

The Impacts of Public Service Advertising on Materialism among Young Children in Urban China

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Abstract: The materialism is particularly evident in young children. This research further explores that in the situation of China, television viewing is positively related with the endorsement of materialistic values among children. Contrary to the commercial advertising that aims to motivate consumers to make consumption decisions, public service advertising (PSA) serves non-commercial, public interest purposes by adopting sophisticated advertising and marketing communications techniques. Finds that television viewing is positively related with the endorsement of materialism among children in urban China. PSA moderates the relationship between television viewing and materialism. Specifically, increase of the ratio of PSA played in the media weakens the relationship between television viewing and materialism.

1. Introduction

Innovative retailing practices, commercialization, and affluence have pushed or are pushing both Western and Eastern societies toward materialism. In China materialism is evident in all social strata. In part, this materialism results from the one-child policy and dramatic economic development [8]. The materialism is particularly evident in young children. Research finding indicate that television viewing is positively related with the endorsement of materialistic values among children [3] [10]. It may result from several reasons: children are unable to resist specific selling efforts in television advertising, and they have not developed essential critical thinking skills [13].

In contrast to commercial advertising, Public Service Advertising (PSA) aims to enhance an awareness of a civilized moral concept, and obtain decent social benefits. Research suggests that if alternative belief systems are presented to people, they are less likely to act in greedy and materialistic ways [9]. Thus, the values in PSA have the potential to alleviate the impact of materialism on children. But attention devoted to PSA is still scarce in both the academic and practical worlds in China.

This research proposal will attempt to answer the following questions:

Is television viewing positively related with the endorsement of materialism among children?

Will Public Service Advertising moderate the relationship between television viewing and materialism?

Specifically, the strength of the relationship between television viewing and the endorsement of materialism be diminished, if the ratio of PSA to commercial advertising increases?

A questionnaire will be developed to measure materialism among young children in China. Correlation analyses and one-way ANOVA F-test will be used to test hypotheses.

2. Materialism and its Effects on Individuals

Materialism has been defined as that a person attaches importance to material possessions and the belief that certain possessions are the primary source of happiness [2]. As the definition indicates, materialism is something we generally regard as negative [33] [39], and it is the displacement of feeling from people to objects [23] and displaces spiritual development with long-term hedonism. The construct of materialism has four dimensions: acquisitiveness, possessiveness, envy [2], and preservation [13].

Its negative effects are seen as follows: 1) Materialism may diminish the well-being of individuals; 2) Materialism may have adverse effects on the interpersonal relationship of individuals [9] [19] [20] [25] [34]; 3) Materialism limits the activities of individuals to the material-oriented ones, and people are inclined to withdraw from participation in family, friendships, and broader community [32]; 4) Materialism will lead to more ecologically - degrading behaviors of individuals [21] [33] [35].

Thus, a society of materialism can result in ruthless competition. In such a society people indulge in consuming conspicuously, and become more alienated and isolated from communities by neglecting public consumption and participation in a civil society [31]. Parents and educators have been increasingly concerned about the adoption of materialistic values among children, as it will have impact on the balance between private choices and public choices that the children make throughout their lives [15].

3. Television viewing and materialism

Children pay attention to most advertising media. Recent findings show that among these media television is the most significant [28]. In fact, television has surpassed parents as the most important source of information about new products. This is highly surprising since in China the most basic unit of society is not the individual, but the family [28]. Research findings indicate that television viewing is positively related to endorsement of materialistic values among children [3] [17]. No doubt, commercial advertising is a major contributor to this relationship [1] [10] [14] [16] [28] [29] [37]. Several researchers have suggested that advertising stimulates materialistic values in children [16] [30] [38] [41]. Because advertising propagates the ideology that possessions are important and desirable qualities, such as beauty, success, and happiness, can be obtained through material possessions [30] [41]. Up to here, I would like to hypothesize as the following: Hypothesis 1: television viewing is positively related with the endorsement of materialism among children.

4. Public Service Advertising (PSA)

Contrary to the commercial advertising that aims to motivate consumers to make consumption decisions, PSA serves non-commercial, public interest purposes by adopting sophisticated advertising and marketing communications techniques. PSA is to enhance awareness or proposition, a civilized moral concept, and obtain decent social benefits. Typical topics for PSA include public health, public safety issues, emergency preparedness instructions, natural resources conservation information, and other topics of broad interest.

As the present research context is in China, I will briefly review the development of PSA in China. After “the opening policy” commercial advertisements appeared in 1970’s. PSA began in 1987, and reached national prominence around the middle of 1990s. The government of China increasingly attaches importance to PSA. It is regarded as a new propaganda tool to deliver solutions to social problems, and establish socialist spiritual civilization and national pride. PSA in China serves to [18]: 1) provide correct courses for actions to current social problems; 2) advocate actions that serve the welfare of the majority or the long-term benefits of the society; 3) establish an optimistic attitudes towards life to raise the moral standard; 4) foster the awareness of health, hygiene, environment and natural resources conservation; 5) eulogize the achievements of the Communist Party, facilitating political stability, and promoting social development; 6) enhance advertisers, advertising agencies, and media practitioners' sense of social responsibility and their willingness to contribute to public services, and improving the public image of advertising industry. It is clear that the development of PSA is beneficial for the education of the whole society, including children.

5. The role of PSA in the socialization of young children as consumer

Materialism is an important concept of consumer socialization. In 1999, there was a model of

consumer socialization proposed by John, unifying Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1970) and Selman's theory of social developments (1980). In the model, consumer socialization is considered as a developmental process. The process has different stages as children mature into adult consumers. Three consumer socialization stages exist in the process: the perceptual stage (ages 3-7), children have a general orientation towards immediate and observable features of the marketplace; the analytical stage (age 7-11), children can master some consumer knowledge and skills. Based on social meaning and significance they begin to understand the values of possession; the reflective stage (ages 11-16), children can gain comprehensive knowledge about marketplace concepts such as branding and pricing. Based on social meaning, significance and scarcity, they understand fully the value of possession. According to the model of consumer socialization, young children have generally been thought to be especially vulnerable to commercial advertising. They are less likely to understand advertising's essential intent, tend to believe message claims, and have more positive attitudes toward advertising. However, Children (age 11-16) are able to develop preferences and skepticism. It is found that older children (age 10-12) readily acknowledge that advertising does not always tell the truth and are more likely to express skeptical views of advertising (e.g. Boush et al).

Research suggests that if alternative belief systems are presented to people, they are less likely to act in greedy and materialistic ways [9]. These results suggest that other types of beliefs can help lessen materialistic impulses, even in the face of social pressure to act materialistically. PSA builds up the values of serving the welfare of the majority or the long-term benefits of the society, establishing an optimistic outlook on life and fostering the awareness of health, hygiene, environment and natural resources conservation in China. Thus, the values in PSA not only oppose materialistic aims, but that conduce towards personal, social, and ecological well-being. The healthier values in PSA will not only protect young children against the internalization of materialistic values, but will also help them organize their lives. Thus, we can easily find the significant role of PSA in producing positive impacts on the children (age 11-16) due to their cognitive characteristics mentioned above.

In the long run, the materialism of the young children will be diminished and even prevented. I hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: PSA will moderate the relationship between television viewing and materialism. Specifically, increase of the ratio of PSA played in the media will weaken the relationship between television viewing and materialism.

6. Methods

6.1 Sampling

The target respondents will be 200 students in a middle school in Beijing. All the children will be in the age group of 13-16. Then questionnaires will be administered in classroom setting to them. The questionnaire based on material values scale (MVS) developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) will be translated into Chinese. In addition to questions about children's endorsement of materialistic values, the questionnaire will consist of close-ended questions about amount of time children spent on television weekly and other various media and their attention to advertising. In addition there will be four demographic questions.

6.2 Measurements

Materialism will be measured by fifteen items, such as whether they feel happier if they have more toys, whether children desire more money and more toys, and whether they often compare their possessions with friends. Children will be asked to indicate on a five-point scale whether they agree with the statement (1=disagree very much, 5=agree very much).

Television will be measured by asking children "on average, how much time do you spend on watching television every day?" Totally, seven types of media will be examined, including television, radio, newspapers/magazines, videotapes, video games, books other than textbooks, and

the Internet. Children will be requested to select from five answers, “0 minutes”, “1 to 60 minutes”, “61 to 120 minutes”, “121 to 180 minutes”, “180 minutes or above”. Demographic variables including sex, age, grade, and whether s-he is a single child will also be collected.

6.3 Analytical procedure

The mean of the statements about materialisms forms on the MVS is the materialistic score. Correlation analysis will be carried out to test the relation between materialism score and television viewing. It is expected to provide support for the first hypothesis that television viewing is positively related with the endorsement of materialism among children. Then the experimental group (100 students) will be regularly asked to view PSA for half an hour per day for six months. The control group (100 students) will not be exposed to PSA. The experimental and control groups will have similar characteristics such as age, sex, family income, hours of television viewing.

A one-way ANOVA F-test will be conducted to match the experimental group with the control group. It is expected to support that 100 students in the experimental group will report decrease in materialism score, as the students in the control group report the same or decrease.

7. Conclusion

This study would be an initial step in investigating the relationship between PSA and the embrace of materialism. An MVS score by itself may indicate whether or not there is a possible relationship. However, it lacks previous research to provide information about what is the amount of time and intensity of PSA contributing to the relation. Many more variables, with many possible interactions among these variables, may also be involved and have to be investigated. Due to the functions of PSA in Western societies different from China, it might be interesting to conduct further research on whether in the United States of America an increase of the ratio of PSA played in the media will weaken the relationship between television viewing and materialism. In future research, the samples should also include adult respondents. International and longitudinal studies should be done to further confirm the two hypotheses mentioned above.

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