

A STUDY OF FOOD BUYING BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHINESE CHILDREN

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Abstract

The paper reports a study on food buying behaviour among Chinese children aged between 10-13 years old. There are two important findings. Firstly, the growing influence of commercial environment. During the learning of consumer behaviour by Chinese children, the parental role of guidance remains prominent, and their recommendations have a decisive impact on children's food choices. Secondly, the perceived importance of product attributes. Chinese children tend to pay more attention to nutrition, hygienic conditions and food safety, which shows that children seem to be mature early at this stage and start to behave in a more adult-like fashion when making purchase comparisons.

Keywords

Buying behaviour, consumer socialisation, children, information sources, TV advertising, China

1. Introduction

China has the largest population of children in the world. Compared with the children in other countries, Chinese children have substantial economic power and unique influence. One couple –one child has been a basic state policy in China since the early 1970s. As the only child in the family, Chinese children receive most of the love and attention of both parents as well as that of four grandparents, and have been described as being like “little emperors/empresses” (Cheng, 1993; Shao and Herbig, 1994). Children of this generation have more discretionary income to spend and therefore exert a greater influence on the spending of their families compared with the children of other countries (McNeal and Yeh, 2003). The purpose of the paper is to report an empirical study of food buying behaviour among Chinese children.

2. Relevant Literature

Consumer socialisation is defined as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace” (Ward, 1974, p.2). Previous research into the acquisition of cognitive and behavioural patterns that constitute consumer socialisation was based mainly on two theoretical frameworks, the cognitive developmental model and the social learning model (Moschis and Churchill, 1978). For the purpose of this paper, this brief review will focus mainly on the consumer socialisation and major socialisation agents.

2.1 Consumer socialisation and socialisation agents

Integrating Piaget’s (1970) stage theory of intellectual development and Selman’s (1980) stage theory of social development, John (1999) proposes a model of consumer socialisation in which children learning to be consumers are theorised to undergo a developmental process in three stages: from the perceptual stage through to the analytical stage, followed by the reflective stage as they mature into adult consumers. Adopting the learning theory to explain consumer socialisation Ward et al. (1977, p.56) postulate “a basic component of children’s learning about the marketplace is knowledge of sources of information about products.” Socialisation agents are the influential sources that convey norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours to the learner (McLeod and O’Keefe, 1972). Much evidence shows that parents, peers, mass media, stores, schools, brands, and products themselves and their packages are all sources of information, namely socialisation agents (Ward, 1974; Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Dotson and Hyatt, 2005).

2.2 Parents as the primary socialisation agent

Parents are considered as the primary socialisation agents for children, and most aspects of parental influence continue well into adulthood (Ward et al., 1977). Among all the social entities from which children might learn, parents appear to be the most instrumental in teaching their children consumer behaviour (Moore and Moschis, 1981; Mascarenhas and Higby, 1993). Parents play the most important role in providing Chinese children with information about school-related products; while parents and TV play an almost equal role in Chinese children’s learning about personal care products. In terms of the relative importance of different information sources, television, parents, store visits and friends were ranked as the most important sources of information by Chinese children (McNeal and Ji, 1999). Compared to other people, parents tend to be perceived as the most rational and trustworthy information source by Chinese children (Yau, 1994).

2.3 Peers as socialisation agent

Like parents, peers can affect child consumer socialisation directly or indirectly. Peers appear

to be an important socialisation agent, contributing to the learning of the expressive elements of consumption (Bachmann, et al. 1993). Several earlier studies have speculated that children learn “expressive elements of consumption” (i.e. materialistic values and social motivations) or “affective consumption” (i.e. styles and moods of consumption) from their peers and the findings also supported such speculations (Parsons et al., 1953; David and Roseboroug, 1955).

2.4 Mass media as socialisation agent

A huge amount of scholarly research has been published which focuses mainly on two dimensions of media influencing upon children, namely, advertising and editorial/programming content, which specifically intend to inform young people about products and encourage them to purchase (Ward and Wackman, 1973; O’Guinn and Shrum, 1997). A study to determine new product information sources for Chinese children shows that television is considered the most important information source for learning about new products; and the perceived importance of television as an information source of new products increases significantly with the age of children (McNeal and Ji, 1999).

2.5 Retailer and brand as socialisation agent

Retailers can be logically expected to be significant consumer socialisation agents due to the regular and frequent store visits by children and the interactions between the two parties (McNeal and Ji, 1999, p.347). Brands are another potentially strong influence on children’s marketplace behaviour. Brand awareness and preference among children is heightened at their earlier ages by the increased presence of brands. Brand name is a highly salient attribute in children’s purchase requests across a variety of food types that they often use and enjoy. Brand knowledge is differentially affected by product, relevance and amount of advertising, and brand knowledge for each product increases with age. The increased level of influence of popular brands on children arise from “peer pressure” and are accompanied by celebrity endorsements associated with their favourite sports, music and entertainment stars pitching well-known brand named products (Dotson and Hyatt, 2005).

2.6 Research on Chinese children

The majority of studies on children’s consumer socialisation were originated in the US and other western countries. Little research attention was paid to China despite the nation having the largest population of children. The first empirical study on Chinese children as consumers was not published until 1997 by McNeal and Yeh. John’s consumer socialisation framework has been applied in particular to the studies in China such as Chinese children’s attitudes towards television advertising (Chan and McNeal, 2004), materialism among children (Chan, 2003), the perception of young consumers on brands (Chan, 2006), and product information sources among Chinese children (Chan, 2005). Chinese children are exposed increasingly to a large amount of advertising. Among all types of media, television has surpassed the parents as the most important source of information about new products for Chinese children (McNeal and Ji, 1998).

3. Methodology

The empirical research was conducted in the summer of 2007 in a primary school located in the East of Beijing metropolitan area. The sample consisted of children in Grades 5 and 6 with the age ranged from 10 to 13 years (for details of the sample, refer to Table 1 in Appendix 1). The reasons of choosing them as samples were that children of these ages were expected to be mature enough and have been found in previous studies to be: active, independent shoppers (McNeal, 1992); highly cognitive of their consumption choices (Belk et al., 1982); and

knowledgeable about products and brands (Ward et al., 1977). The empirical data was collected in two stages. Quantitative data was collected by a questionnaire survey and qualitative data by focus group interviews. The question list was first constructed in English, and then translated into Chinese. It was tested in a pilot: problems were identified and the list revised to ensure that all questions would be understandable to the respondents. The Chinese version was later back translated into English and compared with the original to check for consistency. The findings of the group interviews are reported here. A total of 31 questions were asked that fall into the four categories (the question list is attached in Appendix 2).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 The attitude towards TV commercials

To measure understanding of the nature and intent of the commercials, a number of questions were asked to find if the respondents knew about the difference between a normal TV programme and a commercial; and whether they believed that the commercial was telling truth. Children did make some discrimination regarding the frequency of truthfulness, although one-third of the fifth-graders and half of the sixth-graders felt that commercials lied “most of the time”. When asked how they knew when commercials “lied,” many respondents replied that they would respond to TV advertising in the same way as they did to some other official figures -with a general scepticism or distrust. They cited negative personal experience with a specific product while others relied on the media for determining when advertising “lied.” Those respondents were further asked why TV commercials did not tell the truth, some pointed out that “the company want to sell products to make money, so they have to make the product look better than it is.” Such responses indicate that they have developed the ability to infer and attribute motives, a more complex information-processing skill, which supports the model of consumer socialization advanced by John (1999).

While some children remained sceptical about advertising, other children cited positive experiences with products as a basis for judging advertising truthfulness. However, it is hard to precisely determine to what extent positive or negative experiences with certain products generalised to the attitudes about the credibility of TV advertising. It appears that children’s attitudes toward commercials were complex indeed. Their attitudes were consistent in that they reported disappointment with advertised products, scepticism toward commercials, and general rejection of the proposition that commercials indicate product quality. It is interesting to note, in spite of these attitudes, which may cognitively “filter” commercial messages, about half of the participants still reported wanting much of what they see in commercials.

4.2 Types of stores

Six questions were asked in order to determine where/when/what children buy. The results indicated that the children were shopping in a good variety of retail outlets. When they went shopping with parents, their parents were more likely to choose to go to supermarkets to buy food, as the parents believed that the hygiene and safety of food sold in supermarkets were up to standard and reassuring, and such food would benefit their children’s health and growth. The reason why children themselves preferred shopping at supermarkets themselves is that supermarkets have open shelves, which are convenient for them to choose food. Nowadays, all types of supermarkets are growing rapidly in China, such as superstores, expresses and metros. Many of them are located in residential areas, competing strongly with the traditional food stores for the children’s snack business.

As for which type of stores children spend most of their money on, street merchants were found to be the number one on the basis of patronage, because this is where children can

conveniently buy almost any product they desire. In Chinese cities, children would pass many shops and kiosks on their way walking to school. Most of the participants indicated that they would buy food with their pocket money on their way to and from school. The popular snack items they purchase are various prepared foods sold by street vendors such as ice cream bars, charcoaled meat on a stick and candied fruit on a stick, Ma-la-tang (a spicy food), cola and fruit drinks. Furthermore, the children also go to fast-food restaurants to buy some salty snacks such as french-fries and hamburgers. Due to the perception that some snack items are unhealthy or unhygienic, parents would not buy them for the children. Therefore, the children had to purchase those snacks on their way to and from school. Most of the time, the children will patronise such street vendors with their classmates, and those street vendors recommend by their friends are most popular.

4.3 Perceived credibility of information sources

The children's perceptions on the credibility of various information sources for new products were explored. For personal sources, parents were perceived by children as the most trustworthy information sources for learning about new products. Girls were more likely to trust friends and classmates as a credible information source than boys. As for commercial sources, TV commercials were generally perceived being untrustworthy. However, girls were more likely to trust products that were endorsed by a celebrity than boys did. They believed their favourite stars were trustworthy so the product for which they have endorsed must be good. On the other hand, some children remained sceptical of celebrities by saying that "stars deceived the public"; they cited some examples in which products endorsed by celebrities were found shoddy in quality.

In general, the perceived credibility of commercial sources was lower than that of personal sources. Furthermore, it was observed that children were likely to evaluate perceived usefulness and credibility on the same dimension, forming an attitude towards a specific information source. This observation, whether there is a significant relationship between perceived usefulness and perceived credibility, needs to be examined in a further study.

4.4 Perceived importance of product's attributes

The results of the questionnaire indicate that good taste plays an extremely important role in children's food purchase decision making. In the group interviews, however, the participants also confirmed the importance of price, nutrition, and food safety in their decision making process. Many participants said they cared about the price of food when buying with their own money, as they had only a limited fix allowances. As a result, they would consider how to make good use of their money. The results also provided an indication of the relative importance of the nutritional attributes of food products for children. Many children emphasised that the nutrition of food was also very important, and they confirmed that such notions were heavily influenced by their parents. Food safety was such an interesting topic that was debated in the discussion. Children would look at the best-before-date label when choosing food products and were aware of bogus imitations in packaging. They normally preferred regular and large-size stores or supermarkets to purchase food products and chose the restaurants that had clean and hygienic conditions for a meal. They suggested that their consciousness on food safety was derived from some negative reports in the media, and especially from their parents' concern on food safety, which had a big impact on their buying behaviour.

Additionally, word of mouth played an important role in children's purchase decision making. The findings of the group interviews have confirmed that Chinese families traditionally rely

heavily on word of mouth in order to learn about new products. Kindel (1983) suggests that the Chinese are less likely to seek information from mass media sources, yet, the findings of the study demonstrates that the new consumer generation is more exposed to and more open to commercial sources, and thus is more heavily influenced by the information conveyed in them.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings

1. TV commercials and in-store experiences were the primary sources of new snack foods for Chinese children. Chinese children depended more upon commercial sources than interpersonal sources in order to find out about new food products;
2. In terms of perceived importance to food purchase, interpersonal influences (i.e. recommendation from parents and peers) were rated higher than commercial influences such as TV advertisements and celebrity endorsements in food purchase decision making. Interpersonal information sources were also perceived to be more trustworthy than commercial sources, and parents were regarded as the most reliable source of information.
3. The positive attitude to and desire for advertised food products was significantly related to the children's level of exposure to the commercial environment, such as hours spent on watching TV as well as the amount of attention paid to advertisements;
4. With regard to the importance of product attributes in food purchase, good taste was the most highly rated attribute for all children; price came second; brand name and in-box/send-for promotions were rated similarly as the third. Nutrition and food safety also emerged as important attributes.

5.2 Limitations and future research

The field study was based on a small convenient sample as the participants were chosen from a key school located in Beijing whose families are middle or up-middle class. Care should be taken when generalising the results of the study. Due to the time constraints and difficulty in sampling the children from a wide age range, the differences in children's buying behaviour during different stages of consumer socialisation were not investigated. Furthermore, if parents were invited to participate in the focus groups interviews, it would be possible to gain a more complementary understanding of children's food buying behaviour. Future research may consider using multiple samples in different cities in order to have a better representation of the huge population of Chinese children.

5.3 Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the main sources of information for new food products for Chinese children, and their relative importance along with children's adopted strategies to influence parental food purchasing decisions. One of the most significant findings is the growing influence of commercial environment on Chinese children's consumer behaviour. During the learning of consumer behaviour by Chinese children, the parental role of guidance remains prominent, and their recommendations still have a decisive impact on children's food choices. However, advertisement, especially TV commercials, plays an increasingly important role in children's learning about new products and exerts growing influence on their preferences for certain items. Another significant finding is the perceived importance of product attributes by Chinese children. Surprisingly, there is a tendency for them to pay more attention to nutrition, hygienic conditions and food safety, which shows that children seem to be mature early at this stage and start to behave in a more adult-like fashion when making comparisons.

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Appendix 1

Table 1 Sample Statistics

Age Group	N=145	Percentage
10-11	74	51.03
12-13	71	48.97
Boys	82	56.6
Girls	63	43.4

Appendix 2

Questions used in the focus group interviews

The understanding of TV commercials

When you watch TV you see both programs and commercials. What is the difference between a TV program and a TV commercial? (Anything else?)

2. When you watch TV you must see a lot of commercials. What is a TV commercial? (Is there other way you can tell me what a commercial is?)

3. Why are commercials shown on television? (Is there any other reason they are shown on TV?)

3a. What do commercials try to do? (Anything else they try to do?)

4. Do you think TV commercials always tell the truth?

If YES:

5. How do you know they tell the truth?

5a. Why do you think commercials tell the truth? (What do you think is the reason commercials tell the truth?)

If NO:

6. How do you know they lie?

7. How often do they lie—most of the time, some of the time, or just once in a while?

7a. Why do you think they don't tell the truth? (What do you think is the reason commercials do not tell the truth?)

8. Did you ever see something on TV that you got and then when you got it, it wasn't as good as you thought it would be? Tell me what did you buy and what happened?

Types of stores patronised

9. If you go shopping with your parents, where will you go to buy food?

9a. Who make this choice? Why?

10. If you buy food on your own, where will you go? Why?

11. Given the food products are that you buy with your money on your own, what kinds of food products will you spend most of your money?

12. What kinds of food stores do you spend most of your money on?

13. When do you purchase these food or patronize these stores?

Perceived credibility of information sources

14. How did you learn about the snack food you bought? (from where)

15. Which information sources do you think is most credible?

15a. Why do you think so?

16. Which information sources do you think is less credible?

16a. Why do you think so?

17. Which information sources do you tend to rely on? Why?

17a. What kinds of food will you want to buy as you rely on this information source to make a choice? Why? (If you buy other kinds of food, which information sources will you rely on? Why?)

The importance of attributes

18. When you go shopping, will you look for different brands for certain kind of food products?

If YES:

18a. why do you look for different brands?

19. Do you have favourite brands for certain kind of food products? (Can you tell me some?)

20. How much better is your favourite brand than other brand—is it a lot better, a little better, or are they just about the same?

21. Why is the brand you favour better; what is it about your favourite brand that makes it better? (Anything else?)

22. When you choose food products, what is your foremost concern?

22a. Why is that your most concerned about? (What is the reason you have such concern?)