. The lesser portrayal of fun/happiness and adventure, and the usage of related settings, music, and animation reflect China's collectivism tradition. The use of uniqueness and popularity values on the other hand indicate a shift towards Western values (Ji & McNeal 2001). A content analysis of television commercials (for adults as well as children) broadcast in Mainland China in 1993 and 1998 conducted by Chan and Cheng (2002) indicates that the consumer cultural values most frequently used represent a good mix of eastern values (family, tradition and collectivism) and western values (modernity and technology and youth). Children's television programming also reflects the influx of mass consumption in urban China. An analysis of a popular children's television program indicates that the most frequently featured consumption activities were travel, visiting theme parks and buying toys. The most frequently portrayed rewards for consumption are enjoyment and practicality (Xia, Chan & Chan 2004). To conclude, the consumer values reflected in Chinese television media are a mix of both traditional as well as western values.



## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedures*

Respondents were fifteen grade 1 to 6 students, ages 6 to 12 years, who were recruited from an elementary school in Beijing, China. Beijing was selected as a representative site for a study of cities with more advanced development of advertising. There were eight boys and seven girls. The average age was 9.6 years. The fifteen respondents represent three different age ranges (6 to 8, 9 to 10 and 11 to 12 years). A female master's degree student of Peking University assisted with the contacts with the school and the parents, and assisted in conducting the interviews. The researchers obtained verbal consent of the parents of the participating children through the classroom teachers. According to the school principal, the sample of children came mainly from working class families.

The study was conducted in three sessions in June 2004 in the classrooms when the school days were over. Children of the same age range were placed in the same session. Each child was given a piece of paper (size: 11.5 inches in height and 16 inches in width). The paper had two blank boxes of equal size. On top of the left box and the right box, there are two statements "This child has a lot of new and expensive stuff" and "This child does not have much cool stuff" respectively. The children were asked to draw what comes to their mind for each of these two statements. They were told that there were no right or wrong drawings, that they would not be graded, and that they were not supposed to look at the drawings of others. When they completed the drawings, they handed them to the researchers. The researchers then

conducted personal interviews with the participants individually in a nearby classroom away from the other participants. The children were asked to elaborate on their drawings. After that, four questions were asked: “Are these two children happy?”, “Do these two children have friends?”, “Do these two children feel good about themselves?”, and “If you have a choice, which one do you want to be?”. Each interview took about 10 to 15 minutes. One of the researchers recorded the interview and later transcribed it in both Chinese and English.

## **Findings**

### **The drawings**

All the drawings showed significant differences between the two illustrations in terms of quantity of toys and cool stuff. The first picture on the left (corresponds to the statement “This child has a lot of new and expensive stuff”) was jammed with toys and games. On average, there were 13 toys or play items for each picture. The actual average could be higher because one picture contained a safe box where the most expensive toys were kept. Among all the toys and play items displayed in the drawings, only one carried the brand name. It was a Barbie doll drawn by an 11-year old girl. Brand names of Sony and Adidas occurred on a television set and the clothing of a boy drawn by an 11-year old boy. There were marked differences in the types of toys drawn. Boys were more likely to include trains, guns, swords, tankers, rockets, videogames, and CD-ROMs in the drawings. Girls were more likely to include stuffed animals and dolls in the drawings. The second picture on the right (corresponds to the statement

“This child does not have much cool stuff”) was quite empty. Eight pictures showed the absence of any toy or play items. Three pictures showed an average of three toy items. One picture showed five broken toys and one picture showed five toys with wings and speech balloons saying ‘bye-bye’. One picture showed four game cards in a shop where a mother is pulling the child away from the cards. Two pictures showed there were books and stationery. None of the items drawn carried brand names.

Eleven pictures showed that the children were playing alone in both boxes. One picture showed there were playmates in both boxes. One picture showed a playmate on the left hand side but no playmate on the right hand side. One picture did not show any child in either box. One picture showed a child with her mother in both boxes.

Altogether there were eleven speech balloons or descriptions about the child with a lot of possessions. In seven pictures, the child said, “it’s real fun!” In two pictures, the child said, “these are all mine.” In one picture, the child said, “I have more toys than I have time to play with.” In one picture, the child said, “I want a Barbie and a sewing machine.” Altogether there were twelve speech balloons or descriptions about the child with few possessions. In five pictures, the child was described as not having many things to play with. In four pictures, the child said that it was real boring (accompanied with a sad or an annoyed face). In one picture, the child said, “I really want a videogame player, some CD-ROMs and a remote control car.” In one picture, the child sighed and said, “other people got it but not me. But, I have a strong heart.” In one picture, the child said, “I don’t have many toys, but I am happy.”

## **The interviews**

### **Possession and happiness**

When asked whether the two children in the drawings were happy, all five children aged 6 to 8 perceived that the child with a lot of possession would be happy while the child with a few possessions would be unhappy.

‘The first child is happy because she has a lot of cool stuff. The second one is not happy because she has no toys. Unlike other children, she doesn’t have a happy childhood’ (Girl, 7).

The direct link between possessions and happiness seem to weaken for older respondents. Four out of ten children aged 9 to 12 perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be happy and the child with a few possessions would be unhappy. The other six thought that both of them would be happy. They perceived that a child with a few possessions would get pleasure from other means, such as playing with friends, reading books, performing well in study and doing exercise.

‘I think both of them are happy, because the first kid has many expensive toys, and the second one can get pleasure from books.’ (Girl, 10)

‘I think both of them are happy. The first kid is satisfied with material goods and feels happy. The second one has something that other kids don’t have, such as a brave heart or doing well in study. So both of them are happy now. But the second child will be unhappy in the future. As he grows up, he will look for material goods. Then he will be unhappy.’ (Girl, 11)

‘Both of them are happy. The first kid has many toys and he can play with them. The second kid with a few toys can play with his friends instead of the toys.’ (Boy, 12)

## Possession and social relations

When the children were asked whether the two children in the drawing have friends, all five children aged 6 to 8 perceiving that the first child with a lot of possessions had many friends while the second one with a few possessions did not. Again, the logic was straightforward. Toys mean fun. Friends are looking for fun. So, a child with fewer toys will attract fewer friends.

‘Children like to play with the first kid, because he has a lot of cool stuff to play with. The second one has fewer toys and other children will think that it is boring to play with him.’ (Girl, 6)

‘The first kid has many friends, because he likes to share with others. The second one doesn’t have many friends, because he does not dare to make friends. He was afraid that friendship will be destroyed if his friends find out that he has only a few toys.’ (Boy, 8)

Older children were less likely to perceive a strong link between possessions and good social relations. Two out of ten children aged 9 to 12 perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would have more friends. For the remaining eight children, seven reported that the child with few possessions would have more friends. They perceived that the child with a lot of possessions would be self-centred and would look down on others. Also, his friends were unable to keep up with the new toys that he got. The child with few possessions would have a lot of friends because s-he was kind, sensible, and good-hearted. Others pity him or her too.

‘The first kid doesn’t have many friends, for he always looks down on others. The second one has more friends, because he has less cool stuff. Most of his toys are broken. Other children will pity him and play with him.’ (Girl, 9)

‘The second kid has more friends. The reason is that the first one always plays alone and seldom makes contacts with other children. The second kid makes friends with many kids.’ (Girl, 10)

‘The first child has fewer friends. Most kids don’t like to play with him. The second child has many friends and they all like to play with him. Because the first child is overbearing and arrogant while the second one is not.’ (Boy, 12)

One respondent perceived that both of them would have many friends.

‘Both of them have many friends. Many children can play with the cool stuff of the first child that they don’t have, such as toys and stationery. They are the first kid’s good friends. The second child is pure-hearted and generous, which makes him popular in school.’ (Girl, 11)

### **Possession and self-esteem**

When asked whether the two children in the drawings feel good about themselves, four of the five respondents in the age group 6 to 8 and three of the ten respondents aged 10 to 12 perceived that the first child would feel good about himself/herself while the second one would not.

‘The first one feels good about herself because she has a lot of cool stuff and friends, and her family is wealthy. The second one’s family is poor and she has no friends. So she feels bad about herself.’ (Girl, 7)

‘The first one feels good about himself because he has both toys and friends. The second one does not because he has fewer toys and fewer friends. His only friend stays with him because he wants to read his book, not to play with him.’ (Boy, 8)

One of the five respondents aged 6 to 8 and six of the ten respondents aged 9 to 12 reported that both children in the drawings felt 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 a fit body.

‘Both of them feel good about themselves. The first kid with many toys thinks that nobody else has the same toys as his. The second one works hard and does well in his studies.’ (Girl, 10)

‘Both of them feel proud of themselves. The first kid is proud of his wealth while the second one is proud of his fit body.’ (Boy, 10)

‘Both of them are proud of themselves. Because the first child is proud of his toys, and the second child is proud of his friendship.’ (Boy, 12)

Only one respondent indicated that the second child would be proud of herself while the first child would not.

‘The second one is proud of herself because she does well in study. The first one is not because she is arrogant and other children don’t like to make friends with her.’ (Girl, 10)

### **Aspiration for possession**

The last question asked the respondents which child s-he wants to be. This question attempts to measure children’s value orientation. Nine out of the fifteen respondents reported that they wanted to be the second one, i.e. the one with a few possessions. To our surprise, despite of all the fun and friendships perceived to be associated with possessions among the younger respondents, four of the five respondents aged 6 to 8 and five of the ten respondents aged 9 to 12 wanted to be the one with a few possessions. The reasons were that they didn’t want to waste money, they would not regret it when they grow up, they wanted to have more friends, to be knowledgeable and successful.

‘I wish to be the second one. Although her family is poor, she can play by herself. It doesn’t matter

to have few friends. She can ask people to donate toys to her so that she will have some toys. What's more, there will not be enough space for too many toys. We don't need toys when we grow up, so it will be a lot of waste to throw toys away. The second child has many books, which makes him more knowledgeable than the rich kid. The first kid knows nothing but playing. Toys can't make him intelligent.' (Girl, 7)

'I wish to be the second one, because he will do well in study and become an important government officer in the future. He will be a knowledgeable man and have a successful life.' (Boy, 8)

'I want to be the second child because he has a lot of good friends. There is an ancient Chinese saying that a man suffering the most bitterness will eventually excel in life.' (Boy, 12)

Three children stated that they wanted to be the first kid with lots of toys. The remaining three respondents were ambitious. They wanted to have the good qualities of both children.

'I wish to own the good things of both of them. I like to be sociable like the first kid and to love reading like the second kid.' (Boy, 8)

'I wish to be both. Isn't it great to be wealthy as well as popular at the same time?' (Boy, 12)

## **Discussion and suggestions for future research**

Figure 1 summarizes the positive and negative associations with children who do or do not have a lot of possessions mentioned in the personal interviews. It demonstrates that children, even at very young ages (i.e. age 6 to 8), were able to express the value of possessions based on their emotional attachment (i.e. fun and excitement), social meaning (i.e. the ability to attract friends), and relationship with future success and self-esteem. So, there is 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. Our study reveals that children in the perceptual stage differ from



children in the analytical and reflective stages on the complexity of the perceived relationship between material possessions and social meaning and significance. Both the drawings and the personal interviews indicate that younger children are simple and direct. They perceived that more possessions mean strictly more fun, more friends and higher self-esteem. For children in the analytical and reflective stages, the link between material possessions and social significance becomes more complex. They perceived that more possessions could bring more fun and more friends, but at the same time, could also trigger selfishness, envy, and arrogance. Most important of all, older children believed strongly that having a lot of toys and cool stuff would have a negative impact on scholarly pursuit. They perceived that play and study are rivals. They could not perceive the possibility of having a lot of toys and books at the same time. They also could not perceive that toys can aid learning.

The researcher was quite surprised to find that even young children expressed some anti-materialistic value orientation. For very young children who are more egocentric, it was expected that they would prefer to be the ones with a lot of possessions. There is a strong normative belief about the virtues of frugality and the evil of wastefulness that serve as deterrents to aspirations of material possessions. Children also demonstrated a strong preference for delayed reward and a “bitter now and sweet later” situation. For example, a boy aged eight kept talking to us about ‘regret’. He could not explain to us what he may regret. He just expressed a deep conviction that he would regret it later if he enjoyed a lot of cool stuff now. Young children’s response to the fourth question indicates there are strong

external socializing forces that are shaping children's perceptions and attitudes toward material possessions. There is evidence to believe that schools and parents are playing an important role in shaping children's value orientations. All elementary children in China need to attend at least one session of moral education in schools. An analysis of the stories in textbooks on moral education indicates that there is strong emphasis on frugality (Committee on Teaching Materials of Elementary School's Moral Education and Secondary School's Political Education 2002). Children are taught from early childhood about how to use household goods properly, how to conserve natural resources, and they should be content with what they have. The reason offered for frugality is that it contributes to communistic values. A grade 5 textbook on moral education explained that all possessions (whether belonging to individuals, groups or the nation) were the fruits of hard labour of the collective people in the country. Frugality should be glorified and wasteful behaviours should be condemned (Committee on Teaching Materials of Elementary School's Moral Education and Secondary School's Political Education 2002). Materialistic values are discouraged in schools. One of the moral guidelines for school-aged children is "Live a simple life. Don't be choosy in what you wear and what you eat. Don't spend money irresponsibly" (Chan & McNeal 2004). Parents also discourage endorsement of materialistic values at home. In our focus group interviews with parents of school aged children, parents reported that when they discussed consumption with children, they always encouraged children "to live within means, to save as much as possible, and to refrain from buying luxurious goods". We think that parents attempt to suppress children's aspirations for

material possessions for two reasons. First, given the low household income, a majority of Chinese families will not be able to satisfy most of the children's purchase requests. In order to reduce parent-child conflicts, parents will teach children not to put too much emphasis on material possessions. Secondly, parents are afraid that material possessions (mainly toys and play items) will distract children from concentrating on their studies.

A previous study of Chinese children in Hong Kong indicated that younger children were more materialistic (Chan 2003). The author attributed it to consumer dissatisfaction with possessions among older children, the understanding of the value of possessions that goes beyond quantity and social desirability. The more complex link between material possessions and social significance perceived by older children provide us with one more possible reason to explain why older children were found to be less materialistic. 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 and cool stuff is wasteful and will have negative impact on academic achievement, 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 is wasteful', 'owning a lot of toys is less knowledgeable', and 'I like to own fewer toys so that I can concentrate on studies' should be added in future studies.

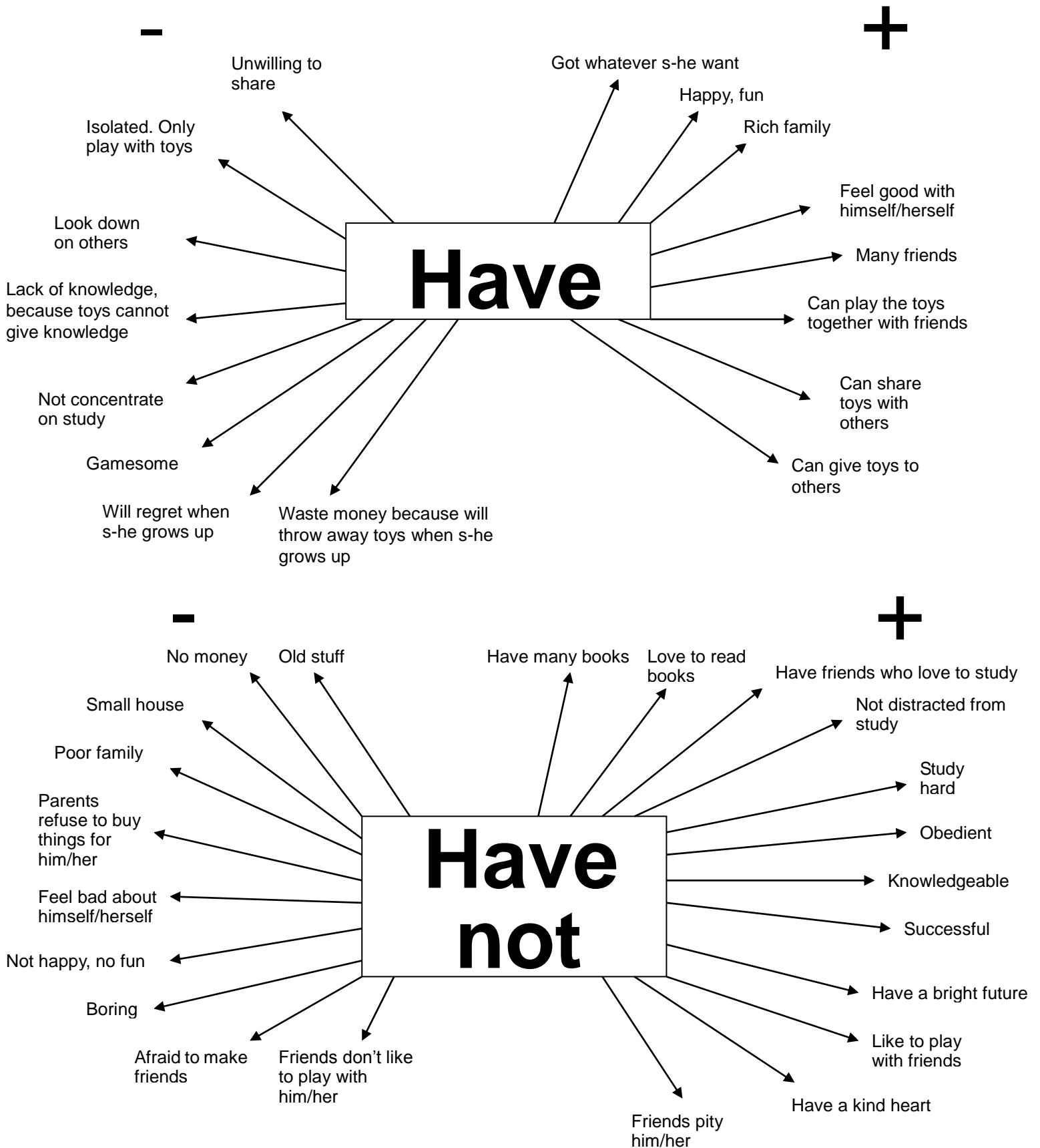
One phenomenon observed in the current study is the preference for delayed reward among

children. Two respondents who preferred to be the one with few possessions mentioned that they wished to be successful in the future so as to “buy more toys later on”. If materialistic values are suppressed in childhood, it will be interesting to ask when will be a legitimate time to search for materialism in the Chinese context. Another question will be ‘Will Chinese children whose material aspirations are suppressed to a greater extent become more materialistic later on than those whose material aspirations are not suppressed’? Further longitudinal research is needed to answer these questions. The implication for marketers of children’s products in China is that they should be aware of the possible negative connotations attached to the value of possessions among older children. Advertising campaigns should encourage the instrumental materialism of how to use material goods to achieve a successful future. The current study has the limitation of a very small sample of a total of fifteen students and only five in each age group. It is difficult to generalize the results from such a small number of children. This study merely points the way for a larger-scale study to determine if the results hold up.

(4920 words for text)

**Figure 1**

Positive and negative associations with persons who have or have not a lot of possessions



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