

CONCEPTUALISING MATERIALISM IN HANDGUN PURCHASING BEHAVIOUR: A RESEARCH AGENDA

Viet Dung Trinh, Curtin University, Australia

Ian Phau, Curtin University, Australia

Abstract

Australia has one of the toughest gun control laws in the world. But despite the tight policy, gun demand in Australia continues to rise. During the time between 2003 and 2012, Australia has imported more than one million firearms. Given the relative small population of 20 millions, one million guns is a huge figure in Australia. To give an answer for this phenomenon, this paper proposes a preliminary study to exam the relationship between material values and the demand for handguns in Australian shooting community.

Keywords: Materialism, conspicuous consumption, status consumption, firearms

Introduction

After recent gun tragedies in the US, Australian gun control policy was often brought up as an example for the US by media from CNN, The Economist, to The Wall Street Journal (Alpers, 2012; Malcolm, 2012; Lexington, 2012). Although Australia has never had a gun culture on the scale of that in the US, gun ownership was widespread, with semi-automatic firearms becoming common in the 80's (Leigh and Neill, 2012). However Australia has tightened its regulations after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996 and became a nation with very restricted gun laws. Many firearms such as subcompact handguns, pump action shotguns and semi-automatic rifles are banned or restricted for civilians in Australia, whereas legally available in other countries such as the US or New Zealand. In 1997, the Australian federal government implemented a gun buyback program that reduced the stock of firearms by one-fifth and almost halved the number of gun owning households (Leigh and Neill, 2012). And later in 2003, a second gun buyback program targeting handguns was implemented and resulting in the surrender of 50,000 newly illegal pistols. And it is not just the Australian gun laws that dishearten gun owners, the stronger Australian dollars has made it very costly to own a gun. On average, a typical handgun like Glock 17 can be sold in Australia for twice of its price in the US, and yet it may take up to 12 months for latest models to be available in Australian market. But despite the heavily regulated gun laws and unattractive price tags, the demand for guns in Australia has never ceased. In 2012, firearms were legally imported to Australia at double the rate of 2007. It is reported that Australians have imported more than one million firearms since 2003 (Leigh and Neill, 2012). In fact, there are as many guns in Australia now as they were before any gun buyback program was introduced in the first place (Leigh and Neill, 2012). This raises the concerning question of “what have been driving the demand for guns in Australia?”.

There have been many studies about firearms but the majority is usually from legal or social (Callahan *et al.*, 1994; Bridges and Kunselman, 2004; Baker and McPhedran, 2007; Leigh and Neill, 2012). Small Arms Survey – an independent research project based in Switzerland – has been leading the research related firearms for years. Based on its extensive archive of publications, Small Arms Survey has categorized studies about guns into five themes: ‘Weapons and Market’, ‘Armed Violence’, ‘Armed Actors’, ‘Regulations and Controls’ and ‘Security Programmes’. Perhaps because it is such a delicate topic, there is hardly any research related to guns from a business perspective even though it has been suggested to treat guns like consumer

products by both gun control advocates and shooter associations (Kopel, 2000). And even among the modest number of available papers from business perspective, most studies are focusing on suppliers (production and distribution) rather than consumers (brand preferences, antecedents of attitudes toward firearms, willingness to buy). In order to fill the gap in current literature, this paper proposes to examine driving factors for the demand for handguns from a consumer perspective.

Background Literature

The demand for handguns in Australia

Handgun ownership in Australia is tightly limited because of its concealability (Chapman *et al.*, 2006). The federal government introduced a tighten handgun regulation in 2002. According to the new laws, smaller handguns with barrels less than 4" were banned for civilians use. And all handguns that fire ammunitions of greater than 9mm caliber were also restricted. Most of the guns affected by the later rule were used for IPSC competition.

IPSC stands for International Practical Shooting Confederation, also commonly known as practical pistol. It is a competition shooting sport where shooters are scored based on accuracy, power factor and speed. The minimum caliber used in IPSC is 9mm, which will be scored as minor. Because of the new legislation in 2002, most major calibers (10mm or .40 and above) are now unavailable for Australian IPSC shooters. But like the demand for guns in Australia, the population of IPSC shooters was not affected by the tighten handgun regulation. As the fastest growing shooting sports in the world, IPSC is practiced by thousands of members across Australia every year. IPSC is also famous for its *equipment race* (Sweeney, 2004). It is not uncommon for an open classed IPSC shooter to own a \$10,000 racegun (Sweeney, 2010). The gun costs so much because it is usually customized for a specific shooter. And because IPSC has several divisions for each type of handguns, it is quite common for a shooter to have more than one gun so they can compete. In summary, IPSC is the ideal platform to study driving factors of the demand for handgun from a marketing perspective.

Materialism

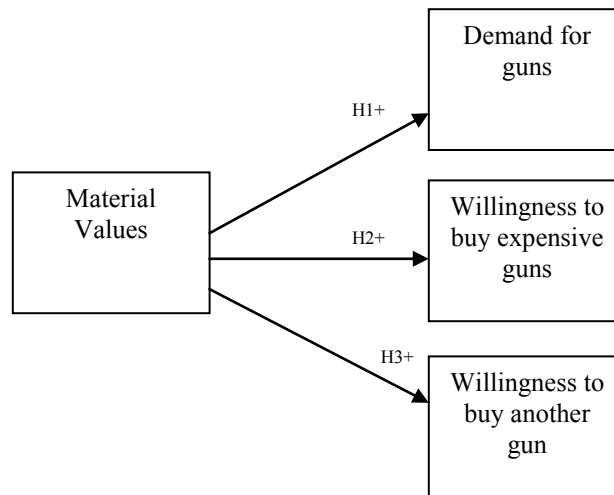
As both gun control advocates and shooting associations are asking to treat gun as consumer products (Kopel, 2000), materialism – a well-known factor and has been studied

comprehensively in marketing and consumer research (Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992; Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Mason 2001; Lu and Lu, 2010; Trinh and Phau, 2012) – should provide an excellent structure to study handgun purchasing behavior. Materialism is defined as “the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desired states” (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Materialistic consumers are driven to consume more than average people (Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Mason, 2001; Trinh and Phau, 2012). They use acquired goods to generate social recognition and status in order to distinguish themselves from others (Mason, 2001; Trinh and Phau, 2012). The new materialism scale (Trinh and Phau, 2012) was developed based on the idea of Richins and Dawson (1992). The new scale measures four values namely:

- *Material Success* measures the extent to which one uses possessions as indicators of success and achievement in life, both in judging oneself and others.
- *Material Happiness* measures the extent to which one believes that possessions are critical to satisfaction and well-being in life
- *Material Essentiality* is the belief that possessions are essential and responsible for everything in one’s life.
- *Material Distinctiveness* measures the extent to which one uses possessions as a device to stand out of the crowd.

Materialism has been used to explain the steady growth of goods such as luxury items during the financial recession (Trinh and Phau, 2012). It is also be used to explain the existence of counterfeit luxury brands in countries with the strictest law against counterfeit (Phau *et al.*, 2009). And therefore materialism should be able to help researchers to understand why the demand for guns in Australia does not shrink despite the tough laws and hefty price tags.

Conceptual Model and Hypotheses Development



H1: The higher material values scored, the higher the demand for handguns becomes.

H2: There is a positive relationship between material values and the willingness to buy expensive guns

H3: There is a positive relationship between material values and the willingness to buy a second gun

Methodology

Research Design

This study is going to employ the new materialism scale (Trinh and Phau, 2012). The scale consists of 16 items measuring four material values. The demand for guns, willingness to buy expensive guns and willingness to buy another gun are going to be measured by a single direct question. All items are measured by 7-point Likert from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Item scores are summed within dimension to form indices for each dimension, and can be summed overall to form an overall materialism score

Sample and Data collection method

The sample for this research is going to be 300 Australian IPSC/practical pistol shooters. Age can be varied from 18 – 70 years old. Data will be collected via online survey. A survey shall be created using Qualtrics Online Survey Platform. The survey will be distributed via emails as well as on a popular Internet forum among Australian shooters.

Data analyzing method

All items of Materialism Scale were subjected to regression analysis using SPSS version 19. Prior to performing the regression analysis, an inspection of the correlation matrix will be conducted looking for any presence of coefficients under .3. The Kaiser Meyer-Olkin values (Kaiser 1970, 1974) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett 1954) are also assessed to see if the data has reached statistical significance supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

Contributions and Further Research Directions

This paper contributes to the body of literature by expanding the knowledge of gun demand from consumer perspective. To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a publication of research that study consumer demand for firearm, or handgun in specific. In light of methodological contribution, this study will provide empirical data for the new materialism scale. The new materialism scale was developed to study consumer demand for luxury and counterfeit luxury brands. It would be the first time it is used to study a non-luxury related item. The most important contribution of this study is managerial implication. The result will enable us to answer the question "Why gun demand in Australia still rising despite the tighten gun law". This study will also provide essential insights of gun demand for policy makers and the public. This information can be used for educating people, forming more radical gun control policy that not only promoting a safer society but also serving the interest of everyone, including sport shooters.

As it is a preliminary study, this study would lay the foundation for further research into the topic. It would benefit the public to study all gun owners rather than just sport shooters. The demand for guns in rural area may be different as they are used for different purpose than sport shooting (hunting, vermin control, etc.). As Australia is a nation of immigrants, the country has a diversified culture. Therefore further research investigating 'country of origin as an antecedent could result in excellent outcome. And with almost 60,000 people in active service and 25,000 reservists, Australian Defence Force has participated in peacekeeping in several conflicts. Veterans, who involved in sport shooting, may demand for something different than ordinary shooters because of sentimental values or nostalgia rather than just functionality.

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