



Materialism as compensation for self-esteem among lower-class students

Jing Li^a, Mengxi Lu^a, Ting Xia^a, Yongyu Guo^{b,*}

^a School of Psychology, Central China Normal University, Key Laboratory of Cyberpsychology and Behavior, Ministry of Education, Hubei Human Development and Mental Health Key Laboratory, Wuhan 430079, China

^b School of Psychology, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing 210097, China

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ABSTRACT

Although some studies have demonstrated that individuals from lower socioeconomic groups have higher tendencies toward materialism, it is not known whether this association is causal, and the underlying psychological mechanisms are not clear. Therefore, we examined the causal relationship between social class, materialism, and the role of self-esteem among Chinese college students. In Experiment 1, we used a priming paradigm to manipulate the perception of social class and found that materialism in the lower-class primed group was significantly higher than in the higher-class primed group and that self-esteem played a mediating role. In Experiment 2, we examined the compensatory effect of materialism on self-esteem in lower-class students by using the imagination paradigm to manipulate materialism. We found that lower-class students had elevated self-esteem in the materialism priming condition compared to the control condition. In summary, our findings indicate that lower-class college students show high materialism tendencies to compensate for low self-esteem. The implications and limitations of this study are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Materialism is a value that emphasises material wealth in personal life, in which material wealth is regarded as the centre of life, the source of happiness, and the criterion for success (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Although materialism originated in Western capitalist society, it is now prevalent in Chinese society due to economic reform and the rapid development of the market economy. A global survey performed in 2013 by IPSOS, a French research organisation, found that the Chinese ranked at the top of the list regarding the pursuit of material wealth. According to the life course perspective, the formation of materialism is largely due to the influence of the early family environment, and one of these important factors is family social class (Duh, 2016; Weaver, Moschis, & Davis, 2011). Social class is often referred to as socioeconomic status (SES), which is comprised of objective material resources (often measured by income, education level, and occupational status), and subjectively perceived social status (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). There is increasing evidence that social class is relatively solidified and has a profound and lasting effect on an individual's psychology and behaviour (Markus & Stephens, 2017). Despite the rapid economic growth in China during the past few decades, the wealth gap and class differentiation have widened. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the Gini coefficient of Chinese resident income was around 0.47 from 2012 to

2017, much higher than the international warning line of 0.40. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the influence of social class on materialism in Chinese society. Previous studies have shown that lower-class individuals have higher materialistic tendencies than higher-class individuals (e.g., Ahuvia & Wong, 2002; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997; Roberts, Manolis, & Tanner, 2003; Twenge & Kasser, 2013). However, there is still a lack of research into potential causal relationships, and their underlying psychological mechanisms remain unclear. Thus, this research examined the potential causal relationship between social class and materialism and the role of self-esteem among Chinese college students.

1.1. Social class and materialism

It has been confirmed that there is a negative correlation between family social class and materialism. Twenge and Kasser (2013) conducted a large study of American 12th grade teenagers between 1976 and 2007 and found that family economic status in childhood negatively predicted materialism in youth. Chaplin, Hill, and John (2014) found that while 8–10 year old children from poor and rich families had similar levels of materialism, adolescents and teenagers (11–17 years old) from poor families had higher levels of materialism. Other studies (e.g., Rindfleisch et al., 1997; Roberts et al., 2003) report similar findings. This may suggest that individuals who are in chronic lack of

* Corresponding author at: School of Psychology, Nanjing Normal University, 122 Ninghai Road, Nanjing, Jiangsu Province 210097, China.
E-mail address: yyguo@njnu.edu.cn (Y. Guo).

material resources are more likely to compensate for economic insecurity by possessing and pursuing material wealth. However, these correlational studies have not determined whether there is a causal relationship between social class and materialism.

1.2. Social class and self-esteem

Self-esteem is an individual's emotional experience and evaluation of self-worth. According to the family investment theory (Conger & Donnellan, 2007), higher-class parents have abundant material resources and can thus provide their children with high levels of social support and education, hence, promoting the development of their children's self-esteem. However, lower-class parents need to focus on earning due to economic pressures, in consequence, the levels of material resources and emotional support they can provide to their children are relatively lower, which can negatively impact the development of their children. A meta-analysis by Twenge and Campbell (2002) found that people's self-esteem levels improved when their SES improved. Other studies have shown that social class, regardless of whether subjectively or objectively ascertained, has a positive correlation with self-esteem (e.g., Chen et al., 2016; Chen, Cheng, Guan, & Zhang, 2014; Cheng & Furnham, 2017; Kraus & Park, 2014). Furthermore, lower-class individuals reported higher levels of negative self-evaluation when experimentally primed with lower-class information (Kraus & Park, 2014).

1.3. Self-esteem and materialism

Kasser, Ryan, Couchman, and Sheldon (2004) argue that when individual psychological needs (such as self-esteem) cannot be satisfied, people often compensate for the unmet psychological needs by obtaining material wealth. Substantial empirical evidence supports this perspective. For example, individuals with lower self-esteem have been found to present higher levels of materialism (De Rezende Pinto, Mota, Leite, & Alves, 2017; De Veirman, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2017). When people experience self-doubt, it has been shown that they improve their sense of self-worth, self-status, and reduce self-uncertainty by acquiring material wealth (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Noguti & Bokeyar, 2014). Finally, individuals with negative self-evaluations are more likely to consume products associated with status symbols to promote their self-image (Chaplin & John, 2007; Jiang, Zhang, Ke, Hawk, & Qiu, 2015; Lee & Shrum, 2012). Thus, materialism may act as one manner in which individuals protect and improve their self-esteem.

1.4. Social class, self-esteem, and materialism

The life course perspective (Weaver et al., 2011) proposes that early life experiences of children affect their later self-development, and further influences the formation of their behaviours, attitudes, and values. Using the life course approach, Duh (2016) found that family resources received during childhood have a significant impact on later-life money attitudes and materialism. As mentioned above, there is a close correlation between social class, self-esteem, and materialism, suggesting that self-esteem may be a potential psychological mechanism underlying the association between social class and materialism. However, only Chaplin et al. (2014) have provided supportive evidence in this regard. Conducting personal interviews with children and adolescents (8–17 years old) from impoverished and wealthy families, they found that self-esteem mediated the relationship between family income and materialism, which suggests that children from impoverished families showed higher levels of materialism partly due to their low self-esteem. However, these findings need to be replicated in other samples from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the study did not further test the potential compensatory effect of materialism on self-esteem in lower-class individuals.

1.5. Purpose and hypothesis

Considering the limitations of previous studies, this research adopted an experimental methodology to examine the causal relationship between social class and materialism, and verify the mediating role of self-esteem using a class-priming paradigm (Experiment 1). We also tested the potential compensatory effect of materialism on self-esteem in lower-class individuals using a materialism-priming paradigm (Experiment 2). The research hypotheses were as follows:

H1. Participants experimentally induced, using a priming paradigm to view themselves as being from a lower-class, would have higher levels of materialism than those induced to view themselves as being from a higher-class, and self-esteem would play a mediating role in this.

H2. Lower-class college students in a materialism-priming group would report higher levels of self-esteem than those in the control group.

2. Experiment 1

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants

The study was approved by our institutional ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent. The researcher also assured participants about the confidentiality of their responses. A total of 82 college students from a university in Hunan province in China volunteered to take part in the experiment. With the removal of 12 participants who had high error response rates on the experimental task (see below), the final sample consisted of 70 participants (36 male; 34 female), ranging in age from 17 to 23 years, with a mean age of 20.04 years ($SD = 1.37$).

2.1.2. Experimental design and procedures

A single factorial between-groups design was adopted, with the independent variable being an experimentally induced perception of social class (high vs. low), and the dependent variable being state materialism; trait materialism was utilised as a control variable.

After the participants arrived at the laboratory, they were informed that two independent experiments would be conducted. First, they were asked to participate in an imagination-based task designed to manipulate their subjective perception of social class. Next, all participants completed a state self-esteem scale. Then, they were told that they needed to complete a vocabulary classification task, which, unknown to the participants, was an implicit test of state materialism. Finally, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information and completed a trait materialism scale. After the experiment, each participant was given a small sum of money in appreciation.

2.1.3. Materials and measures

2.1.3.1. Social class manipulation. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011), we used the MacArthur scale of subjective social status (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000) to manipulate the subjective perception of social class. Participants were presented a 10-tier image and asked to imagine the social classes that exist for Chinese people from level 1 to 10. A higher level represented a higher social class position, that is, greater income, higher educational level, and higher level of occupational status. By considering their own family's economic conditions, their parents' educational levels and occupational status, participants were asked to compare themselves to those at the bottom for the subjective higher-class condition, and to those at the top for the subjective lower-class condition. Participants were then asked to write down their perceived social class rank.

2.1.3.2. State self-esteem. We measured state self-esteem with the 20-

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