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EFFECTS OF FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIALIZATION ON MATERIALISM: A LIFE COURSE STUDY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers have had a long-standing interest in understanding the development of materialistic attitudes and values in different cultural settings. The life course approach, which has developed recently as an interdisciplinary program for studying various aspects of behavior, is used as an overarching framework for studying the development of materialism in Malaysia. Specifically, the paper first presents the general conceptual life course paradigm that serves as a blue print for discussing theoretical perspectives, organizing, integrating, and reporting consumer research on materialism. Next, hypotheses derived from life course perspectives are formulated, and a survey of 101 young adults (ages 18 to 22) is used to test them. The findings suggest that the amount of television viewing and peer communication about consumption during adolescent years contribute to the development of materialistic values.

Key words: Family structure, socialization, Materialism
Track: Consumer Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

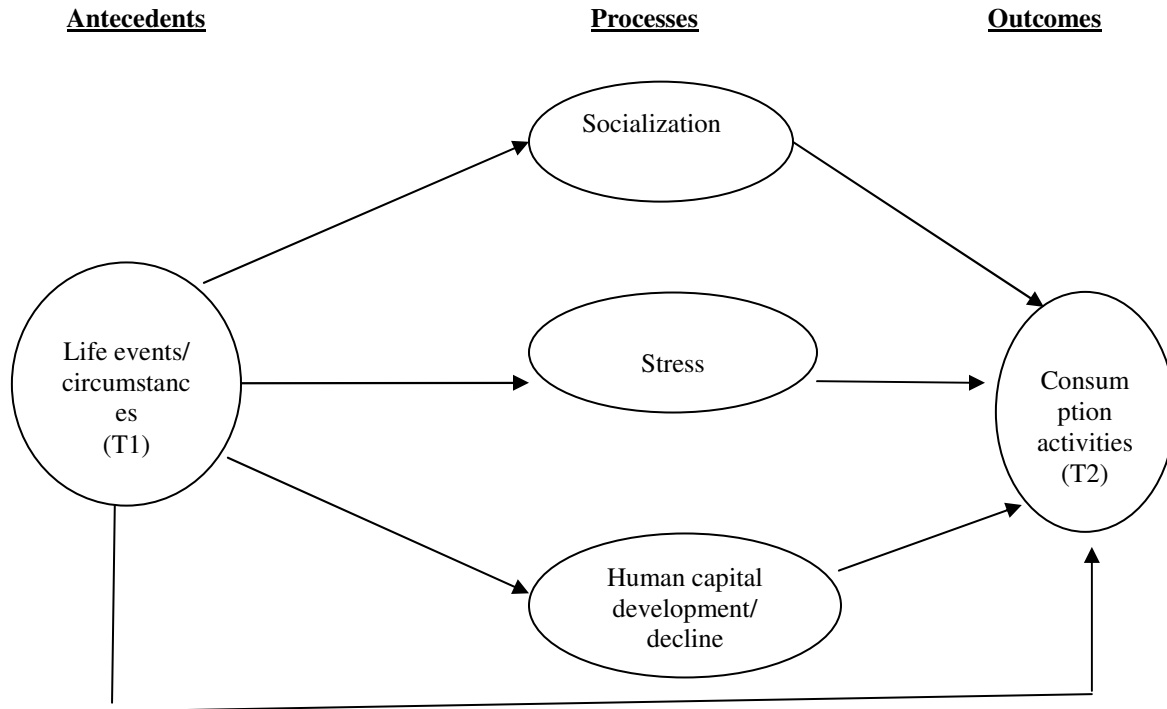
Research on consumer behaviour have currently become deep seated in not only identifying and analyzing superficial dimensions but also the causative and intervening variables involved in the adoption process. In that regard, 'materialism', one of the variables involved in a consumer decision making process has become an important area of study. The need for understanding and interpreting the development of materialistic attitudes and values in different cultures and their impact on consumption activities, orientations and decisions is strongly felt by consumer researchers. Consumer researchers have suggested that much can be understood by studying the past events in a person's life and his perceptions of the future in understanding patterns of consumer behaviour. Researchers in several disciplines have presented compelling evidence for childhood-adulthood links and have also started elaborating and explaining the mechanisms responsible for them. In this context, the Life course paradigm, a recent addition to the knowledge base on consumer behaviour, operates as a relevant framework to study development of an important consumer orientation namely 'Materialism' in multi cultural environments and Malaysia, being a multi cultural society, has been taken as the area of study.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The life course framework, which extends across substantive and theoretical boundaries of social and behavioral sciences (e.g., Abeles, Steel and Wise 1980; Elder, 1995; Mayer and Tuma 1990), can fill gaps in previous efforts to study consumer behavior. Unlike many other approaches to the study of behavior, the life course paradigm views behavior at any stage in life or given point in time to be the product of responses to earlier life conditions, including cultural settings, and the way the individual or other units have adapted to these circumstances (e.g., Mayer and Tuma 1990). Researchers in several disciplines of science have presented compelling evidence for childhood-adulthood links and have begun to elucidate the mechanisms responsible for them (McLeod and Almazan 2003); they have contributed to our understanding of how early experiences in a person's life influence patterns of thought and action in later life. The elements of life course model (Figure 1) can be classified into three broad categories: events and circumstances that are experienced at a specific point in time (T_1) in the person's life course, processes triggered by these events, and outcomes that occur at later points in time (T_2) which are the consequence or outcome of these processes and earlier in-time-occurred events.

FIGURE 1

A GENERAL CONCEPTUAL LIFE COURSE MODEL OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR



Note: Adapted from Moschis (2007).

The life course paradigm provides a framework for integrating diverse theoretical perspectives into a multi-theoretical conceptual framework, which is consistent with recent efforts of life course researchers to develop models that include variables derived from diverse theories (e.g., Elder et al. 1996; Pearlin and Skaff 1996; Mortimer and Shanahan 2003).

The life course paradigm is a Multidimensional conceptual framework that brings out variables sourced from theories originating from different disciplines (e.g., Elder et al. 1996; Pearlin and Skaff 1996; Mortimer and

Shanahan 2003, Abeles, Steel and Wise 1980; Elder, 1995; Mayer and Tuma 1990). The life course paradigm posits that consumption activities and orientations of individual consumers are effectively being influenced by antecedents, which may be early life events and processes that include socialization, stress and human capital development in childhood e.g., Mayer and Tuma 1990, McLeod and Almazan 2003. The elements of the Life course model can be classified into Events and circumstances that are experienced at a specific point in time (T1) in a person's childhood, processes triggered by these events and the outcomes that occur at later points in time (T2) because of the events and processes. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of family structure (Events) and socialization (processes) during childhood in Malaysia on the development of materialism in Adult consumers (outcomes). Existing literature establishes a direct link between adverse evaluations of family disruptive events and the strength of materialistic values, which indirectly are taken as strategies to cope up with stress coming out of disruptive events (Rindfleisch et al. 1997, Hill et al.2001). Hence, one of the important dimensions taken under Family structures in this study is the incidence of Family disruptive events in childhood.

Secondly, research also indicates that the Socio economic status enjoyed by a particular family determines whether its members would value Conformity with the society's expectation more than self-expression and more the conformity, more the possibility of its members striving for materialism Kasser et al. 1995 Moschis 1987; O'Guinn and Shrum 1997). Hence the second dimension considered under Family structure would be that of Socio economic status enjoyed by adult consumers during their childhood. Existing research evidence also supports the line of reasoning that a significantly positive relationship exists between three major mediating variables namely Peer communication, Television viewing (socialization agents) and socio-oriented family communication structure on materialism Moschis 1987 Moschis and Churchill 1978 Flouri 1999; Moschis 1987. Hence, in this study, these three variables have been considered as process variables to find their mediating effects on materialism (outcome).

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

Evolving from the discussion above the major research objectives are to assess the impact of Family structure and socialization on materialism. The study has achieved these objectives out of six Hypotheses statements which attempt to test the relationship between family structure and socialization on 'materialism'. Out of the six hypotheses tested, four of them are intended to test the unilateral relationship between television viewing, Peer communication, Socio-oriented family communication, Socio economic status (independent variables) and Materialism(dependent variable). The remaining two hypotheses test the mediating effects of socio economic status, peer communication and Mass media use on 'materialism'.

Methodology

A convenience sample of 101 undergraduate Malaysian students in Stamford college sdn Bhd., Petaling Jaya, Multimedia University, Cyberjaya and Sunway college, Petaling jaya aged from 18 to 22 was used for a survey using a self administered structured study. The Data analysis tools employed were Product moment correlation, Regression analysis and Tests of hypothesis conducted on their coefficients. Materialism was measured using an inventory of nine items, while socio-oriented family communication, Television viewing and Family disruptive events were measured using six, one and six items respectively (refer Appendix).

Results

The results of the study indicate a positive association between Television viewing and Materialism, Peer communication about consumption during adolescent years and Materialism. These findings are in line with studies made by earlier researchers, who have indicated that consumption norms are acquired through Mass media and peer communication. These findings reinforce the liking adolescents have on watching televisions. A considerable amount of Malaysian adolescents including Indians, Chinese and Malays have access to TV and a considerable number of Asian Brands are in the commercials talking about the different types of Brand positions maintained by them. However, the other hypotheses which study the unilateral relationship of Socio-oriented family communication, Socio economic status and Materialism were found to be insignificant. Additionally, the hypotheses intended to study the mediating effects of socio economic status, peer communication and Mass media use were not found to be significant.

These findings indicate that disruptive family events in Malaysia are not necessarily manifested and mediated through socialization agents such as TV viewing and peer communication and hence it may be interpreted that other possible maladaptation strategies may be employed by adolescents in mediating family disruptive events and materialism. Since 'TV viewing' and 'Peer communication' have not been found to be playing the role of mediators between Disruptive Family events and Materialism, we suggest the future researchers to study the role played by other possible mediators like cultural, social and religious values. The findings of the study, when reflected and transposed on the Life course paradigm (figure 1) brings out the role played by Family structure and socialization on Materialism in Malaysia.

APPENDIX

ITEMS USED IN MEASURES

Materialism

1. Do you feel that you have all the things you really need to enjoy life?
2. How do you feel about having a lot of luxury in your life?
3. How do you feel about acquiring material possessions as an achievement in life?
4. Would your life be any better if you owned certain things that you don't have?
5. How do you feel about people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes?
6. How much pleasure do you get from buying things?
7. How do you feel about things you own?
8. How do you feel about owning things that impress people?
9. How do you approach your life in terms of your life possessions (i.e., buying and owning things)?

Socio-Oriented Family Communication

1. Say that their ideas were correct and you shouldn't question them.
2. Say that you should give in on arguments rather than making people angry.
3. Say you shouldn't depend on others if you can do something yourself.
4. Answer your arguments by saying something like "You'll know better when you grow up."
5. Say that the best ways to stay out of trouble is to keep away from it.
6. Say that you shouldn't argue with adults.

Television Viewing

Approximate number of hours spend weekly viewing the following on television: News, soap operas, action and adventure shows, sport events, drama shows, movies, comedy shows, other (write in number of hours)

Family Disruption Events

The respondent's experience of the following events before their 18th birthday:

1. Did not live in the same home as both of their biological parents
2. Frequent time periods in which one or both parents were absent
3. Loss (other than death) or separation from a family member or loved one
4. Arguments between parents or other family members
5. Move(s) to a new place of residence
6. Physical abuse by parents or close family members

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