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Materialism in Malaysia

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Abstract

Development of materialistic attitudes and values in different cultural settings has become a relevant discussion in consumer behaviour. Accordingly, a study to analyse the development of materialism in Malaysia was initiated. Specifically, the paper first presents the general conceptual life course paradigm that serves as a blue print for discussing and reporting consumer research on materialism. Next, hypotheses derived from life course perspectives were tested with a survey in Malaysia. The findings suggest that the amount of television viewing and peer communication about consumption during adolescent years contribute to the development of materialistic values.

Keywords: *Family structure, Materialism*

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1. Introduction

'Materialism', one of the variables involved in a consumer decision making process has become an important area of study. 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 explaining the mechanisms responsible for them. In an attempt to understand more about this, the Life course paradigm, a recent addition to 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.

2. 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) 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.

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., 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., 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 (T_1) in a person's childhood, processes triggered by these events and the outcomes that occur at later points in time (T_2) 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). 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).

Antecedents

Processes

Outcomes

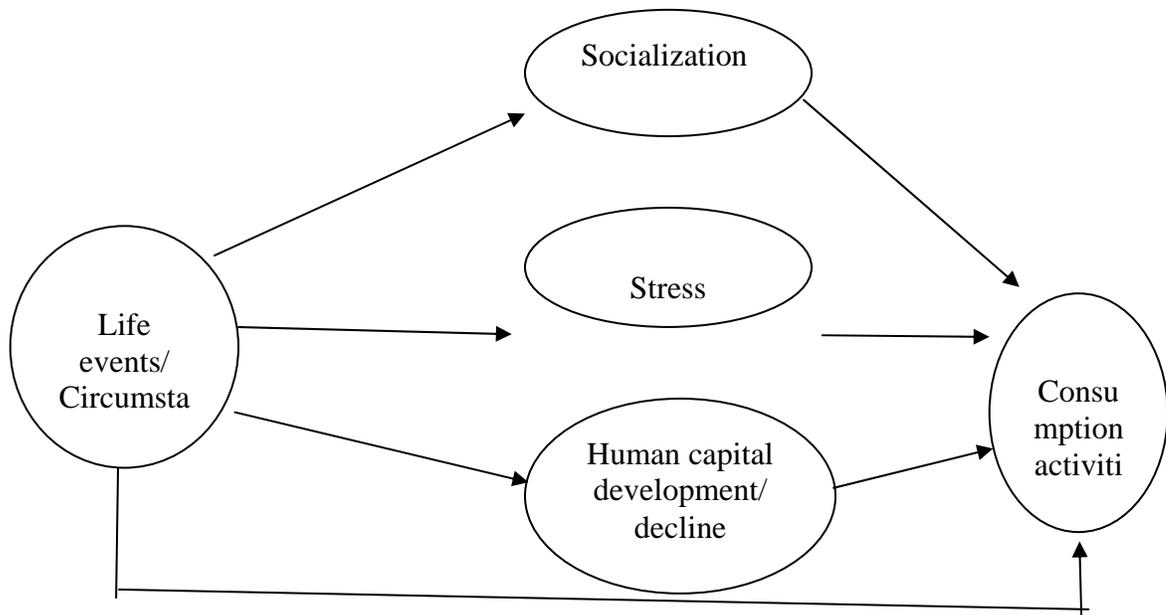


FIGURE: A General conceptual life course model of consumer behaviour (Moschis, 2007)

3. 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'.

4. 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 (Measures of the variables are available from the senior author upon request).

5. 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) brings out the role played by Family structure and socialization on Materialism in Malaysia.

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