

Values, Materialism and Life Satisfaction: A Study of Cultural Influence and Gender Differences in China

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The number of middle-class consumers has grown significantly following China's economic development. As well as increasing their consumption, the Chinese have also become increasingly materialistic, raising the question of whether increasing material acquisition and possession have led to greater life satisfaction. This paper, using a convenience sample of 600 Chinese, examines the influence of cultural dimensions (uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, power distance, collectivism, masculinity) on materialism and life satisfaction. A comparison of gender difference was conducted to understand the gender role played in forming individuals' values, attitudes, and social behavior. The influence of culture and gender roles was partially confirmed.

Keywords: Chinese Consumers, Values, Materialism, Gender Differences

INTRODUCTION

Following the economic development in China, the number of middle-class consumers has grown significantly (Podoshen, Li, & Zhang, 2011; Xiao & Kim, 2009). The Chinese have not only increased their consumption, they have also become increasingly materialistic (Ferdman & Quartz, 2013), which raises the question of whether increasing material acquisition and possession have led to greater life satisfaction.

Researchers have investigated the relationships among values, materialism, and life satisfaction extensively, but mostly using samples from Western countries (Ryan & Dziurawiec, 2001). However, individuals from different cultures perceive life satisfaction differently because culture has a prevalent influence on an individual's values and goals. Since individuals from different cultural settings often weigh life domains differently, it is highly likely that cultural values have a role in determining the outcome of materialism on life satisfaction.

Given the complexity of the subject and the power of cultural influence, it is essential to examine the relationship among values, materialism, and life satisfaction by taking into account various factors such as cultural background and demographics. This research, using Chinese samples, examines the influence of cultural dimensions (i.e. uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, power distance, collectivism, masculinity) on materialism and life satisfaction. A comparison of gender difference is conducted to understand the gender role played in forming individuals' values, attitudes, and social behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Values

Among all researchers who have attempted to identify framework that conceptualizes and operationalizes culture (Bond, 1987; Clark, 1990; Keillor and Hult, 1999; Schwartz, 1994), Hofstede's cultural dimensions are the most widely used in various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, marketing, and management studies (Søndergaard, 1994; Steenkamp, 2001). Hofstede originally proposed four dimensions of cultural values (individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance; and masculinity-femininity). Later, the fifth dimension of long-term vs. short-term orientation was added to distinguish the difference in Eastern culture and Western culture.

According to Hofstede (1983), the first dimension, power distance, refers to how power relationships are understood in societies. There is a tendency in societies with low power distance to accept or expect relatively equal power distribution. On the other hand, in societies with high power distance, there is a tendency to tolerate unequal power distribution. Individualism-collectivism is another cultural dimension in Hofstede's framework. This dimension is used to categorize societies in terms of whether they gravitate towards individualism or collectivism. Collectivist societies have the characteristics of being integrated, whereas individualist societies are inherently unintegrated. Uncertainty avoidance (UA) refers to a tolerance for ambiguity in a society. Culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable, typically in high uncertainty avoidance culture, or comfortable, typically in low uncertainty avoidance culture, with ambiguity. The fourth dimension, masculinity-femininity, classifies societies along gender lines. Masculine values are identified as assertive, while feminine values are identified as nonassertive, modest, and caring. The fifth dimension divides societies in terms of being short-term or long-term oriented. Short-term orientation focuses on the present or past, while long-term orientation considers the future to be more important than the past and present.

Materialism

Materialism is defined as "a cultural system in which material interests are not made subservient to other social goals" (Mukerji, 1983, p. 8). It is also defined as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions (Belk, 1984). Consumer culture emerges when a large body of society yearns for the consumption of services and products based on nonutilitarian reasons (Belk, 1988; Rassuli & Hollander, 1986). Materialism can be viewed in various ways from the consumer's vantage point. The most notable perspective is to view materialism as a central aspect of one's life, placing material acquisition and at the center of one's life. Another perspective is to view materialism as the acquisition of goods and services as a pursuit of happiness. Materialism is associated with life satisfaction and well-being: "At the highest levels of materialism ... possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction" (Belk, 1984, p. 291). Similarly, materialism is considered as "an orientation emphasizing possessions and money for personal happiness and social progress" (Ward & Wackman, 1971, p. 426). It is associated also with pleasure (Campbell, 1987; Heilbroner, 1956; Wachtel, 1983).

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is the overall judgement that people make about the quality of their lives. Generally, two theoretical approaches exist on life satisfaction, namely the "top-down" and "bottom-up" perspectives. The top-down perspective argues that differences in personality predispose people to be differentially satisfied with their lives (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008). The bottom-up perspective assumes overall life satisfaction depends on an individual's satisfaction in broad life domains such as family, friendship, work, and leisure (Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 2008; Veenhoven, 1996). Andrew and Withey (1976) offered a conceptualization of life satisfaction on the basis of seven domains of life: housing; standard of living; family life; accomplishment; job; health; and amount of fun and enjoyment.

Previous studies (see, for example, Xiao & Kim, 2009) have found that Chinese consumers with higher levels of individual orientation place a greater emphasis on the acquisition and possession of material objects. Another cross-cultural study found individuals' life satisfaction to be greater among people in individualistic nations than in collectivist nations (Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999). Hence, we hypothesize that:

H1: *Cultural dimensions will, at least partially, have a positive effect on life satisfaction.*

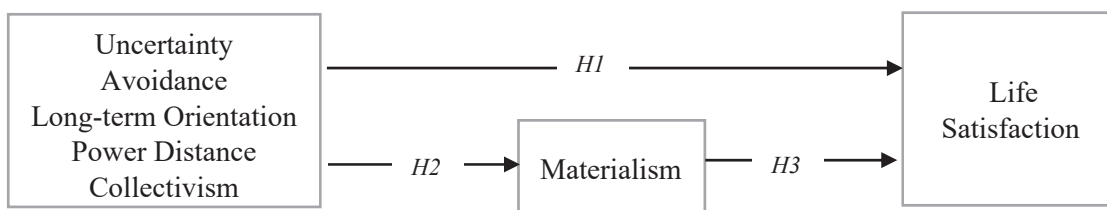
H2: *Cultural dimensions will, at least partially, have a positive effect on materialism.*

A global poll (Ferdman & Quartz, 2013) of attitudes toward wealth has found that the Chinese population is the most materialistic among respondents from 20 countries, and one of the most satisfied in measuring success by their possessions. Other prior studies (Podoshen et al., 2011; Xiao & Kim, 2009) have found that materialism and conspicuous consumption are on the rise among middle-class Chinese consumers. Hence, we hypothesize that:

H3: *Materialism will have a positive effect on life satisfaction*

The conceptual model and hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL MODEL**



METHOD

Measures

To understand the influence of cultural values on materialism and life satisfaction in China, this research adopts the well-validated cultural dimension scales from Yoo, Donthu, & Lenartowicz's (2011) study, which treats the cultural dimensions as individual differences rather than national differences. The present research also adopts Richins and Dawson's (1992) model, which views materialism as a consumer value, involving beliefs and attitudes that are centrally held and guide the conduct of one's life. Richins and Dawson's (1992) material value scale consists of nine items encompassing three dimensions of materialism. The life satisfaction scales were developed in this study to examine consumers' overall satisfaction with various domains of their lives, ranging from income, type of work, transportation, retirement funds, education, living conditions, and information access, to sense of sophistication and staying up to date. All statements were rated using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Participants

A self-administered survey based on a convenience sample was obtained from an online panel in China in 2018. A total of 600 usable samples were obtained. Among all respondents, half (50%) were female and half (50%) were males; about 40% were from tier-one cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou) and the remaining 60% were from other smaller cities and townships. The majority of

the respondents (51.7%) were aged between 30 and 45 years, with the remaining respondents aged 18–29 (21.83%), and above 45 (26.5%). About 75% of the respondents had college degrees or post-college degrees, and were married with children.

Results

A principal component factor analysis with quartimax rotation was conducted for scale reduction purposes. Five cultural dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, power distance, collectivism, and masculinity were identified. Factor loadings ranged from 0.562 to 0.825, i.e. above the acceptable level of 0.40. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all factors were above 0.67, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Table 1 summarizes the results of the factor analysis.

This study used multiple-regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The results of the regression analysis, shown in Table 2, suggest that for both men and women, materialism was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction ($b=0.508$ for males; $b=0.420$ for females), followed by collectivism ($b=0.438$ for males; $b=0.374$ for females). This study found a negative relationship between masculinity and life satisfaction ($b=-0.102$), and a positive relationship between long-term orientation and life satisfaction ($b=0.176$) only for women. A positive relationship was observed between power distance and life satisfaction ($b=0.111$) as well as masculinity and materialism ($b=0.178$) only for men. For both men and women, there was a positive relationship between uncertainty avoidance and materialism ($b=0.150$ for males; $b=0.157$ for females), power distance and materialism ($b=0.252$ for males; $b=0.196$ for females), and collectivism and materialism ($b=0.119$ for males; $b=0.140$ for females).

TABLE 1
RESULT OF FACTOR ANALYSIS

Items	Factor loading	% of variance	Cronbach's α
		54.94	
<i>Uncertainty avoidance</i>			0.811
Instructions for operations are important.	0.727		
Rules and regulations are important because they inform me of what is expected of me.	0.705		
Standardized work procedures are helpful.	0.693		
It is important to closely follow instructions and procedures.	0.685		
It is important to have instructions spelled out in detail so that I know what I'm expected to do.	0.681		
<i>Long-term orientation</i>			0.691
Personal steadiness and stability.	0.711		
Working hard for success in the future.	0.653		
Careful management of money.	0.612		
<i>Power distance</i>			0.877
People in higher positions should avoid social interaction with people in lower positions.	0.825		
People in higher positions should make most decisions without consulting people in lower positions.	0.821		
People in higher positions should not delegate important tasks to people in lower positions.	0.797		
People in lower positions should not disagree with decisions by people in higher positions.	0.766		
People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently.	0.755		

<u>Collectivism/individualism</u>		0.827
Group welfare is more important than individual rewards.	0.761	
Group success is more important than individual success.	0.689	
Group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer.	0.678	
Individuals should sacrifice self-interest for the group.	0.654	
Individuals should only pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group.	0.651	
<u>Masculinity</u>		0.671
There are some jobs that a man can always do better than a woman.	0.726	
Men usually solve problems with logical analysis; women usually solve problems with intuition.	0.698	
Solving difficult problems usually requires an active, forcible approach, which is typical of men.	0.562	

TABLE 2
THE RESULTS OF MULTI-REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Items	Males		Females	
	Materialism	Life satisfaction	Materialism	Life satisfaction
Uncertainty avoidance	0.150*	–	0.157**	–
Long-term orientation	–	–	0.213***	0.176***
Power distance	0.252***	0.111*	0.196***	–
Collectivism	0.119*	0.438***	0.140**	0.374***
Masculinity	0.178**	–	–	–0.102**
Materialism		0.508***		0.420***

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies have shown that there is a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (Belk, 1984, 1985; Dawson & Bamossy, 1991; LaBarbera and Gurhan, 1997; Richins, 1987; Richins and Dawson, 1990, 1992). Highly materialistic individuals were less happy or satisfied with their life as a whole, or less satisfied with particular aspects of their life (Richins, 1987; Richins and Dawson, 1990, 1992). Our result show, in contradiction with previous studies, that materialists are happier than those lower in materialism. The possible explanation for this is that previous studies have mostly used samples from Western countries, considered to be individualistic cultures; however, Chinese culture is a highly collectivist culture where people act in the interests of the group and not necessarily of themselves. For example, Sidhu and Foo (2015), in their attempt to measure the effect of materialistic inclinations on life satisfaction in Singaporeans, found that people related material distinctiveness positively to life satisfaction; the desire for material success is most associated with Chinese students. Our results confirm this positive relationship between materialism and life satisfaction in an Eastern collectivistic culture. It suggests that there are no gender differences, but rather cultural differences, in the relationship between materialism and life satisfaction.

The present study also found, for both men and women, a positive relationship between materialism and 1) collectivism, 2) uncertainty avoidance, and 3) power distance. The association between the components of materialism and the dimensions of culture has been examined in previous studies (see, for example, Ogden & Cheng, 2011). The high level of Chinese materialism was at least partially explained

by high level of power distance, as well as high level of masculinity (Ogden & Cheng, 2011). The findings of the present study evidenced the important role that culture plays in defining the social context within which individuals behave (Srite & Karahanna, 2006).

The present study confirmed gender difference in values, materialism, and life satisfaction in China. Masculinity was found to be negatively associated with life satisfaction only for females, and masculinity was positively associated with materialism only for males. This result is expected since, in a high masculine culture, men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, while women are supposed to be modest, tender, and obeying, which may reduce the quality of life for women. The present study also found, only for women, that long-term orientation was positively associated with both materialism and life satisfaction. This can be explained by the fact that women tend to focus more on future rewards rather than virtues having relevance for the present and past, and they tend to be more satisfied with their life than their male counterparts.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has investigated the effect of values on materialism and life satisfaction in China. The influence of culture and gender roles was partially confirmed. Future studies should further examine the mediating role of materialism in the relationship between cultural dimensions and life satisfaction. Meanwhile, Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism themes (i.e. acquisition centrality, possessions as defining success, and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness) should also be investigated to reflect the values consumers place on material goods and the role that these material goods play in the consumers' lives.

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