

**CAN CONSUMPTION MAKE YOU HAPPY?**  
*(Exploring Student's Quality of Life from Marketing Perspective)*

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**ABSTRACT**

*This present study explored the concept of quality of life (QOL) marketing from the perspective of students. Furthermore, it generated qualitative data which will open doors for future research in the same area. This study adopts a qualitative approach, using in-depth face-to-face interviews. A total of twenty participants were selected from different faculties currently residing in Malaysia and Pakistan. Several procedures were applied to carry out a rigorous qualitative analysis (i.e., interview guide, audio/ video recording and field notes, prompt transcription, coding and tabulating the transcripts, direct quotes and rich data slices when presenting findings). The findings of this paper revealed that in milieu of consumption students believe that their quality of life enhance with the consumption of various products. Further, for most of the students a strong relationship with their families and loved ones is an important factor of their quality of life. Country-based population studies should be carried out in order to assess and monitor the quality of life in a standard way. Further given that this research is qualitative, there is a need to embark on empirical data gathering on the same topic. This study was conducted in Malaysia and Pakistan, where no study has been conducted to explore the quality of life marketing from student's perspective. Moreover, Consumption, an important facet of marketing, was also explored for the first time in the QOL context.*

**Keywords:** *quality-of-life marketing; quality-of-life research; students' perspective; in-depth interviews; Malaysia, Pakistan.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Quality of life (hereafter, QOL) is one of those popular phrases we see and hear with increasing frequency. Unfortunately, though, it is used so often, and in so many different contexts for so many different purposes, that it is difficult to pin down an agreed meaning. Studies on QOL started in the 60's in politics which used purely economic measures of social welfare (Birnbacher, 1999; Mohamad et al., 2008). The study of the QOL concept then passed to medical fields, focusing on the functional indicators of patients' health-related well-being. Only recently has the study of QOL received growing interest among researchers, especially in the social sciences, because of the important role it plays in social policies (Mohamad et al., 2008). QOL reflects a general sense of well-being, life satisfaction and happiness (Strumpel, 1973). Such issues are increasingly being studied across a broad range of disciplines (Yuan, 2001). For example, the quality of leisure activities (Deleuil, 2000) and the impact of recreation quality on QOL perceptions have recently been examined (Wong, 2000). The effect of marketing on consumers' quality of life has also interested scholars for sometime (see Sirgy et al., 1982). Sirgy (2001) explicated that marketing practice designed to enhance the well-being of customers while preserving the well-being of the firm's other stakeholders (e.g., stockholders, distributors, suppliers, employees, the local community, and the environment), comes under the definition of QOL marketing.

The purpose of this study was to explore, using a qualitative approach, the QOL marketing from students' perspective, particularly highlighting the consumption aspect of marketing. Although much has been written about QOL in marketing, less work has yet articulated from the students' dimension of QOL concept. Students,

for example, tend to focus on short-term goals, because of their short tenure at the university. Shorter-term goals of satisfaction, happiness, interpersonal-social interactions, physical and emotional health, and satisfactory living arrangements are extremely important to students, whereas longer-term goals such as tenure/job security and opportunities for professional development and promotion may be more important to other groups of population (Ducinskiene et al., 2003). Further, Ducinskiene et al. (2003) argued that there are other factors external to the university that can have a profound effect on the QOL for all students.

One of the major factors affecting the quality of students' life is marketing. The concept of QOL marketing has been described and discussed in a variety of contexts. For example, Sirgy et al. (1982) proposed a product development model guided by the notion of QOL marketing which was applied in social marketing (Sirgy et al., 1985). Similarly, Sirgy and Lee (1995) discussed how the concept of QOL marketing evolved in marketing thought. Further, Lee and Sirgy (1995) and Lee et al. (1998) developed the concept of "international quality-of-life orientation" (an individual-level construct describing the marketing manager's disposition to make decisions guided by a QOL marketing philosophy) and validated this construct. This study also attempt to explore QOL marketing (consumption) from student's perspective.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

QOL research began around 1960 when scholars set the stage for investigating QOL as a unique area of research (Schuessler & Fisher, 1985). Since then QOL has been examined in conjunction with many other variables including ethnicity and to a lesser extent, education. Historically, there have been differences in how QOL is defined. This is because researchers have differences in defining QOL. However, most of the researchers agree that QOL is more related to the degree of one's "mental life" (Schuessler & Fisher, 1985). Mental life is generally taken to mean satisfaction or synonymously; happiness, wellness, or well-being (Schuessler & Fisher, 1985). Many others (Frisch, 1992, 1994; WHO Group, 1994) considered of QOL in a broader way, combing multiple facets of life including psychological (mental), physical, social, and environmental aspects, in its definition.

In marketing the concept of QOL has been originated from a set of philosophical foundations. For example, societal marketing (Kotler, 1986), relationship marketing (Macneil, 1980; Dwyer et al., 1987; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and stakeholder theory (e.g., Carroll, 1989; Evan & Freeman, 1988; Freeman, 1984). Today's consumers increasingly look for signs of corporate citizenship and expect that business firms conduct themselves ethically and responsibly in order to preserve and enhance the consumer's and the society's well-being (Kotler, 2003). Societal marketing defined in terms of quality of life is, that, the organization's task is to determine the needs, wants, and interests of target markets and to deliver satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than competitors in a way that preserves and enhances the consumer's and the society's well being (Lee & Sirgy, 2004). In a similar manner, Sirgy and Lee (1996) argued that marketers are adopting a QOL strategy in attempt to maximize the welfare of their customers without adversely affecting the well-being of the stockholders, distributors, suppliers, employees, and the local community in significant ways.

Another importance philosophical foundation is the relationship marketing which includes all activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It is an important paradigm of marketing that includes concepts such as trust, commitment, benevolence, and satisfaction (Dwyer et al., 1987; Ganesan, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1994). The followers of this concept emphasizes on building up a network of stakeholders for mutual benefit over a long time. In a similar manner, Lee and Sirgy (2004) emphasized that QOL marking also guides the firm to establish long term relationship with target consumers by establishing and reinforcing long term relationships with various stakeholders. This relationship is possible through integrating ethical and socially responsible concerns that guide the firm by enhancing QOL through the delivery of quality products (Lee & Sirgy, 2004). Further, Lee and Sirgy (2004) argued that QOL marketing is an extension of relationship marketing because the former focus on societal affects, whereas, the later focus on the firm's financial performance.

The last philosophical foundation is that of the stakeholder theory. According to Lee and Sirgy (2004) QOL marketing borrows from stakeholder theory in a way that the focus is not only on serving the customers to enhance their satisfaction and well being but also on the preservation of the well-being of the firm's other stakeholders. According to stakeholder theory a firm engages in various exchange relationships with many exchange partners including suppliers, customers, competitors, other functional departments within the organization, and various stakeholders in the society (Carroll, 1989; Even & Freeman, 1988; Goodpaster, 1991; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Robin & Reidenbach, 1987).

A plethora of studies conducted on QOL marketing (see Helliwell & Putnam, 2005; Lee & Sirgy, 2004; Lee & Sirgy, 1995; Lee et al., 1998; Sirgy, 1996, 2001, 2002; Sirgy & Lee, 1995; Sirgy et al., 1985; Sirgy et al., 1982)

but only a handful of studies focused on exploring students' QOL (Ducinskiene et al., 2003; Hsu et al., 2008). To our knowledge, there is no study conducted on exploring students' QOL from marketing perspective, specially in Malaysia and Pakistan. This study, therefore, aims to achieve this objective in an exploratory manner.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study were the students from various faculties at the International Islamic University in Malaysia and the students from different universities in Pakistan. Based on the nature of research, only 20 students were interviewed and they are selected through convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996).

### ***Data collection***

The authors conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with participants selected on convenience based sampling from different faculties. Time and location with the students were set and confirmed before the interview. They were invited to their favorite and convenient locations for interview. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.

When the interviewees arrived for the interview, they were explained the purpose of the study, the anticipated length of the interview, the fact that the interview was being videotaped/ audio taped (only one participant refused to be videotaped, so was audio taped only), and an assurance of confidentiality.

The interview consisted of two main questions emerged from the literature. Ducinskiene et al. (2003) conducted a research using World Health Organization Quality of Life assessment brief (WHOQOL- BREIF) addressing students' QOL, the same issue has been taken into account in an exploratory way, hence asking the subjects: "*What is quality of life for you?*". Similarly, numerous studies have been conducted on QOL and marketing (Sirgy et al., 1982, 1985; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1994; Sirgy & Lee, 1995; Lee et al., 1998; Sirgy, 2001; Lee & Sirgy, 2004; Peterson & Ekici, 2007) addressing different dimensions. For this study consumption has been selected as one of the factor influencing students' QOL (Peterson & Ekici, 2007) and therefore, asking a core question: "*How consumption can affect your quality of life?*"

Interviewees were encouraged to discuss anything they have in their mind regarding the questions. Interview probing technique was also used with the participants, in order to find out more details about the topic they know. Further, upon every interview completion the video tape was played in front of the interviewee to assure that the quality of audio and video is up to the mark. The author also asked the interviewees for the comments on their own video recordings and noted for information purposes. After each interview, the authors read through their notes and checked the audio/video recording with the addition of comments on it for future convenience. This enabled us to transcribe, analyze and interpret the interviews in a much better way.

The interviews were audio/ video taped and were transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word. After transcribing the interviews, they were checked and verified against the audio/ video tapes. The raw transcripts were then re-arranged, coded and put in the tabulated form for easy data retrieval during the analysis part. Due to the small number of interviews, coding and tabulation were done manually.

During the coding and tabulation of transcriptions, those material were omitted which was doubted to be a source of disclosure of the identity of participants. Transcripts were also given a unique identification name so that individuals were not associated with their data. The quotations reported in this paper cannot identify any participant, and those that might compromise the identity of participants are not reported.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis was an enlightening process; it was cyclical and reflective activity that informed data collection, writing and further data collection (Tesch, 1990; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Analysis of the data began after the first interview and was an iterative process. Themes and codes were identified as interviews were conducted and were revised accordingly. The transcripts were re-read several times to come to an overall idea of both the content and the process of the discussions. Then, an inductive data analysis process followed. The first step was breaking the data into meaningful units of information and highlighting significant sentences and paragraphs with different colors. Then, the highlighted units were combined into larger categories by cutting and pasting of similar colored text fragments in the word processing program. The third and final step was to combine all the categories, formed in step two, into topics, once the author was satisfied with them.

## **RESULTS**

Twenty students were selected for interview. The interviews were conducted in different locations convenient to the participants. The intention was to select student who have knowledge of QOL, but for most of the

participants the topic was new and this was a challenging task for authors. Due to reasons of confidentiality, the names and faculties of participants are not reported. Participants were seven females and thirteen males from different faculties and of age group from 20 to 35. Only five participants responded with comments after watching their own recordings but these comments were not incorporated as they did not change the content or meaning of the questions or topic.

The following themes emerged and as advised by Wilkinson (1999) we have included individuals' quotes, in order to give a clear picture of participants' response to particular questions:

***The concept of QOL according to participants***

QOL for most of the participants is a strong relationship with their family and friends. For some of them religion is also a factor that contributes towards the QOL. Their comments included:

"In my situation now, since I have a family, since I have children, since I have spouse, the relationship, the strong relationship will make us happy."

"For me quality of life is an abstract term, but if I am supporting my family and I am fulfilling their needs, I think I would be very happy... also if I am free to exercise my religion [that is QOL for me]"

"For me the relationship will play a big role... certainly the relationship."

"...Enjoying my life with my kids and family [pause], give them everything they want, enjoy the life, go with them everywhere, buy them what they want.... feeling happy, for me [thinking], I feel very happy when they [family] are with me, even [if] they give me hard time, and tease me."

"...Family, friends, just the fact that I am still alive, materialistic stuff plus the love, you know the unconditional love with family and friends... that's it..."

"...If I have a close contact with my family [it is QOL for me]"

"Relationship with my family... if you have family [and] if you treat your family good, they will treat other people good and that's what people treat each other good [pause] relationship is really good, especially between families, Kids, wife, husband, mom, dad, grand ma."

Some participants remarked that religion will play an important role and can significantly improve their quality of life. This idea has already been supported by well known scholars who concluded that religiously active people have been reported to be happy, physically healthier and live longer (Levin & Schiller, 1987; McIntosh & Spilka, 1990; Williams & Sternthal, 2007). The comment of the interviewees comprises:

"Religion [because] it is the centre for everything around you, if you go for religion it means that you will go right for everything else, if you go right for the religion, it means that you are doing everything else right. So this is the central thing, this is the back bone of the whole life."

One of the interviewee answered in the following way:

"If this question was asked me a few years back than I would have picked out money because once you get money you get satisfaction all over, but since I have been in this university and the emphasis is on our religion, believe of our religion, how it performs, how it acts, all these things work out and what is going to benefit us in this life and the life here after, so keeping that in mind [all this] I would opt for knowledge of our religion."

Another participant said that it is difficult to make a choice between religion and family. The comments appeared as:

"Religion and family... My heart says family and my head says religion."

The same participant said that:

"I cannot think to choose in between this [but if I have to choose one] I would choose religion."

For one of the interviewee a balance between material things is QOL. The comments include:

"I think it would be a balance of what you possess, I mean the material possessions and your satisfaction level, so when they match you have a good QOL and when there is a mismatch than the QOL at least in my own perception would not be good, my own perception about my own QOL would not be good, for example, even if I have a lot of material possession [even then] there is this possibility that I might not be satisfied, so if the

satisfaction level matches my possession level and there is a balance between the two, so there is likely to be a high estimation of QOL.”

The same participant gave another answer about, what QOL is:

“...I am just reminded there is another important element in the QOL and that I am not sure if you are including those kinds of factors in the study, but, to have companionship and relationship is also an important factor in determining the QOL.”

Based on the above comments, it appeared that QOL is different for different students. For some it is a strong relationship with the friends and family, whereas for others it is the knowledge of religion and possession of material things.

### ***Impact of consumption on QOL***

For some of participants, the consumption of product makes either no difference or little difference to their QOL, whereas, for others it contributes to the enhancement of QOL. The following comments from the participants highlighted this issue:

“Not really [because] sometimes there is a feeling of prestige, you buy just to show the world and show the people that you have it...”

The same respondent further commented:

“... but we consume things because we have that prestige feeling, we want people to know that we have something of high quality and it really makes us happy and satisfied”

“Not necessarily [because] it is according to the type of products [that] what are the type of products that you are looking [and] you are focusing on that particular time.”

The same participant after thinking for a while commented:

“But in certain situations, yes consumption will improve my QOL.”

In reply to the same question some other comments appeared:

“Yes, yes, this is [what] I am sure about it, like if we can buy a lot of things and can use it, this [is] what enhances the life of everyone, I notice that when I buy things, I will feel really good and happy.”

“In order to fulfill your physical needs, you need to consume products... so up to some extent it may improve your standard or QOL and [up to some extent means] according to the expectations.”

“Yes it will make a difference but not that much [pause] yes it will make a difference... may be it will make you more confident, this is the only thing [and that is] you will be more confident about yourself.”

“Well it is going to enhance my QOL... Consumption is a part of our life, we get satisfied when we consume...”

One interviewee contradicted the comments of some respondents in milieu of consumption and answered that:

“No it cannot enhance [QOL]... it (product) actually provides [the] ease in my school life, it provides a little help in performing certain tasks that I need to do, but doesn't bring happiness, I don't think that it brings happiness to me...[it] helps me out in certain things, but through this do I get happiness [umm] no.”

One of the interviewees argued that, consumption make different things easy for us and commented:

“...it makes it easier for you to do stuff... yes consumption [enhances QOL].”

One more participant also agreed that consumption of products enhances the QOL of life. The comments include:

“Yes to some extent, and that would be included in what we identified as material possessions [pause] not just the fixed assets but your ability to buy on a regular basis...”

The result of this research shows that for most of the respondent QOL is a good relationship with their families and loved ones. The participants also commented that religion can play a pivotal role in enhancing QOL. Moreover, when the main question of the research was asked, “*How consumption can affect your quality of life?*” the respondents argued that consuming products will ultimately make them happy and enhance their QOL. However, it is important to note that some participants did not agree that consumption can make them happy.

## DISCUSSION

Over the recent years, the number of QOL studies has increased, nevertheless, as we pointed out, only a limited number of studies were conducted in exploring the students’ QOL and no studies conducted in Malaysia and Pakistan addressing the students’ QOL and marketing.

The aim of this research was to explore students’ QOL from marketing perspective. It is noticed that the participants showed adequate interest in the research. Our study suggests that perhaps further research is required targeting any single issue discussed in this research.

QOL for most of the students interviewed was, to have a good and strong relationship with their family and friends. It was observed that if the students have strong relationship with friends and families, they feel happy and satisfied. It has been reported previously that the QOL of individual family members has an impact on the QOL of other family members and on the family as a whole (Poston et al., 2003). Those students who live closer to their families are more satisfied and happy compared to those who live alone and away from their loved ones. The participants expressed that if they have connections with their families, it is QOL for them. A similar finding has been reported by Halford et al. (1991), that, higher levels of positive emotional expressiveness in the family predicted milder and fewer negative symptoms and better quality of life.

Another important aspect noticed by the authors during the study is the impact of religion on the QOL of students. The participants also commented that religion plays a vital role in the enhancement of their QOL. According to them, if they are close to the religion and follow its guidelines, their QOL will enhance. Tiliouine et al. (2009) also found that religious people and religious nations tend on average to experience greater well-being than non-religious people and less religious nations. Moreover, people who have religious beliefs report higher life satisfaction than those who declare themselves atheists (Donovan & Halpern, 2002) and have lower suicide rates (Helliwell & Putnam, 2005).

Most of the students agreed that consumption of products will enhance their QOL with the exception of few students, who thinks that it will enhance their QOL but will not make a big difference. This appeared to be in contrast with Hirsch (1977), Bauman (1992) and Gabriel & Lang (1995), who suggested that consumerism promises a universal happiness that it cannot deliver. Further they explicated that disconfirmed expectations impoverish individual and societal QOL. Hirsch (1977), Bauman (1992) and Gabriel & Lang (1995), argued that the desire for constantly increased consumption may not only decrease the QOL of the consumer, but also have deleterious effects on the natural environment.

In summary, the present research adds to the relatively small number of studies that found evidence of the effect of different factors on QOL. The findings of this study are in contrast with Hirsch (1977), Bauman (1992), and Gabriel and Lang (1995) because this study confirms the positive impact of consumption on happiness and overall QOL. However, it is consistent with those researches that confirmed the positive role of relationship on QOL (Halford et al., 1991; Poston et al., 2003) and influence of religious beliefs in improved QOL (Donovan & Halpern, 2002; Helliwell & Putnam, 2005; Tiliouine et al., 2009). Finally, the authors wish to attach the present study with the relationship marketing, a philosophical foundation of QOL marketing, where the focus is to establish long-term relationship with target consumers by enhancing QOL through the delivery of products (Lee & Sirgy, 2004).

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