

CHILDREN'S BUYING BEHAVIOUR IN CHINA
A study of their information sources

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Abstract

Purpose

Reports an empirical study on children's buying behaviour in China with a special focus on their information sources.

Design /Methodology

The key literature on consumer socialisation of children is reviewed. Primary data was collected from a sample of 155 children aged 10 to 13 using questionnaire survey. Various statistical methods such as Pearson correlation and tests were employed to analyse the data.

Findings

Chinese children regard TV commercials as an important information source for new product. However, they place greater level of trust in interpersonal information sources, especially in their parents who are perceived as the most credible information source with respect to their learning about new food products.

Originality /Value

The study has made a contribution to the extant literature on Chinese children as consumer. The findings would be valuable in assisting companies, specially those in the food industry, to have a better understanding of Chinese children's buying behaviour.

Keywords

Children buying behaviour, consumer socialisation, socialisation agents, information sources, TV commercials, China

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

A growing awareness was developed during the 1990s that children had enormous market potential, not as one market but as three – a current market spending their own money in order to satisfy their own needs and wants, an influential market attracting a substantial amount of parental expenditure, and a future market that eventually will constitute all the customers for a firm's services (McNeal and Yeh, 1997). Children in China have become the most important object in such research. This is not only because China has the largest population of children in the world, but also due to the fact that compared with the children in other nations, Chinese children have substantial economic power and unique influence. The total number of Chinese population reached 1,321.29 million at the end of 2007(NBSC, 2008); among which 256.60 million (19.4 percent) are under the age of 14, making China the largest potential consumer base of any nation.

One couple –one child has been a basic state policy in China since the early 1970s (Zhao, 2004). 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). Compared to children with siblings, the only child generation tend to present certain characters in that they

appear to be less cooperative with their classmates, less task-oriented, and possess fewer leadership qualities (Hall, 1987).

The purpose of the study reported here is threefold: a) to determine where Chinese children obtain their information about new food products and their attitudes toward these information sources, b) to identify the important consumer socialisation agents among Chinese children, and c) to explore how Chinese children influence their parents' purchase decisions as well as the strategies that they use to achieve their goals.

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 review will focus mainly on the consumer socialisation and major socialisation agents.

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 theorized 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.

Ward et al. (1977, p.56) utilised the learning theory to explain consumer socialisation and postulated “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; Moschis and Moore, 1979; Moschis, 1987; Dotson and Hyatt, 2005). Mascarenhas and Higby (1993) classified sources of influence upon teen’s shopping into person and situation factors, such as opinions and attitudes towards product, brand and store, market advice and purchase values and norms available from parents, peers and the media.

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). The influence of family on consumer socialisation appears to produce effects more through the subtle social interactions between parents and their children than purposive education efforts carried out by parents (Ward, 1974). During the processes of direct communication between parents and children, parents influence their children’s interactions with other consumer influence sources, and play a role to modify the effects of other socialisation agents upon their children, such as mass media and peers groups (Moschis, 1985, 1987).

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).

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 (Hawkins and Coney, 1974; 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; Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Moschis and Moore, 1982). It seems clear that both parents and peers are important facilitators of children's learning of socialisation as consumers; parents contribute greatly to the formation of children's consumer behaviour in the earlier phases of a child's growth, and the peers' socialising influence increases with age as the parental influence wanes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Ward, 1974).

Mass media as socialisation agent

While parents are considered the primary socialisation agents of children, “no other

agent of consumer socialisation has received more attention (in the literature) than the mass media” (Moschis, 1987, p.121). There is a huge amount of scholarly research in the area that focuses mainly on two dimensions of media that confers influence 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; Clncy-Hepburn, et al. 1974; Galst and White, 1976; Gorn and Goldberg, 1982; Woodward, et al, 1997; O’Guinn and Shrum, 1997). Nowadays, children are in the environment of the omnipresence of television in which programmes and commercials are used with persuasive intentions. Considerable evidence has shown that the more children interact with the mass media, the more consumer behaviour learned by children and the more consumer socialisation occurs (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Moschis and Moore, 1982; 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).

Retailer as socialisation agent

Retailers can be logically expected to be significant consumer socialisation agents, also, because of the regular and frequent store visits by children and the interactions between the two parties (McNeal and Ji, 1999, p.347). Research shows that the average ten-year-old child goes shopping 250 times per year, or approximately five times per week (Dotson and Hyatt, 1994). The more often parents take their children shopping, the more conscious the children become of the information about products such as price and brands (Shim et al., 1995). Shopping was listed by children as their

second favourite after-school activity after watching TV (Schulman and Clancy, 1992).

Brands as socialisation agent

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 (Dotson and Hyatt, 2005). 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. Among the children who make requests for a specific product brand, it is an important attribute considered by children during their decision-making. In the case of cereals, brand is a much more dominant attribute (Ward et al., 1977). Additionally, 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).

Research on Chinese children

The majority of studies on children's consumer socialisation was originated in the US and other western countries. Little research attention was paid to China despite the nation has the largest population of children. The first empirical study on Chinese children as consumers was published by McNeal and Yeh in 1997. John's consumer socialisation framework (1999) provides a conceptual framework for many subsequent cross-cultural research endeavours. It 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, especially through television. There is some evidence that Chinese children interact regularly with most advertising media, television is by far the most important of the media, and it has surpassed the parents as the most important source of information about new products for Chinese children (McNeal and Ji, 1998).

Considering the fact that China has undergone huge economic liberalisation and social changes during the last decade, the consumer behaviour patterns of Chinese children growing up in this period of economic boom may have changed greatly. Therefore, there is a need for updated empirical research on the aspect of consumer socialisation of children in China today. The main themes of the current research and its connection with the literature are conceptualised into a coherent framework as shown in Figure 1.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Methodology

The empirical data were collected from a sample of children in grades 5 and 6 in a primary school located in the East of Beijing metropolitan area. The children's age ranged from 10 to 13 years. 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).

A 7-page self-administered questionnaire was the instrument chosen for the survey as it had a number of advantages over other methods. Given that detailed and some complicated data were requested in the study, this method allowed the respondents to answer the questions in a more relaxed environment and to complete the questionnaire in their own time. The children were asked to take the questionnaire home for completion and return it to their teachers within three days. The questionnaires used in the survey was first constructed in English, and then translated into Chinese. The questionnaire was tested in two pilot studies: problems were identified and the questionnaire 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 questionnaire administered to children consists of 33 questions in five parts. In the first part, children's media exposure and shopping habits were examined. The second part asked questions related to the impact of socialisation agents such as peers, attributes of products, and brands. In the third part, children's information sources of new products were investigated. A list containing eight food items was presented and the children were asked to report what was most likely source for them to learn about a new type of each. The list was compiled after a two-week observation on which food products were most frequently advertised in the commercials broadcast on CCTV-15 (the national children's channel in China), during the evening hours of 5 to 7 p.m.. Additionally, children's perceptions on the relative importance of different information sources were studied by asking them to rank a list of information sources that was compiled from the secondary sources. Ranking is widely used in Chinese schools and well understood by children at these ages (McNeal and Ji, 1999). In the fourth part, the influence strategies used by Chinese children was examined by asking them to choose from a list. The items listed were drawn partially from the literature,

partially from children's own description in the pilot study. Demographic information of the respondents was obtained in the last part.

Findings and Discussions

Of the total 155 questionnaires distributed, 149 were returned but four were found unuseable, this gives a return rate of 93.5 percent. There were about the same number of children in Grades 5 and 6, but 13.2 percent more boys than girls in the sample. Table 1 summarises the profile of the children participated in the survey.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

TV viewing

Watching hours

12.4 percent of the children were heavy viewers (more than 3.5 hours per day in weekdays), 66.9 percent were moderate viewers (less than 3.5 hours per day in weekdays), and 20.7 percent light viewers (never watch TV in weekdays). At weekends, 4.1 percent of the respondents never watched TV, 51 percent watched less than 3.5 hours, 36.6 percent watched more than 3.5 but less than 7 hours, and only 8.3 percent watched more than 7 hours. Boys tended to watch longer hours than girls.

Attention behaviour

Most of the children reported that they paid little attention to TV commercials. 59.3 percent of the respondents replied "switch to other channels most of time"; while 22.1 percent switched channels nearly every time during advertisements being broadcasted. On the other hand, 15.2 percent said that they watched TV commercials most of the time, and only 3.4 percent watched commercials all the time.

Compared to those who paid less attention to TV commercials, the children who paid

more attention seemed to be more likely: a) to seek the food they saw on TV during store visits, b) to advance the request to purchase the food shown in TV commercials, and c) to adopt the phrase “this food is advertised on TV” to make their purchase requests to their parents. Considering such a tendency, Pearson Correlation (r) and Linear Regression were conducted in order to measure the strength and the direction of the relationship between a pair of interval variables and the nature of the relationship. The result shows that the degree of attention paid to TV commercials is significantly and positively correlated to the children’s requests for purchasing the food shown on TV commercials and seeking the food they saw on television during store visits ($r = 0.176$, $p = 0.035$, $F = 4.552$, $P = 0.035$ and $r = 0.184$, $p = 0.027$, $F = 5.008$, $P = 0.027$, respectively). In addition, a positive, statistically significant relationship was found between the degree of attention paid to TV commercials and adopting “this food is advertised on TV” as a point to persuade parents to buy their favourite food ($r = 0.200$, $p = 0.016$, $F = 5.972$, $P = 0.016$). Furthermore, TV commercials were more likely to be the first information source for the children who paid more attention to them to know about new food products.

The role of TV

Pearson Correlation (r) was conducted to test if there were relationships between hours that children spent watching TV and the attitudes toward products advertised on TV. Strong positive relationships were found between the hours children spent watching TV and the desire to buy the products advertised on TV ($r = 0.199$, $p=0.016$). The recognition of products advertised on TV was also significantly correlated to the hours children spent watching TV ($r = 0.183$, $p=0.027$).

(Insert Table 2 about here)

With regard to the degree of attention paid to TV commercials, the result suggested that the positive attitude towards product advertised on TV was significantly correlated to the attention paid to TV commercials. In order to further test the relationship between hours of TV watching and children's attitude towards products advertised on TV, and the relationship between the degree of attention paid to TV commercials and children's attitude towards products advertised on TV, a linear regression was undertaken. The criterion variable included the items for perceived attitudes while the independent variables consisted of the sum of the hours of TV viewing and the degree of attention paid to TV commercials respectively. The regression provided a statistically significant R^2 of 0.04 ($F= 5.901$; $P=0.016$) and a significant R^2 of 0.04 ($F= 5.972$; $P=0.016$) respectively. The results indicated that children's attitude towards products advertised on TV was significantly related to the number of hours that they watched TV and the degree of attention that they paid to advertisings. To sum up, the respondents who rated high on the items—hours of TV watching and the degree of attention paid to advertisings, had a more positive attitude toward products advertised on TV than those who rated low on these two items.

Shopping behaviour

The results showed that virtually all the children made purchases for themselves while accompanying their parents to the marketplace (The term “*marketplace*” is used here to embrace stores and street vendors). Only a small percentage of the children did not. McNeal and Yeh (2003) find that Chinese children make an average of 3.0 shopping trips per week. Comparatively, the average shopping trips made by the children in this study are far less. This may be due to the fact that they had to study longer hours preparing for the middle school entrance exams, thus had less time to spend on

shopping.

Among these children, 62.1 percent went shopping no more than three times a week. As for the question of “who do you go shopping with”, 75.9 percent of the respondents indicated that they shopped independently. It is noticeable that 47.6 percent of the children sampled, however, would never go shopping with their friends (See Table 3). On the other hand, 79.3 percent of the children went shopping with their parents frequently, 13.8 percent shopping on their own. Gender was not a significant influence on the average frequency of store visits, with or without parents, although there was an interesting tendency for boys to go shopping with their parents more frequently than girls. In comparison, girls preferred shopping with their friends while boys preferred visiting the marketplace alone and making purchases by themselves.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Knowledge about brands

To the question that “what is a famous brand”, three top answers chosen by children were as follows: (1) a famous brand is the product with high quality (32.1 percent), (2) a brand with highly complimentary comments, especially from the official sources such as government (26.2 percent), and (3) the product being widely used (18.2 percent). Some children also mentioned that a famous brand was the one promoted by a celebrity and gave the names of the celebrity.

(Insert Table 4 about here)

78 percent of the children expressed that it was not important for them to eat food products of famous brand. 65.5 percent reported that it was not important for them

whether the brand is famous or not when choosing food products. More than 60 percent of the children, however, reported that they wanted to have the food products of their *favoured* brands, which may suggest that branding is a highly salient attribute in children's purchase decisions across a variety of food products that they often use and enjoy.

With regard to children's concern about what others think of them when talking about eating food products of certain brands, almost half of the respondents replied that the impression others had about them was bad, namely, others did not like them. One third of respondents believed that others liked them when they talked about eating famous brand food products; the rest reported that they had no idea of what others thought of them. Furthermore, most of the respondents reported that they would not ask parents to buy famous brand food just because their peers had eaten them, which is surprising and contrary to the findings in previous research that this age group is susceptible to what others think of them (Marquis, 2004). The results also indicate that the foods children eat did not need to be too similar to those eaten by others (79.3 percent), a surprising result. In fact, most children agreed that it was important for them to eat publicly the same brands of foods as their peers, because most of the primary schools in China encourage pupils to bring their own lunches and snacks into school, and children would normally share food and snacks while eating together with classmates, and also exchange consumption experience about new food products (Guo, 2000).

Information sources

The importance of TV

Table 5 summarises the information sources from which children first knew about the snack items listed. TV commercials were the most important source for children

learning about new products of biscuits, chips, soft drinks and fast-food restaurants. TV plays the most important role in Chinese children's learning about new products of chips. 37.8 percent of children listed TV commercials as sources compared to store visits (29 percent) and friends (20.6 percent). Most children knew about new candy products, chocolate and ice cream during store visits, 32.7 percent, 35.0 percent and 33.8 percent respectively. Unsurprisingly, only in one item- milk, did parents have the most important impact on children's knowledge about new products (53.1 percent). This is probably due to the fact that parents are regarded as symbols of knowledge and authority (Yau, 1994), so children might naturally turn to them for information about health and nutrition. Furthermore, as parents pay more attention to children's health and nutrition, they choose milk for their children personally. When learning about new snack foods it seems to be more likely for children to look at the products themselves in stores, on TV, than talking to parents and friends. In the case of new snack items, children tended to rely heavily on commercial sources for information; this is because Chinese parents, who choose food almost solely from health criteria, are normally reluctant to recommend snack foods to their children.

The importance of store visits

A significant positive relationship was found between shopping trips and store visits as the first information source for new food products ($r=0.304$, $p=0.004$). The significant role of store visits as an information source cannot be overlooked. In-store displays and demonstrations experienced by children who frequently visit stores, with and without their parents, may help them become familiar with some new brands and products of snack foods. As self-service is common in supermarkets, children can reach and examine products on the shelves by themselves easily and comfortably, which allows them to learn more about new products. In general, girls tended to use

retail stores as a source of new product information more frequently than boys did which is consistent with the findings of the research conducted by McNeal and Ji (1996) and probably reflects the teaching of parents that shopping is more of a female role.

Interpersonal sources

Table 5 shows that the percentages of children who utilised interpersonal sources (parents and friends) to learn about new products. Contrary to previous research about strong reliance on interpersonal sources for guidance (Kindel, 1983), this study reveals that Chinese children depended on commercial sources at least as much as they did on interpersonal sources to learn about new food products. Gender matters slightly, but age does not. When learning about candy, more girls learned from friends than boys ($\chi^2=6.793$, $df=2$, $p=0.033$).

(Insert Table 5 about here)

The role of interpersonal sources

Table 6 shows children's perceived usefulness and importance of various information sources when choosing new food products. An independent sample t-test showed that overall, parents were ranked as the most important and useful information source for choosing breakfast, soft drinks and fast food, followed by friends and classmates. Advertisements were ranked third. Among all the sources, celebrity endorsement was perceived to be the least important factor for choosing food products. With regard to snacks, friends and classmates were viewed as the most useful information sources, followed by advertising, parents and celebrity. Children also ranked friends and classmates at the first place in terms of the importance of information sources for ice cream. Consistent with the findings of McNeal and Ji (1999), the tabulated statistics show that the importance of TV commercials being viewed as a new product

information source is related to the time children devoted to watching TV ($\chi^2=12.786$, $df=6$, $p=0.047$).

(Insert Table 6 about here)

Attributes of food products

With regard to the perceived importance of various attributes of food products that children used in purchase decision making, the t-test shows that good taste was the most highly valued attribute for all children (except for the item of fast food), price came second after good taste; brand name and promotion (for example, receiving a prize) were rated similarly. In the case of fast food, brand and taste were viewed as the most important attributes. Price was ranked third and promotion was the least-favoured product attribute. For children of 11 and 12 year old age, both in-box and send-for promotions appeared to be relatively unimportant to this age group.

In addition, with regard to the degree of influence of branding on their food choice, the result suggested that the perceived importance of brand in purchase decision making was significantly correlated to the children's positive attitude towards eating famous brand food products.

(Insert Table 7 about here)

Persuasion strategies adopted

When asked about the ways they would like to use to make purchase requests, both girls and boys preferred to use their taste experience as a point to persuade parents (28 vs. 26). Furthermore, girls were more likely to use friend's recommendation as a point to persuade parents to buy their favourite food (31 vs. 19) while boys were more likely to use "this brand is famous" as a reason for making purchase requests (29 vs.

18). Other factors mentioned include nutrition, benefiting health, hygienic standard and low price as justifications to advance purchase requests.

Table 8 presents correlations between the use of strategies to influence parental decisions on food purchasing and variables explaining the development of these strategies. With regard to interpersonal influences, strong positive relationships were found between the importance of eating foods similar to those eaten by others and suggesting to the family that they had foods that the children saw advertised on television. For society derived influences, results related to the children's ability to adopt different ways to persuade family members from different angles to buy their favourite food products confirm the social interaction, including persuasion and negotiation characterising the ten to twelve-year-olds mutual role taking stage (Selman, 1980).

(Insert Table 8 about here)

There was a strong positive relationship between the hours children spent watching TV and adopting the phrase "this food is advertised on TV" to advance their purchase requests ($r = 0.516$, $p=0.000$). Adopting friends' recommendation as a persuasion strategy was significantly correlated to the reliance on friends' recommendation ($r = 0.669$, $p=0.000$), and also perceived importance of brand and using persuasion method of "famous brand" ($r = 0.376$, $p=0.000$).

With regard to interpersonal influences, significant differences were observed between boys and girls: boys gave more importance than girls did to selecting foods similar to those eaten by others (means are 2.2439 and 1.5873 respectively, $p<0.05$). Overall, these results are consistent with previous gender research findings to the effect that males tend to be more materialistic than females (Moschis and Moore,

1982).

Pester power

63.4 percent of the respondents reported that they did not use “pester power” to ask parents to buy the food that they wanted but their parents did not. Among the children using pester power to ask what they wanted, 31.7 percent reported that they used pester power sometimes, 34 percent “most of the time”, and only 2.1 percent reported they “always” used pester power to get what they wanted. Overall, the results confirm that children adopted a range of different strategies in wielding pest power: bargaining strategies (offering deals); persuasive strategies (expressing opinions and stating preferences); and playing a little trick (putting favourite foods in the shopping cart stealthily). Two significant differences were found between genders: girls were more likely to state that the food was their preferred food (Means (girls)=2.8000 and Means (boys)=2.3448; $p<0.005$); and girls were more likely to be unnaturally nice or affectionate to parents (Means (girls)=2.8276 and Means (boys)=2.5102; $p<0.005$). Although not significant, a strong tendency was observed among boys, which is that, when compared to girls, they preferred the “silent treatment” as an emotional strategy and “fair play” as a competition strategy (Means (boys)=1.6667 and Means (girls)=1.5246; Means (boys)=1.6129 and Means (girls)=1.4177 respectively).

Conclusions

Summary of findings

This exploratory study illustrates the integration of three levels of influence on children’s food purchase behaviour: interpersonal, environmental, and the products. The interpersonal influences considered are those from parents and peers. The environmental influences refer to the exposure to television and shopping visits. The

attributes of food products include brand name, taste, price and package. The study has produced the following major findings:

1. TV commercials and in-store experiences were the primary sources of new snack foods for Chinese children;
2. Chinese children depended more upon commercial sources than interpersonal sources in order to find out about new food products;
3. In terms of perceived importance to food purchase, interpersonal influences (i.e. recommendation from parents and peers) was rated higher than commercial influences such as TV advertisements and celebrity endorsements in food purchase decision making;
4. Interpersonal information sources were also perceived to have higher credibility than commercial sources; and parents were regarded as the most reliable source of information.
5. 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;
6. 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 also emerged as an important attribute.
7. Gender differences had an effect upon children's consumer socialisation.

These findings largely conform to the researchers' expectations: children used different kind of information sources in purchase decision making and adopted different strategies to persuade parents to buy their favourite food products as they grew older. The findings are also consistent with John's indication (1999) that the heightened awareness of other people's perspectives allows children to hold more adaptive manner and adopt more strategic approaches to influence parents and friends. Furthermore, information processing is more elaborate among older children. Specifically, the results show that: (1) more attributes were examined in comparing products; (2) both functional and other more abstract attributes were considered, such

as the nutritional value of the food; (3) branding was perceived of less importance, perhaps as a consequence of the use of more attributes in comparisons; and (4) promotion was regarded as almost irrelevant in purchase decisions.

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 big 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.

Managerial implications

The research has a number of implications for marketers targeting children. Gender can be a major variable used to reach children using media strategies. It might be more effective to target girls using strategies that stimulate word-of-mouth and other methods of social interaction. On the other hand, it might be more effective to target boys using commercial sources, such as television commercials. In other words, marketers could target gender-based segments more effectively in order to reach

children's market.

Marketers today are increasingly targeting children directly with child-orientated messages, logos, and characters that play emphasis on a “cool” and “fun” image (Wechsler, 1997). However, this communication strategy is not effective for all children. The findings of this study suggest that Chinese children, during the reflective stage, are likely to pay more attention to the “true value” of products, such as price, taste and nutrition. They are more inclined to heed their parents' advice about products; as a result, are less influenced by factors perceived as irrational. Therefore, marketers should instead develop communication strategies that try to engage both children and their parents.

Limitations and future research

As with any research, this study is not without limitations. Care should be taken when generalising the results of the study. The field study was based on a small convenient sample as the respondents were chosen from a key school located in Beijing whose families are middle or up-middle class. The fact that all the children sampled were asked by their teachers to complete the questionnaire might imply that respondents felt obliged to co-operate and this might have led to inaccurate responses in some cases. 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 could not be investigated. Furthermore, if parents were invited to participate in the focus groups, it would be easier to gain a more factual and complementary understanding of children's consumer behaviour. Future research may consider using multiple samples in different cities in order to have a better representation of the vast population of Chinese children.

Another weakness of the study is that only the influence of TV commercials on

children's food buying behaviour was examined in this study. Further research is needed to study the role of other mass media in the consumer socialisation process such as newspapers, magazines, movies, and especially the Internet. This will help developing a more comprehensive picture of environmental influence on children.

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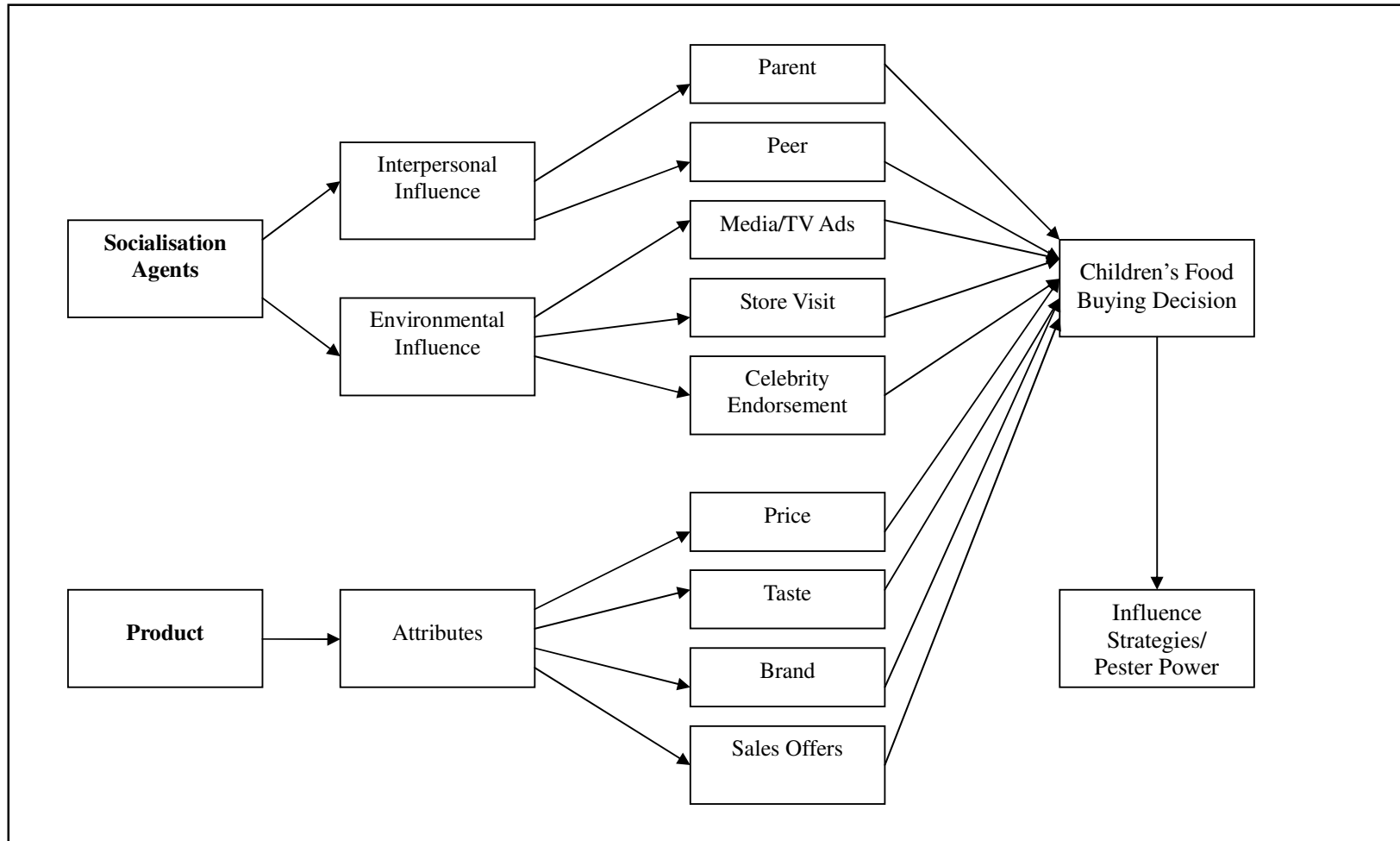


Figure 1 The Framework of the Study

Total sample	N=145	Percent of sample
Age group		
10-11	74	51.03
12-13	71	48.97
Sex		
Boys	82	56.6
Girls	64	43.4

Table 1 Sample Statistics

	1	2	3	4	5
1 hours spent watching TV	1.000				
2 attention paid to TV commercials	0.136	1.000	0.176*	0.200*	0.14
3 I want to buy or ask parents to buy the food advertised on the TV.	0.168*	0.176*	1.000	0.605**	0.407**
4 I would like to have most foods they show in TV commercials.	0.199*	0.200*	0.605**	1.000	0.420**
5 I think the food products they show on TV commercials are the best I can buy.	0.183*	0.14	0.407**	0.420**	1.000

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 Children's attitude towards TV adverts

Frequency per week	Go shopping	Shopping alone	Shopping with parents	Shopping with friends
Never	6.2	24.1	7.6	47.6
Three times or less	82.1	62.1	66.9	46.2
Less than 7 times	9.7	11.7	24.1	5.5
More than 7 times	2.1	2.1	1.4	0.7

Table 3 Who do you go shopping with?

Items	Frequency (Percent)		
	Male	Female	Total
1 Products with advertisings	3 (0.9%)	3 (0.9%)	6 (1.9%)
2 Products with high qualities	53 (16.4%)	51 (15.7%)	104 (32.1%)
3 Products with high price	9 (2.8%)	5 (1.5%)	14 (4.3%)
4 Products with highly complimentary comments	44 (13.6%)	41 (12.7%)	85 (26.2%)
5 Products with celebrity endorsements	3 (0.9%)	5 (1.5%)	8 (2.5%)
6 Products being widely used	30 (9.3%)	29 (8.9%)	59 (18.2%)
7 Foreign imported products	15 (4.6%)	17 (5.2%)	32 (9.9%)
8 Products being sold in up-scale stores	8 (2.5%)	8 (2.5%)	16 (4.9%)

Table 4 Children’s understanding of “brand names”

Snack item	Parents	TV	Friends	Store visits
Candy	15.2	30.7	21.4	32.7
Biscuit	26.2	33.8	8.3	31.7
Milk	53.1	20.0	1.4	25.5
Chocolate	26.2	25.8	13.0	35.0
Chips	12.6	37.8	20.6	29.0
Ice Cream	30.3	18.6	17.2	33.8
Soft Drinks	29	32.4	7.6	31.0
Fast-food- Restaurant	34.5	35.2	20.0	10.3

Table 5 Children’s information sources of new products

Item	Gender		Parents	Classmates	Advertising	Celebrity
Breakfast	Male	Mean	3.2537	2.2344	2.125	1.806
		SD	1.19	1.23	1.19	1.2
	Female	Mean	3.5893	2.5918	1.18824	1.6538
		SD	1.01	1.12	1.05	1.1
	Total	Mean	3.4065	2.3894	2.0174	1.7395
		SD	1.12	1.19	1.13	1.15
Soft drinks	Male	Mean	2.8806	2.4179	2.125	1.9538
		SD	1.24	1.26	1.19	1.23
	Female	Mean	3.1132	2.8333	1.8654	1.6667
		SD	1.28	1.21	1.03	1.11
	Total	Mean	2.9833	2.6033	2.0086	1.8276
		SD	1.26	1.25	1.12	1.18
Snack	Male	Mean	2.1587	2.5522	2.5224	1.8769
		SD	1.22	1.26	1.37	1.21
	Female	Mean	2.0000	3.1346	2.5094	1.7451
		SD	1.10	1.22	1.37	1.13
	Total	Mean	2.0870	2.8067	2.5167	1.819
		SD	1.17	1.27	1.37	1.17
Fast food	Male	Mean	2.8657	2.5606	2.2813	1.7538
		SD	1.31	1.24	1.25	1.19
	Female	Mean	2.9818	2.8269	2.0769	1.5686
		SD	1.34	1.25	1.15	1.01
	Total	Mean	2.918	2.678	2.1897	1.6724
		SD	1.32	1.25	1.21	1.12
Ice cream	Male	Mean	2.6364	2.697	2.0923	1.7692
		SD	1.28	1.26	1.21	1.17
	Female	Mean	3.037	2.9811	2.06	1.6415
		SD	1.3	1.12	1.17	1.11
	Total	Mean	2.8167	2.8235	2.0783	1.7119
		SD	1.3	1.2	1.19	1.14

Table 6 Perceived usefulness of various sources for new product information

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Important to eat brand name food products	1.000							
2	Want to have certain brands of food products	0.275**	1.000						
3	Influence of brand name on the choice of food products	0.526**	0.240**	1.000					
4	Perceived importance of brand name choice of food products	0.271**	0.098	0.415**	1.000				
5	Perceived importance of brand name on breakfast choice	0.302**	0.177	0.411**	0.516**	1.000			
6	Perceived importance of brand name on snacks choice	0.286**	0.187*	0.414**	0.669**	0.547**	1.000		
7	Perceived importance of brand name on fast-food restaurants choice	0.198*	0.247**	0.254**	0.376**	0.567**	0.552**	1.000	
8	Perceived importance of brand name on ice cream choice	0.257**	0.146	0.351**	0.571**	0.539**	0.662**	0.619**	1.000
Note: Asterisks refer to significant of bivariate correlation based on Pearson's two-tailed test of association;									
** p<0.01, * p<0.05									

Table 7 Children's attitude towards branded food products

		1	2	3	4
1	Important that foods are similar to those eaten by others	1.000			
2	Feel bothered if the food is that which my friends have eaten, but I have not.	0.522**	1.000		
3	Ask parents to buy the food my friends have eaten but I have not.	0.602**	0.497**	1.000	
4	Use strategies to influence parental Decisions	0.235*	0.372**	0.203	1.000

Note: Asterisks refer to significant of bivariate correlation based on Pearson's two-tailed test of association; ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Table 8 Strategies used by children to influence parents