

Perception of possessions and personality traits among urban children

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Objectives

- **To examine how urban children in China perceive the link between material possessions and personality**

Theoretical framework

- **People use material good as an instrument to assess social identity information, including social class, status, personality, and social relationship (Belk, Bahn, and Mayer, 1982; Dittmar, 1989, 1991)**

Theoretical framework

- **John's (1999) model of consumer socialization: developmental point of view**
- **Younger children's understanding of material possessions is based on surface feature**
- **Older children's understanding of material possessions is based on its social meaning, significance, and scarcity**

Chinese cultural values

- **A central factor in children's consumer socialization comes from culture**
- **Traditional Chinese values: frugality, long term orientation, personal virtues more important than possessions; possessions to mark one's position in the society; social 'face'**
- **Communist values: personal sacrifice for the interest of the community; respect the fruit of laboring;**
- **consumption values: consume for personal enjoyment**

Purpose of the study

- **Specifically, to what extent children are using information about a person's possessions as indicators of happiness, success in academic performance, and social relations with others?**

Previous study

- **Chan, K. (2006). Exploring children's perception of material possessions: A drawing study, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9 (4), 352–66.**

Figure 1.

This child has a lot of new and expensive toys.

This child does not have a lot of toys.



The drawing

- **On the left hand side, the girl is happy with all the toys, and the comfortable living conditions**
- **On the right hand side, the girl is crying because of lack of toys and the poor living conditions**

Hypotheses from Chan's (2006b) study

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

Research method

- A survey of children in grade 4-6 in Guangzhou, a large city in south China (n = 268, $M = 11.4$ years, $SD = 1.1$)
- Paper-and-pencil questionnaires distributed in normal class session
- Showing two pictures (both girls or both boys) with the description of child A: This child has a lot of new and expensive toys; and child B: This child does not have a lot of toys

Questionnaire 1

Child A



Child B



Questionnaire 2

Child A



Child B

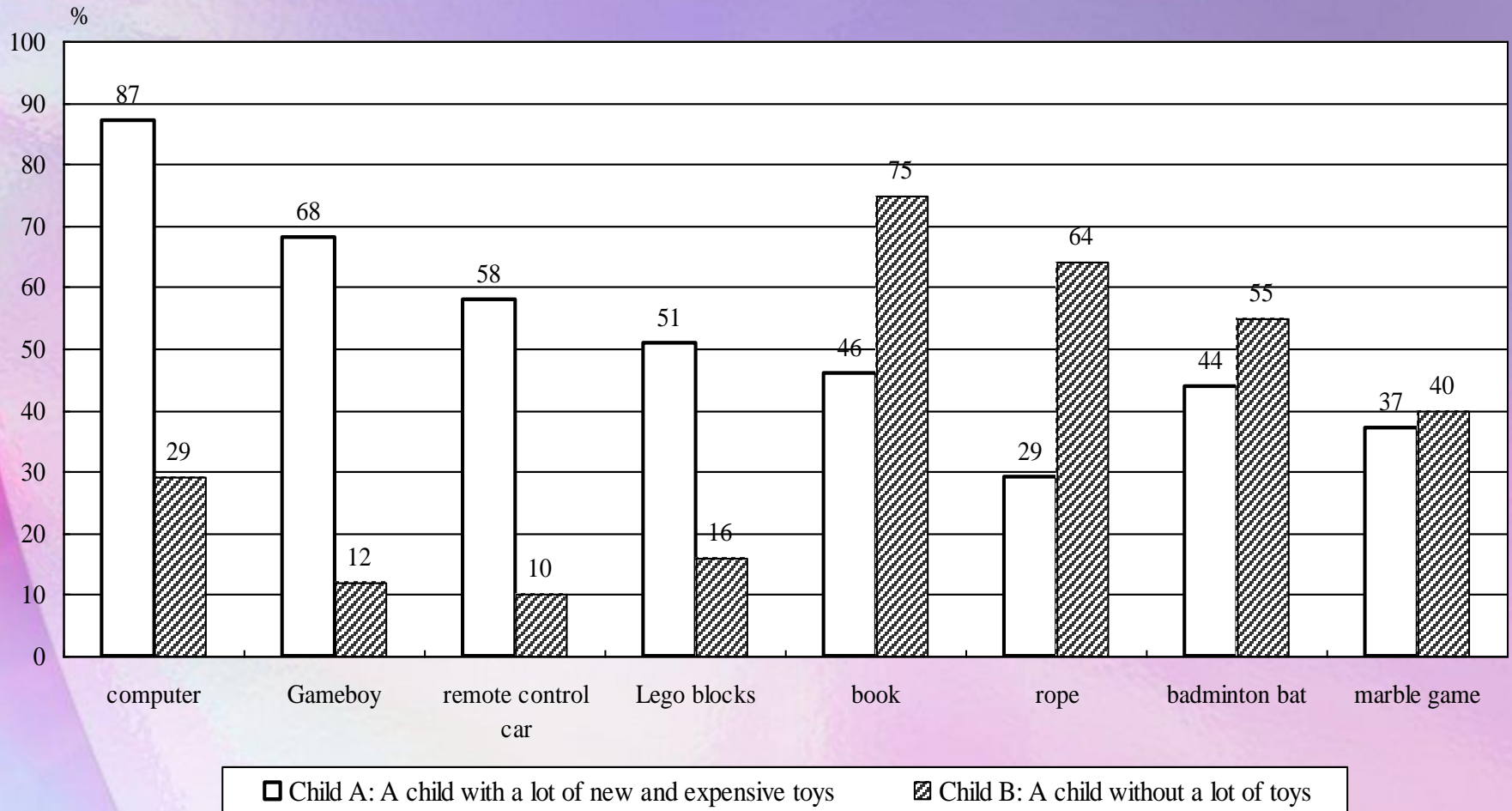


Research method

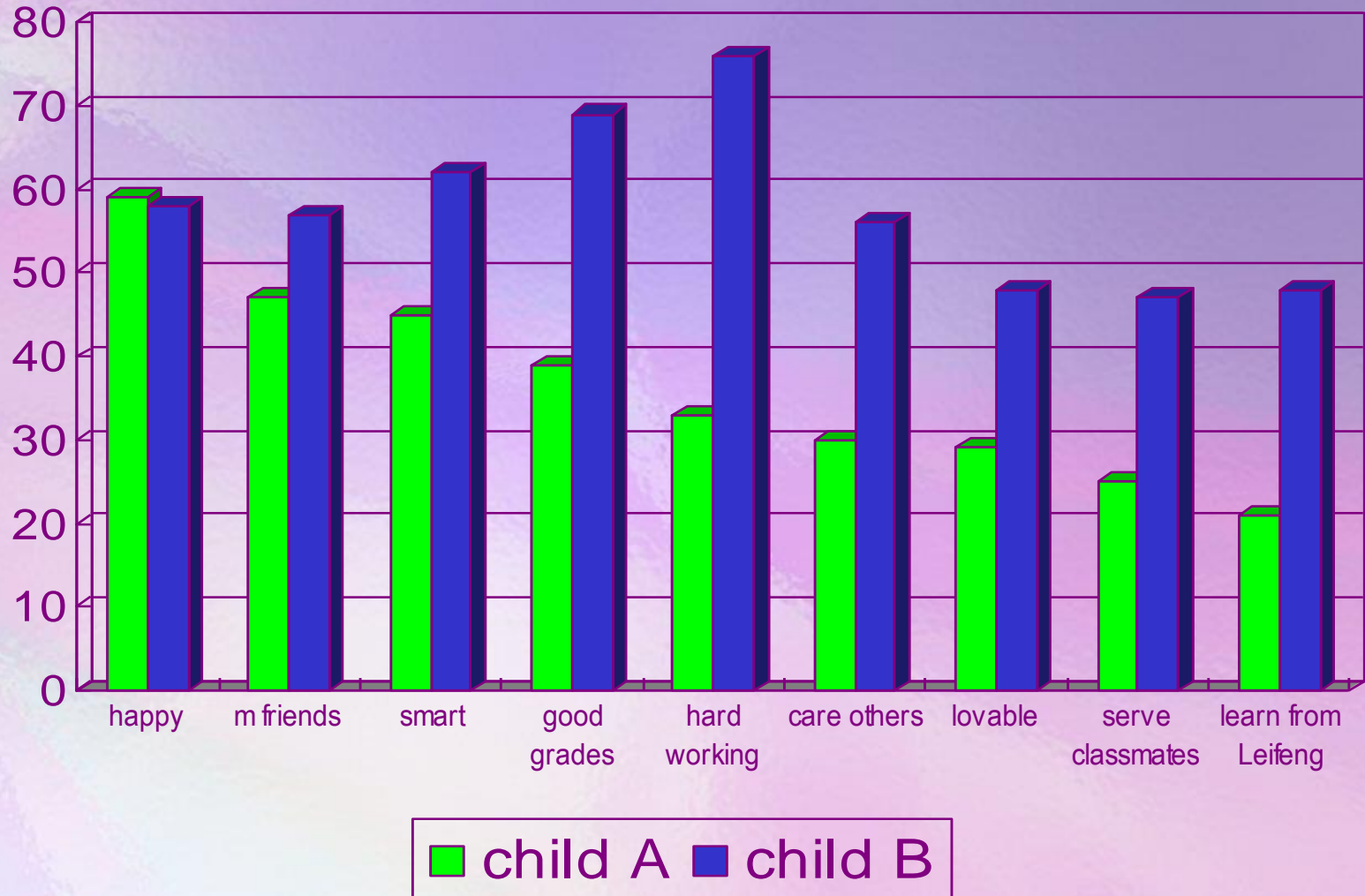
- **Two sets of questions were asked for child A and child B respectively:**
 - **Types of possessions**
 - **Personality traits**
- **And “who do you want to be?”**

Findings: possessions

Figure 1: Perception of toy possessions of child A and child B



Perception of positive personality traits



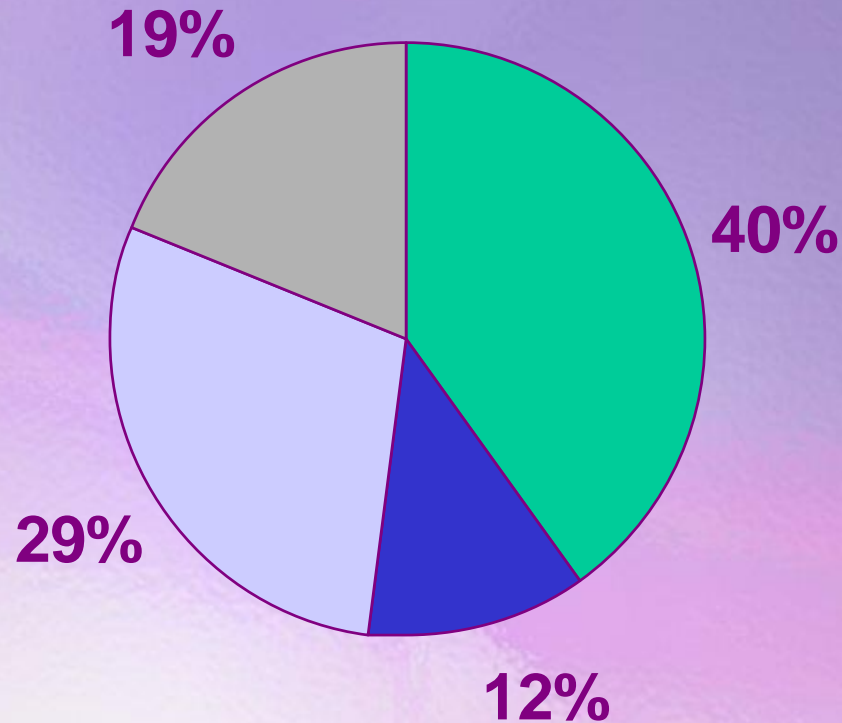
Perception of negative personality traits



Perceived personality

- **Link possessions with poor academic grades, not hardworking, not caring, spending lavishly, and selfish**
- **Link lack of possessions with hardworking, good grades, caring and willing to serve**

Which child do you want to be?



■ without a lot of toys ■ a lot of toys □ either ■ neither

Discussion and conclusion

- **Significantly different perceptions in types of possessions between a child with many toys and a child without many toys, H1 was supported**
- **Significantly different perceptions in personality traits between a child with many toys and a child without many toys, H2 was supported**

Discussion and conclusion

- **Children are able to express the value of possessions based on emotional attachment (happiness), and personality association (smart, willing to serve others, or self)**
- **Children at this age group (9 to 14) demonstrated an understanding of the social meaning and significance of material possessions**

Discussion and conclusion

- **A strong perceived link between material possessions and poor academic achievement – toys as barriers to academic excellence**
- **A strong association between lack of possessions and positive personality traits**
- **Anti-materialism value orientation**
- **Normative belief about the virtues of frugality**

Possible source of influences

- **Parents worry that toys will have negative impact on study**
- **Children's school textbooks on moral education portray negative personality traits for children with a lot of possessions (Chan, 2006a)**

limitations

- **The sample came from lower social class and may have an inclination to attribute positive personality traits to a child without a lot of toys**

Further studies

- **Conduct the study among children from upper social class**
- **Recruit younger children as respondents**
- **Recruit youth as respondents**
- **Conduct face-to-face interviews to locate source of perceptions**