Do Materialistic Consumers Buy More During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Social Consumption Motivation of Anxious Malaysians in the Face of Existential Threat of Death

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mediated moderating relationship of self-concept clarity, materialism, and social consumption motivation in the context of COVID-19 pandemic based on the terror management theory. The findings suggest that Malaysian consumers have high self-concept clarity about their materialistic orientation. This materialistic orientation may be of hedonistic-utilitarian nature that is internally directed for self-satisfaction and not exclusively directed externally in material consumption to portray an image to others. Furthermore, this study posits that cultural factors like collectivism and uncertainty avoidance delimits the applicability of terror management theory in Malaysia, suggesting that the development of the theory draw heavily from Western ideology of individualism not directly relevant in the Asian context. Finally, this study offers an understanding of the self-concept clarity from the Asian context, addressing the appeal by Dunlop to investigate the construct of self-concept clarity particularly in non-Western context.

KEYWORDS

Materialism, Self-Concept Clarity, Social Consumption Motivation, Terror Management

INTRODUCTION

The consumption pattern of Malaysian consumers has continuously changed and is simultaneously propelling the growth of the country's economy (Sulaiman, et al., 2018). This social phenomenon is noticed from the private consumption growth pace in 2019 at 7.6% which was higher than the long-term average (2011 to 2018) of 7%. Malaysia consumers are spending more which is contributing to nearly 60% of the Malaysian GDP in 2019 (Ong & Analytica, 2020). Financial agencies projected positive economic growth in 2020 (Asada & Lenain, 2019; Shukry, 2019). Furthermore, Malaysia is placed 6th globally on the Consumer Confidence Index (CCI), with an index score of 115 points in the first quarter of 2019 ("Malaysia consumer confident", 2019). Malaysia was expected to have a steady growth in the luxury lifestyle and goods spending regardless of the slowing global economy (Tan, 2018). Unfortunately, all the optimistic prospects have taken a drastic turn for the worse with the unprecedented global Covid-19 pandemic. To curb the spread of the virus in the country, the

Malaysia government implemented three phases of strict containment measurements since first quarter of 2020 with serious economic consequences (Kana, 2020). The Central Bank of Malaysia revised its official gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast for 2020 to between -3.5% and -5.5% against 4.3% growth in 2019 (Idris, 2020). Private consumption fell 18.5% in the second quarter of 2020 and a 17.1% contraction in GDP which is the lowest quarter growth ever recorded by the nation since the Asian Financial Crisis when GDP fell 11.2% in the fourth quarter of 1998 (Idris & Salim, 2020).

As Malaysian consumers resolve to manage their consumption by discriminating towards essential goods and necessities, the focus of policy makers shifted to low-income spending (Mohtar & Kamarulzaman, 2020). The immediate effect of decline in discretionary spending rate appears to contribute to the deteriorating demand for branded and luxury goods (AmInvest, 2020). Branded and luxury goods offer high symbolic, social, and emotional value to consumers as a source intrinsic pleasure while offering low ratio of functionality to price (Kapferer & Bastien, 2017). Branded and luxury goods are known as social goods, the consumption of which is to portray an image to fit in with desired social groups (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). This curtailed demand of social consumption is expected as the general perception toward these as non-essentials may become accentuated in weak situation (Mischel, 1977). In recent years, the luxury market emerged as a significant element in global market (Wang et al., 2011) estimated at the value of 1.2 trillion Euro globally up until 2018 (Bain & Company, 2018). This market has a notable footprint in retail industry where more than 50 percent of the Malaysia shopping mall retail mix comprises non-essential goods (PPKM, 2018). As such, luxury products consumption rate could significantly dictate the survival of the 671 malls in Malaysia which are said to be a struggling sector recently due to changing consumption pattern owing to the Covid-19 pandemic (Birruntha, 2020). Erratic consumption behaviors surfaced because of the Covid-19 pandemic that contradicted common pattern expected of cautious spending during a crisis. For instance, irrational consumption behaviors of panic buying, and stockpiling were observed during the enforcement of the first movement control order (MCO) in Malaysia ("Panic buying", 2020). Recent study based on data from 4,859 respondents from the US, Canada, UK, France, and Germany during the week of 6 April 2020 found that, consumer spending habits across the four emerging segments, only 9% reported they will maintain the same spending patterns post-Covid-19 (Rogers & Cosgrove, 2020). If this pattern is representative of Malaysian consumption pattern as well, the question arises as to the sustainability of the shopping malls in Malaysia that are dependent on leisure consumption. However, very little is known about what motivates Malaysian consumption of non-essential goods during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study investigates the consumption of social goods (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006) and its relationships with materialism and self-concept clarity of Malaysian consumers amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

MATERIALISM

The feelings of insecurity and the fear of death tend to encourage material consumption (Kasser and Sheldon, 2000). According to terror-management theory (Pyszczynski, et al., 1997), when confronted with the realization of inevitable death, individuals seek validation of their lives by material consumption because material possessions are culturally acceptable symbols of success. At the core, money becomes a measure of self-worth and individuals internalise the beliefs of material consumption to overcome their dread of insignificance in the shadow of death (Arndt et al., 2004). The values of material consumption in offering public meanings arise from socialization processes (Richins, 1994) which offer private meanings as well. That is to say, cultural norms and expectations influence the construction of private meanings. Display of photographs at home of honeymoon trip to Paris in front of the Eiffel tower has symbolic meanings both publicly and privately. Such values guide individuals' consumption behaviour (Richins & Dawson, 1992) and evidently are recognised as an independent driver of luxury consumption (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Literature on materialism suggest that materialism is a universal socio-cultural phenomenon (Srikant, 2013) that is not exclusively

held by affluent group but applies to general consumers as well (Ger & Belk, 1996). The desire of material things and the association material wealth with happiness are consequences of social-cultural factors that driven by advertisement, the media, and other social-structures (Larsen et al., 1999).

SOCIAL CONSUMPTION

Individuals consume goods as a way to define their social identity (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). One's value is determined by what one consumes and possesses (Kasser, 2002) and the impressions consumption has on others (Wiedmann et al., 2009). Material goods offer meanings shaped also by advertisements (Czarnecka et al., 2018; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Eastman et al. (1999) explain that consumers tend to express their wealth in society through their consumption. As such, social consumption explains the phenomenon of consumption that is influenced by the image consumers want to portray that fits into a preferred social situation or group (Campbell, 1987). Such consumption is said to be goal orientated (Kim & Kim, 2020). For instance, the purchase of luxury products with the intended goal of signalling status (Han et al., 2010) to gain in-group legitimacy. Consumer are considered as socially motivated in their consumption behaviour when others' opinions are valued and weigh more in their consumption decisions (Gil et al., 2012). The consumption desire to impress others about their ability to consume certain products usually involve goods of prestigious nature to portray wealth conspicuously (Eastman et al., 1999; Mason, 1981) such motivation leads consumers to be more sensitive to social cues related to brand consumption exhibiting such status (Gil et al., 2012). However, recent research has disentangled status consumption and conspicuous consumption (O'cass & McEwen, 2004). While acknowledging an overlap in construct domains, status consumption is described as the process of gaining prestige through status-laden consumption which has a stronger private meaning whereas conspicuous consumption focuses on overt display of consumption to significant others which suggest a stronger public meaning to the consumption (O'cass & McEwen, 2004). Kim and Jang's (2017) study exemplified this social consumption situation where Korean Gen Y consumers indulge in conspicuous consumption at luxury café due to the influences of personal materialistic desires and their susceptibility to social group membership status. In addition, Sharda and Bhat (2018) detected similar positive correlation between materialism and luxury social consumption in their research India youth with materialistic induced tendencies to purchase symbolic luxury and branded items because they want to be seen as successful and attached to the affluent social community. The positive relationship between materialism and social consumption motivation is clear (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006). Furthermore, materialistic consumers have high status consumption (Türk & Erciş, 2017) and conspicuous consumption (Podoshen et al., 2011), which suggest the same for social consumption motivation. Therefore:

H1: Materialism is positively related to Social Consumption Motivation.

SELF-CONCEPT CLARITY

The concept of self can be described as the view that a person has about his qualities and how he assesses these qualities in himself (Ünal et al., 2019). The notion of self is a very complex mechanism, it can include multi-dimensional personal traits and attributes such as self-beliefs and perception of oneself that may be domain specific (Alvandi et al., 2013). Guerrettaz and Arkin (2016) posit the higher subjective sense of self is found to have influence on how people search and interpret information about their surroundings. The stability of the self-concept can be evaluated by the construct called self-concept clarity (SCC) which is defined by Campbell et al. (1996, p. 142) as the extent to which one's self concept is "clearly and confidentially defined, internally consistent and temporally stable". SCC is closely relevant with consistency and stability of the overall construct of

self-concept instead of specific identity (Reed II et al., 2012) (See Schwartz et al., (2017) for a clear delineating of self-concept clarity and personal identity). SCC refers to assessments of the structural dimensions of self rather than the content of self. Although SCC is malleable, high SCC persons have well-articulated self-concept which is less vulnerable to the effects of external stimuli and able to cope well with depression and have healthy habits, such as constructive self-talk and enhanced mental processing capacity; this is because one with well-developed SCC is unlikely to integrate fresh and possibly contradictory information about themselves (Campbell, 1990; Campbell et al., 1996). However, recent studies suggested the reverse. Low SCC is found to be associated with higher risk adversity in self-expansion as there are possibilities of adopting attributes contrary to self-concept which is perceived to be risky (Emery et al., 2015). The study by Emery et al. (2015) investigated self-concept clarity involving respondents in the context of romantic relationships. Contrary to Emery's findings, research show that low SCC compels individuals to seeks external references to consolidate ones' concept of self (Vartanian, 2009). Furthermore, women with low SCC tend to make reference to others and internalise external ideals (Vartanian & Dey, 2013) to develop their sense of identity. It seems therefore that the confused self is less resistance in embracing contradictory qualities to their self-concept because low SCC is not sure these are contradictory. Weak metacognitive knowledge of the self, subjects the self to be guided by external and situational cues instead by the self-concept (Light, 2017). A person with high SCC demonstrates a well-articulated self-concept which tends to be less susceptible to external cues for self-definition. In contrast, the individual with vaguely defined or ambiguous self-concepts, as indicated with low SCC, tends to depend on and be highly susceptible to external situation influences (Campbell et al., 1996) such as peer pressure, mass media, social consumption motives, and other beliefs like materialism that can impact human behaviours and decision-making processes (Kernis et al., 2000). The positive relationship between SCC and materialism has empirical support (Reeves et al., 2012). In consumer behaviour research, SCC has remained under-investigated. Among the limited studies, it was found that low SCC persons are prone to marketing persuasion (Burger & Guadagno, 2003; Lee et al., 2010) while low-income British teens with low SCC are susceptible to interpersonal influence in branded goods consumption (Isaksen & Roper, 2008). Reeves et al. (2012) discovered that students who are prone to celebrity worship and who buy compulsively lack SCC. Mittal (2015) found that consumers with low SCC are vulnerable to interpersonal pressure and materialism; they use consumption as a form of escape. Furthermore, Mittal (2015) suggest that low SCC use their purchase to bolster self-esteem but suffer from post purchase self-doubt. Recent study treats work as a consumption object (Godlewska-Werner et al., 2020) that found a negative relationship with SCC. Since social consumption describes the consumption phenomenon that is affected by other salient social groups (Campbell, 1987), we expect consumers with low SCC to be susceptible to such motivation. From the extent literature, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2: Self-concept clarity is negatively related to Materialism.
H3: Self-concept clarity is negatively related to Social Consumption Motivation.

FEAR OF COVID-19

The Coronavirus 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic first emerged in China in December 2019 and was confirmed by World Health Organisation (WHO) on January 12, 2020 before its abrupt outbreak in 213 countries (Shah et al., 2020). This deadly pneumonia disease caused wide array of respiratory and non-respiratory symptoms (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020). Infection symptoms like fever, exhaustion, dry cough, myalgia, and dyspnoea are the most frequently observe within the first 2 – 14 days (Wang et al., 2020). Around 80 percent of patients undergo and recover from moderate infections. The remaining patients have serious dyspnoea and poor blood oxygen saturation infections or may be in severe condition with respiratory or multiple organ failure (Shah et al., 2020). Its severe global

proliferation rate prompts the WHO to announce an urgent call for public health emergencies (Wu & McGoogan, 2020). In Malaysia, the Covid-19 pandemic started with 2 digits confirmed cases daily and accelerated rapidly to new record of more than 5,700 cases on January 29, 2021 which brought the cumulative number of cases since the pandemic hit the country to more than 203,000 cases and 733 deaths (Zainul, 2021).

Harper et al. (2020) posit that the imminent fear of Covid-19 itself supersedes other fears that might exacerbate the harm inflict by the disease itself. 86% Malaysian residents indicated the fear of contracting the virus (Hirschmann, 2020). Disproportionate fear is one of distinct association of infectious diseases because of their rapid transmission and invisibility which can be exacerbated by the misinformation of the media (Pappas et al. 2009). Under the psychological influence of fear, irrational reactions replace logical thinking in the face of Covid-19 pandemic (Ahorsu et al., 2020). Human awareness of death during the pandemic will trigger various forms of psychological distress (Li et al., 2020); for instance, fear and anxiety (Greenberg et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 1991). Naturally, people will counter react to seek positive emotion to cope with their fear of death threat (Hikosaka, 2010; Hsee et al., 2008) hence; consumer behaviour will change to match their psychological conditions (Song et al, 2020). Research on consumer behaviour unveil shift spending pattern switching toward compulsive consumption (Arndt et al., 2004; Mandel & Smeesters, 2007) as a coping mechanism addressing the fear and anxiety due to the exposure (Shrivastava et al., 2017). Such erratic consumption patterns are similarly observed in Malaysian (Yau et al., 2020).

According to terror management theory, the pursuit of material consumption is a way to mitigate the threat of death. The realisation of the inevitability of death posts an existential threat which engenders a debilitating fear triggering an ameliorating mechanism by fulfilling cultural ideals of meaning and significance. Such cultural ideals are called cultural worldview (Arndt et al., 2004). Consumption is a way to supress the thoughts of death, as in "living up to the standards of value inherent" (Pyszczynski et al., 1999, p. 2) in the cultural worldview. As material possessions are symbols of success in the cultural worldview, the pursuit of high priced and culturally desired commodities projects imagines matching the societal standard of having ultimately arrived (Mandel & Heine, 1999; Truong & McColl, 2011). Having lived the culturally accepted worldview of the good life is one way to at last overcome the existential anxieties of death (Arndt et al, 2004; Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2004).

In the context of Covid-19 infectious disease, Li et al. (2020) found that the pandemic caused impulsive consumption propensity which seems to be driven by materialistic tendency. Similarly, Song et al. (2020) highlighted the positive relationship between the thread of death in light of Covid-19 and materialism where, consumer use goods acquisition to enhance their sense of security like the need of belonging through social conformity consumption. Similarly, based on terror management theory, in the face of existential threat, the fear of Covid-19 is posit as having a positive moderating effect on the relationship between materialism and social consumption motivation:

H4: Fear of Covid-19 positively moderates the relationship between Materialism and Social Consumption Motivation.

METHODS

Measurements. For self-concept clarity, the original 12-item scale developed by Campbell et al. (1996) was used which content questions about beliefs of oneself (e.g., "I can change my mind about myself from day to day" and "Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be"). The respondent provides answers to questions on a 5-point Likert scale, where $1 = $ *Strongly disagree* and $5 = $ *Strongly agree*. Reliability in the current study was $\alpha = 0.84$. Social consumption motivation was measured using a 4-item scale developed by Moschis (1981) consisting of questions like "Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what others think of different brands or

products" and "Before purchasing a product, it is important to know what others think of people who use certain brands or products". Responses were captured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 5 = *Strongly agree*. Reliability in the current study was α = 0.83. Richins and Dawson's (1992) materialism scale was used which consists of the three factors correspond to the elements of materialism in construct definition. Participants rated the item using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*), and higher values indicate greater materialism. The reliability correlations are as follow: success (α = 0.61), centrality (α = 0.23), happiness (α = 0.55), and materialism (α = 0.69 for the combined scale). Similar readings were reported by Heaney et al, (2005) with data drawn from Malaysian respondents. The 7-item unidimensional Fear of Covid-19 scale developed by Ahorsu et al. (2020) was used to assess Malaysia consumers' fear of the coronavirus. The scale has been translated into Malay version aim to be used in Malaysia context and has be tested in Li et al. (2020). Examples of item questions are "I am most afraid of coronavirus-19", "It makes me uncomfortable to think about coronavirus-19", and "My hands become clammy when I think about coronavirus-19". Responses were collected using a 5-item Likert (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*), resulting in instrument reliability α = 87. Fear of Covid-19 was recoded to a new variable with three groups using the first and fourth quartile values as cut off (1=low fear, 2=mid fear, 3=high fear). For demographic data, respondents were asked about their gender (0= female, 1= male), age, nationality, seniority (1= frontline staff, 2= middle manager, 3= senior manager, 4= top manager), and income (B40 consisting of 1= below 2500, 2= 2501–3169, = 3170–3969, 4 = 3970–4849; M40 consisting of 5= 4850–5879, 6= 5880–7099, 7= 7100–8699, 8= 8700–10959; and T20 consisting of 9= 10960–15039, 10= 15040 and above).

Respondents. Anonymous online questionnaire was used in the survey to solicitate respondents who are staying in Malaysia. A total of 167 completed questionnaires were collected. A priori minimum sample size of 84 was ascertained based on power analysis (Soper, 2021a) with parameters for a 4-predictor model, with medium effect size ($f2$) of 0.15, statistical power of 0.80, and probability level of 0.05 (Cohen, 1988). Post-hoc analysis of statistical power was 0.92 based on a 4-predictor model with observed $R2$ at 0.0916, probability level of 0.05 and sample size of 167 (Soper, 2021b). The sample size of 167 is deemed to have sufficient statistical power for the analysis in this study. Majority of the respondents were Malaysians (159, 95.2%) with 8 respondents who are foreigners staying in Malaysia. Out of which 87 respondents are female (52.1%) and 80 are male (47.9%). The largest age group was the range of 30 to 39 that consists of 89 respondents (53.3%), followed by 22 to 29 range which consists of 40 respondents (24.0%), and finally the 40 and above age range consisted of 38 respondents (22.7%). Majority of 48.5% held mid-level management positions with front-liners accounting for 31.7% and senior and top managers for 19.8% of the remainder respondents. Based on the household income classification by Department of Statistic Malaysia (DOSM, 2019), the bottom 40 percent bracket (B40) which segregates household income into the ranges of 2,500 and below, 2,501 to 3,169, 3,170 to 3,969, and 3,970 to 4,849, accounted for 25.1% of the respondents. The middle 40 percent bracket (M40) which segregates household income into the ranges of 4,850 to 5,879, 5,880 to 7,099, 7,100 to 8,699, and 8,700 to 10,959, accounted for the majority 50.9% of the respondents. Finally, the top 20 percent bracket (T20) which consists of the household income range from 10,960 to 15,039 and 15,040 and above, accounted for 24% of the respondents in this survey. Comparatively, this sample has more representation from the middle-income bracket (M40).

Data Analysis

Correlation analysis of all scales shown on Table 2 reveals strong support for the hypotheses developed in this study. One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the mean values of the multiple groups. Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation values. There is significant difference in self-concept clarity between the income groups [$F_{(2, 164)}= 3.40$, p = 0.036]. Post hoc comparison using Games-Howell test indicated that the SCC mean score for B40 (M= 3.20, SD = 0.83) was significantly higher than the mean score for M40 (M= 2.86, SD= 0.64).

Figure 1. Conceptual model
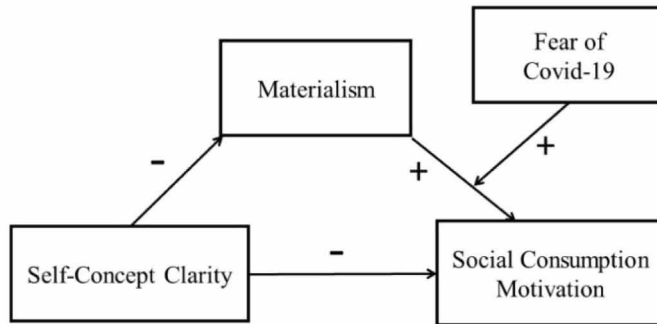
Furthermore, between income groups, there is a significant difference in materialism [$F_{(2, 164)}$= 7.96, p = 0.001]. Post hoc comparison using Games-Howell test indicated that the mean score for B40 (M= 3.26, SD = 0.46) was significantly higher than the mean score for T20 (M= 2.92, SD= 0.55) and the mean score for M40 (M= 3.25, SD = 0.40) was significantly higher than the mean score for T20 (M= 2.92, SD= 0.55). This basically indicated that respondents in the T20 income bracket scored significantly lower in materialism. Between age groups, there is significant difference in materialism [$F_{(2, 164)}$= 4.11, p = 0.018]. Post hoc comparison using Games-Howell test indicated that the mean score for age group 22 to 29 (M= 3.35, SD= 0.42) is significantly higher than for age group 30 to 39 (M=3.13, SD=0.45) and similarly significantly higher when compared with age group 40+ (M= 3.09, SD= 0.55). Age group 40+ (M= 2.77, SD= 0.85) score significantly higher for Fear of Covid-19 [$F_{(2, 164)}$= 3.26, p= 0.041] than aged group 30 to 39 (M= 2.36, SD= 0.84). Comparing

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	87	52.1
	Male	80	47.9
Age	22 - 29	40	24
	30 - 39	89	53.3
	40 & above	38	22.7
Nationality	Non- Malaysian	8	4.8
	Malaysian	159	95.2
Seniority	Frontline	53	31.7
	Middle Manager	81	48.5
	Senior Manager	22	13.2
	Top Manager	11	6.6
Income	B40	42	25.1
	M40	85	50.9
	T20	40	24.0

Table 2. Correlation analysis

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SCM	3.258	1.010	1						
M	3.173	0.474	0.296**	1					
SCC	2.945	0.740	0.167*	0.303**	1				
Fear	2.520	0.900	0.213**	0.212**	0.307**	1			
Gender	0.480	0.501	0.073	0.094	0.092	-0.014	1		
Age	35.020	6.906	0.045	-0.279**	-0.139	0.031	0.037	1	
Seniority	1.950	0.845	0.011	-0.208**	-0.132	0.031	0.118	0.314**	1
Income	6.200	2.667	0.033	-0.286**	-0.219**	-0.073	0.174*	0.610**	0.441**

* $p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, M = Materialism, SCC = Self-concept clarity, SCM = Social consumption motivation, Fear = Fear of Covid-19

Table 3. Comparing means

		SCM		SCC		Fear		Materialism	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender	Female	3.19	1.04	2.88	0.70	2.53	0.90	3.13	0.42
	Male	3.33	0.98	3.02	0.78	2.51	0.91	3.22	0.52
Seniority	Frontline	3.41	0.94	3.10	0.85	2.52	1.03	3.39	0.40
	Middle	3.08	1.06	2.92	0.64	2.52	0.79	3.05	0.49
	Senior	3.36	0.87	2.66	0.81	2.37	0.93	3.13	0.48
	Top	3.59	1.13	2.97	0.62	2.84	0.96	3.11	0.37
Age	22-29	3.16	1.27	3.14	0.72	2.63	1.01	3.35	0.42
	30-39	3.26	0.96	2.86	0.71	2.36	0.84	3.13	0.45
	40+	3.37	0.81	2.95	0.81	2.77	0.85	3.09	0.55
Income	B40	3.11	1.02	3.20	0.83	2.59	1.05	3.26	0.46
	M40	3.33	1.06	2.86	0.64	2.50	0.83	3.25	0.40
	T20	3.26	0.90	2.86	0.80	2.49	0.89	2.92	0.55

seniority groups, there is significant difference in materialism [$F_{(3, 163)}= 6.31$, $p= 0.000$] between front-liners (M= 3.39, SD=0.40) and mid-level management (M=3.05, SD=0.49).

Multiple regression analysis of the model was executed with Hayes proceed macro (3.3) integrated in SPSS (Model 14) using 50,000 bootstrapping samples. The results are shown in Table 4. The moderating effect is significant [$F_{(1, 162)}= 9.681$, $p= 0.002$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$]. The moderated mediation effect is also significant because the bootstrapped results did not contain a zero between the lower- and upper-level confidence intervals ($p<0.05$) with an index value of -0.091. Figure 2 shows the model with results and Figure 3 shows the interaction effects.

Table 4. Regression results

	Coeff	SE	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	R²
Step 1							
SCC -> M	0.194	0.048	4.08	0.000**	0.100	0.288	0.092
Step 2							
SCC -> SCM	0.045	0.107	0.418	0.676	-0.166	0.256	0.163
M -> SCM	1.734	0.418	4.150	0.000**	0.909	2.560	
Fear -> SCM	1.683	0.496	3.394	0.000**	0.704	2.663	
Fear x M -> SCM	-0.470	0.151	-3.110	0.002**	-0.769	-0.172	
Step 3							
Index = -0.0912		0.032			-0.159	-0.034	
Conditional Indirect Effects							
Fear	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI		BootULCI		
1.5714 (Low)	0.193	0.066	0.075		0.334		
2.4286 (Mid)	0.115	0.046	0.035		0.215		
3.2857 (High)	0.037	0.037	-0.032		0.115		

** $p < 0.01$, M = Materialism, SCC = Self-concept clarity, SCM = Social consumption motivation, Fear = Fear of Covid-19

Figure 2. Model with results
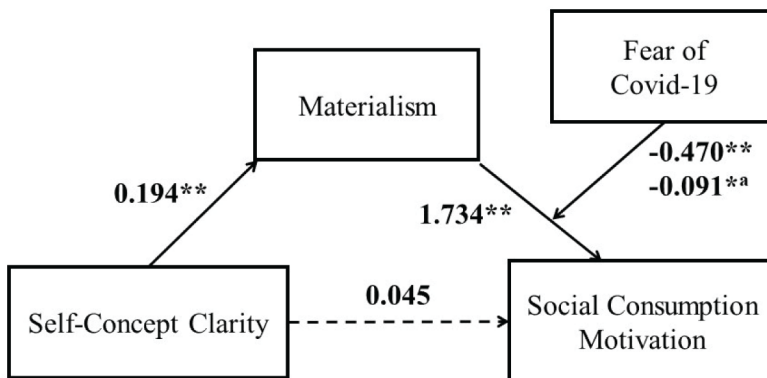
a Mediated moderation. Dotted line indicates insignificant relationship.
* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that social consumption motivation is driven by self-concept clarity and materialism while the fear of Covid-19 dampen this effect. Since social consumption subsumes status consumption (O'cass & McEwen, 2004), this study is congruent with Heaney's et al. (2005) reported findings that materialism is positively correlated with status consumption in Malaysia. Zakaria et al. (2020) also found materialism to be the most significant predictor of social consumption among Gen Y in Malaysia, accentuated by the national collectivism value. However, this study contributes

Figure 3. Interaction effects
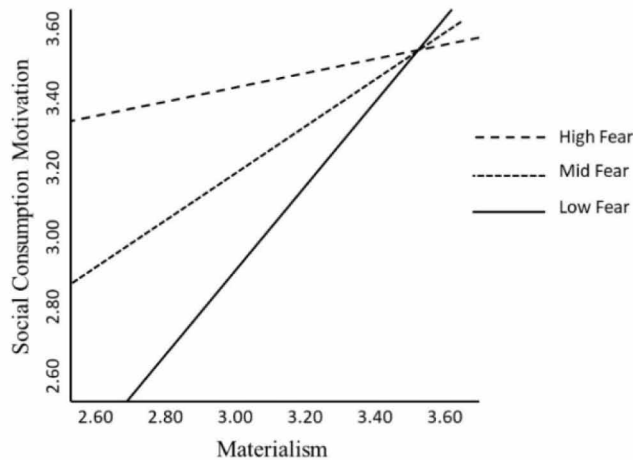
to new findings about how self-concept clarity feature in the relationship. This study shows that self-concept clarity is positively related to materialism, at least in Malaysia. Past studies suggest that consumers with low SCC derive clarity to their identity from consuming products with culturally embedded meanings (Reeves et al., 2012). Cushman's empty self-theory (Cushman, 1990) is the idea that Western secular man, in rejecting religion as a reference for meaning, is left to fill the emptiness in the self by ceaseless acquisition. Supporting this claim is Reeves' et al. (2012) results which show that individuals with low SCC are susceptible to materialistic consumption. Furthermore, this is in line with Micken and Roberts' (1999) claim that materialists are seekers for meaning in their consumption to fix their identity. However, there is a competing perspective (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006) which suggests that materialists are not lost souls but are instead said to have core beliefs that distinguish them from non-materialists (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Material and brand possessions have meaning in and of themselves that is beyond their social symbolic status. This study supports the counter perspective. Malaysian consumers with high SCC tend to be more materialistic but their understanding of their self is not directed towards social consumption. One possible explanation is that Malaysian consumers are more utilitarian in their consumption preference which is in sync with the concept of materialism rather than social consumption (Eastman et al., 1997). The insignificant relationship between SCC and SCM further supports this claim although self-concept understanding of materialism has positive indirect effects. Future studies should investigate the effect of self-concept clarity with such self-directed consumption construct akin to hedonic/utilitarian consumption (Ladeira et al., 2013) as dependent variable, mediated by materialism. Other related variables that should be investigated in a single model with self-concept clarity are status and conspicuous consumption to have a clearer picture of the social psychological motivations of Asian consumers. Since SCC is conceived as a metacognitive understanding of the structure of self rather than the contents of self-concept (Dunlop, 2017), we suggest that Malaysian consumers have superficial understanding of the detailed contents of their self-concept but a firm structural alignment with materialistic values in their self-concept. In addition, although it is still an open question whether Asian consumers are more materialistic than Western consumers (compare Eastman et al., 1997 and Ger & Belk, 1996) what is clear is that Malaysians see themselves as materialistic, especially the case for the B40 income bracket, frontline managers, and the age group of 22 to 29. This further indicate the materialism is not income related, which is congruent with past studies (La Barbera et al., 1997; Watson, 2003) indicating high materialistic aspiration.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, we investigated whether the fear of the virus confers significant thread to life such that it triggers an extenuating process of self-preservation in what is described as terror management (Greenberg et al., 1986). Terror management theory suggests that in the face of existential thread of death, effort to safeguard self-esteem entails address culturally relevant shortcomings. Based on this theory, we expect the fear of Covid-19 would compel Malaysians to increase social consumption as a symbolic gesture to signal having achieved the cultural worldview value of achieving significance in success. We expected the fear of Covid-19 to moderate positively the relationship between materialism and social consumption motivation. Besides, the age group of 40 and above (significant positive correlated with income) indicated significantly higher fear of the Covid-19 suggesting the likelihood to "shop 'til you drop" (Mandel & Smeesters, 2007). However, the results are contrary to this expectation. Both the significant moderating and mediated moderating effects were negative. One possible explanation is that Malaysian consumers, although materialistic, are also pragmatic, risk-averse, and collectivistic. Malaysians have high uncertainty avoidance and have high group/family collectivism (Kennedy, 2002). Risk-averse behaviours during the pandemic were reported by Azlan et al. (2020) like avoiding crowded places and hand hygiene. Preserving the well-being of the community and family and avoid unnecessary spending will tend to be priority during the pandemic. In other words, welfare of the family takes precedence over discretionary personal spending. For instance, although wearing mask is a controversial topic in the West (Finn, 2020), the mandate to wear mask in public is enforced by the Malaysian government without much debate when supply of mask was not an issue (Azlan et al., 2020; Wong & Alias, 2020). Congruent with collectivism, the social utility of wearing mask in prevention of possible harm to others by spreading the virus supersedes individual inconveniences. Contrasting with Western cultural values of higher individualism and lower uncertainty avoidance, this suggests that cultural values of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (House et al., 2004) are boundary conditions to the terror management theory. Zakaria et al. (2020) have shown that, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, collectivism is positively associated with materialism among Malaysian Gen Y consumers. This further strengthens the case for collectivism as a moderating factor when considering terror management theory in the Asian context, or at least in Malaysia. Consequently, future studies should also investigate the other cultural dimensions in the GLODE study (House et al, 2004) as possible boundary conditions when applying terror management theory in the Asian context.

Marketing implications. Shopping malls owners and operators will find it challenging to market social consumption related goods to Malaysians amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Malaysian marketers may their efforts in promoting status symbols in social consumption marketing backfiring. Furthermore, the restricted movement order by the authorities may further reduce social comparison saliency as social gatherings are illegal. However, promoting materialistic consumption by emphasizing utilitarian values and hedonistic appeal of the products may gain more traction, particularly for the age group of 40 and above. Nevertheless, further studies are needed to understand consumption preference along this approach. Given that the B40 and the younger age group in this study have higher materialistic desire, there is an ethical dilemma in persuading these consumers to spend what is obviously beyond their means.

Limitations. This study is not without its limitations. First, the self-concept clarity and self-esteem constructs have overlapping domains. This study did not control for the effects of self-esteem thus prevent us from accurately predicting the true associates of self-concept clarity construct (DeMarree & Bobrowski, 2017). A possible approach in future studies to reduce this uncertainty is to measure self-esteem concurrently and determining the R^2 change in stepwise regression analysis. Second, the Moschis's (1981) social consumption motivation construct captures influence from meaning of both products and other people. It does not only measure social influence in consumption. Third, alternative instrument for materialism that offer better reliability statistics should improve dimensional analysis that was not provided in this study. Fourth, generalisability is limited by the sample size as circumstances during the Covid-19 pandemic restricted access to respondents across a wider spectrum

and a bigger range. Future studies may have opportunity to closely replicate such unique situational context confronting us.

Contributions. Notwithstanding these limitations, this study contributes important new understanding of materialism and social consumption motivation in the context of Covid-19 pandemic in Malaysia. Malaysian consumers have high self-concept clarity about their materialistic orientation that may be of a hedonistic-utilitarian nature. Furthermore, cultural factors like collectivism and uncertainty avoidance bounds the applicability of terror management theory in Malaysia, suggesting that the development of the theory draw heavily from Western ideology of individualism foreign to the Asian mindset. Finally, this study offers an understanding of the self-concept clarity from the Asian context, answering the the appeal by Dunlop (2017) to investigate the construct of self-concept clarity particularly in non-Western context. Given the limited studies of self-concept clarity in consumer behaviour research, it is the hope that this study broaches interest.

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