

Chinese Adolescent Consumer Socialization: A Study Of Chinese Urban Adolescents' Involvement In Family Purchasing Activities

A survey of 429 Chinese students in Beijing investigates how family type, family structure, American television, economic development, self-esteem, personal values and personal financial resources affect Chinese adolescents involvement in family purchasing. The variables predicting the Chinese urban adolescents' family purchasing involvement were found to be single-child family, concept-oriented family, self-esteem, and personal financial resources. The concept-oriented family also had a significant impact on adolescents' identification with Western values.

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Introduction

Consumer socialization studies contribute to a better understanding of family consumption behaviors, intergenerational influences, and the impact of social trends on consumer behaviors (Ward, 1974; Moschis, 1979; 1985; 1987; Belch et al., 1985; Foxman et al.; 1986; 1989; Carlson et al., 1986; 1994; and Beatty et al., 1994). Since much of consumer socialization takes place within the family (Hafstrom, Chae & Chung, 1992), family plays an important role in shaping children's consumption behaviors.

Previous consumer socialization studies found family communication patterns suggest two major types of families: one stresses deference to parental authority, and avoidance of controversy (social-oriented family). The other encourages children to express ideas openly, to analyze all sides of an issue, and to be able to challenge the views of others (concept-oriented family) (Chaffee, McLeod, & Wackman, 1971; McLeod & O'Keefe, 1972; Moschis, 1985; Foxman et al, 1989). These studies have used Western families. Studies of how family communication patterns and family type influence consumer learning among non-western consumers are rarely found in the literature. The study of how internal factors, influence consumer learning and involvement in family purchasing have also been neglected.

This study investigates how family type, family structure, and personal characteristics affect Chinese urban adolescents in their consumer socialization process. The study focuses on Chinese

urban adolescents' consumption involvement. This study integrates social learning theory, social cognitive learning theory and economic development to conceptualize Chinese adolescent consumer socialization variables.

Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 1994) helps explain how human behaviors are learned through an interaction of personal and environmental factors. It emphasizes both social origins and cognitive development.

Human behavior can be observed through an analysis of the interaction between internal and external factors. Consumer behavior can be observed through an analysis of influences of family type, family structure, self-esteem, personal financial resources, and identification with Western values. Social cognitive theory also helps explain why people learn consumer values and behaviors from their parents. Family communication patterns or family type play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' consumer values and consumer behavior. If parents encourage their children to express their opinions openly and view all sides of issues, children are more likely to get involved in family purchasing decisions. If parents emphasize deference and conformity, children are less likely to get involved in family decisions. According to social cognitive theory, adolescents can learn consumer values and behaviors from television. Because television produces models for viewers. Through

observational learning, viewers receive vicarious reinforcement.

Social exchange theory explains the relationship between parents and children in terms of consumer socialization. When children have the resources that the parents depend on, the children are more likely to have power. When an adolescent is the only child, parents are more likely to give higher status to him/her. As a result, the adolescent is more likely to have more power in the family decision-making.

Since 1979 when the Chinese economic reform started, Chinese consumer behavior changed. Before the reform, China had a central-planning economy. Production and consumption activities of consumer goods were controlled by the government. The concepts of "consumer" and "consumption" were vague.

The development of independent business in China helps change Chinese people's consumption values and behaviors. It provides consumers with more information about goods and services; it also provides more consumer goods and services. Today, the mass media organizations partially support themselves rather than being fully funded by the government. To get financial resources and to attract audiences/readers, advertisements and consumption themes are being introduced. In the meantime, American television and movies have penetrated the Chinese market. This media is expected to influence Chinese consumer values and behaviors.

The economic development perspective helps explain how the market economy affects consumer values and behaviors. Tse, Belk, & Zhou, (1989) showed that there is a correlation between economic growth and pursuit of hedonistic values.

Hypotheses

Family Characteristics and Involvement

Family structure. This concept is conceptually defined as the distribution of resources and the opportunity to gain the resources within the family. A single-child will have more resources than those others. According to social exchange theory, the more resources one has, the more power one will gain. Therefore:

H1: The adolescents who are from single-child families are more likely to be involved in the family purchasing activities than those who are not.

Family type. In the social-oriented family, children are taught to respect their parents and authorities. Traditional values are emphasized.

Children are encouraged not to criticize other's opinions.

In concept-oriented families, however, expressing opinions openly is stressed. Children are encouraged to question, to see all sides of an issue, argue for the truth and to be critical. Therefore:

H2: The adolescents who are from concept-oriented families are more likely to be involved in family purchasing activities than those who are not.

H3: The adolescents who are from concept-oriented families are more likely to identify with Western values than those who are not.

H4: The adolescents who are from social-oriented families are less likely to be involved in family purchasing activities than those who are not.

H5: The adolescents who are from social-oriented families are less likely to identify with Western values than those who are not.

Personal Characteristics and Involvement

Identification with Western values. Consumer motivation comes from their perception of getting reward or avoiding punishment. Under the current economic reform, Chinese adolescents may perceive the values of freedom, competition and individualism as being very important. Chinese adolescents who identify with Western values will express their motivation to participate in family purchasing decisions, to be independent and to be ambitious. Therefore:

H6: The adolescents who identify with Western values are more likely to be involved in family purchasing activities than those who do not.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to people's perceptions of themselves. Self-esteem is both cause and consequence of social interaction. For instance, self-esteem can help actors to perform effectively. It can also be enhanced through social interaction. Self-esteem carries motivational properties, Gecas (1986). People's self-esteem can motivate them to "conceive of themselves as efficacious and consequential, and to experience themselves as meaningful and real. Therefore:

H7: The adolescents who have high self-esteem are more likely to be involved in family purchasing activities than those who do not.

Personal financial resources. The resources are defined as money which adolescents earn after school. According to social exchange theory, the more resources one has that are valued by others, the more power one will gain. This study proposes that the more money one makes, the more power one has. Therefore:

H8: The adolescents who have more financial resources are more likely to be involved in family purchasing activities than those who do not.

Exposure to American Television

According to Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, people pick up values and behaviors through observational learning or modeling. American television programs convey Western affluent lifestyles and consumer values and they likely play an important socializing role:

H9: The adolescents who have been exposed to American television programs are more likely to identify with Western values than those who have not.

Methodology

The survey was conducted in Beijing, China in 1994. Predictors in the study include family characteristics, adolescent characteristics, economic development, and American mass media influence. Demographic variables such as gender, age, and education were also measured. The subjects were chosen randomly from four high schools. The sampling frame was a list of high schools in Beijing. Random procedures were also used to choose classes of students within each school. Grade levels of the subjects are from nine to twelve. These grade levels were chosen because these adolescents are in a formative stage of development and are "undergoing an identity crisis period" (Erikson, 1968). They are undergoing a period of experimentation about themselves, which can be viewed as part of the process of identity formation. The sample should represent major characteristics of urban Chinese adolescents because many urban areas in China are similar to Beijing.

The questionnaires were administered to classes by the researcher with the assistance from teachers. Parents were informed about the survey and the students volunteered to answer the questions. They were told to feel free to omit questions. They could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The students filled out the questionnaires in their classrooms during one-class period (45 minutes). A brief introduction about the survey procedure was given to the subjects before they started answering the questions. A debriefing followed immediately after the survey to explain the project. Of the 450 questionnaires distributed, 429 were completed and useable, including 157 junior high and 272 senior high respondents. The average age was 15.6. 49.4% were male and 50.6 were female.

All survey measures were pretested. The survey instruments were developed originally in English. The instruments were translated from English into standard Chinese. The translation procedure included two steps. First, the instruments were translated into Chinese (via Nanjixing computer software program). Then the Chinese version was translated back into English for meaning checks. The results of the comparison of the two English versions showed that the two versions had some wording differences but no major changes in meaning. Therefore, only few refinements to the questionnaire were made.

During the translation, the cultural difference between the American and the Chinese was given consideration. For instance, the word "individualism" could be translated into their different Chinese terms, such as "ge ren zhu yi", "zi shi qi li", and "bu kao ta ren." However, in Chinese culture "ge ren zhu yi" carries a negative meaning while "zi shi qi li" carries a positive meaning. If "individualism" was translated into either "ge ren zhu yi" or "zi shi qi li," it could lead to a biased answer. Therefore, "bu kao ta ren" was used.

The pre-test of the instrument was conducted among ten high school students in Beijing. It was done by a Chinese high school teacher. The completed pre-test questionnaires were then checked by the principal investigator. There were no major changes as a result of the pretest.

Variable Formation

Seven variables were formed from the questions posed to the respondents. Gecas 13-item semantic differential scale was used to measure self esteem. The 13 adjective pairs include powerful-powerless, confident-lack confidence, strong-weak, wise-foolish, do most things well-do few things well, brave-cowardly, honest-dishonest, good-bad, kind-cruel, dependable-undependable, generous-selfish, and worthy-worthlessness. Pairs were rated by respondents on a 1-7 scale. the average value was used to measure self esteem.

Personal financial resources were measured by the amount of money earned from part-time after school jobs.

Identification with western values was measured with a 7 point Likert scale. There were 10 items in the index. The values included equality, freedom, competition, individualism, honesty, ambition, responsibility, tolerance, wealth, and being broad-minded.

Family purchasing involvement was measured by extracting the first principal component from the responses to 11 statements (Table 2). The 8 statements with the highest loadings were used to construct this index.

Concept-oriented and social-oriented families were measured from two orthogonally rotated factors of 10 statements (Table 3). The 5 statements loading high on factor 1 measure the concept-oriented family, while the 4 statements loading high on factor 2 measure the social-oriented family.

Exposure to American mass media was measured using an index developed by Nelson using 3 items; (a) Number of American movies seen in the last 30 days, (b) Number of American movies seen on the VCR in the past 30 days, and (c) Number of American TV programs watched in the past 30 days.

Analysis Results

Two multiple regression models were estimated. The first related family purchasing involvement to the hypothesized explanatory variables. The second related identification with western values to the hypothesized explanatory variables. Results are shown in Table 1. Involvement in family purchasing decisions was significantly affected by all hypothesized variables but social-oriented families at the .06 level. All variables had the hypothesized sign. One reason for the non-significance of the social-oriented family could be the measurement of this variable. The Cronbach alpha for this variable was 0.56. In contrast, the Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.70 to 0.85 for the indices measuring family purchasing involvement, self-esteem, the concept-oriented family, and identification with western values.

Identification with western values was significantly affected by the concept-oriented family, but not by either exposure to American TV or by the social-oriented family. The sign of the relationship between concept-oriented family and identification with western values agreed with the hypothesis.

Discussion

The study focuses on the effects of the Chinese adolescents' consumer socialization which is involvements in family purchasing activities. The predictors for the involvement include family type, family structure, self-esteem, personal financial resources, and identification with Western values.

In China, family plays a central role in

Table 1
Regression Analysis Results.

I. Dependent Variable - Involvement in Family Purchasing Activities

Explanatory Variables	t-value	Prob.
Single-Child Family	1.914	0.0564
Concept-Oriented Family	3.418	0.0007
Social-Oriented Family	-0.914	0.3668
Self-Esteem	2.104	0.0360
Personal Financial Resources	2.223	0.0269

$R^2 = 0.065$

II. Dependent Variable - Identification with Western Values

Explanatory Variables	t-value	prob.
Exposure to American TV	1.39	0.1652
Concept-Oriented Family	5.01	0.0001
Social-Oriented Family	0.30	0.7668

$R^2 = 0.065$

socializing its members. According to Chinese values, the family is the most important social unit in which they live, grow, and interact with each other. The Chinese believe that parents are the key figures in a family. Although this relationship is being challenged due to the current economic reform, traditional attitudes toward parents' power are hard to change.

The social-oriented family did not have a significant impact on the adolescents' involvement in family purchasing. Concept-oriented family and social-oriented family may not be mutually exclusive in the Chinese culture. These families may, on the one hand, keep their traditional culture and teach their children to respect parents; on the other hand, they encourage their children to speak out about family issues.

The concept-oriented family was a significant predictor of adolescents' involvement in family purchasing activities. This type of family tends to provide adolescents with opportunities to gain consumer knowledge, sharpen their consumer purchasing skills and develop their family responsibility.

Adolescents' identification with Western values can also be predicted from the concept-oriented family. On the other hand, the social-oriented family had no significant impact on Western value acceptance. This suggests that the concept-oriented family is the primary socialization agent. Chinese adolescents'

Table 2
Principal Component Analysis of Family Purchasing Involvement.

Statement	Loading
1. I feel better about what we buy when I help my parents decide on a product.	0.49
2. It doesn't bother me at all when my parents buy a product for family use and don't ask what I would like.	0.23
3. I am often unhappy with family purchases if I haven't had a part in helping to decide on them.	0.59*
4. When my parents are about to buy a product, I usually suggest a price range I think we should consider.	0.52*
5. I usually go shopping with my parents when we are looking for a product for family use.	0.69*
6. I usually suggest stores to visit that would have the product our family wants.	0.72*
7. I usually don't get to suggest particular brands when we are looking to buy something.	0.04
8. When we are deciding to buy something, I usually get to suggest things I would like, such as color of features.	0.54*
9. I pay attention to new products or new brands.	0.54*
10. I usually get to tell my parents when to buy a product.	0.70*
11. When my family is thinking of buying something, I try to learn what is the best buy around on that product.	0.58*

*Indicates the statement used in the index.

Table 3
Factor Analysis of Family Type.

Statement	Factor 1	Factor 2
1. Your parents' ideas are right and you shouldn't argue with them.	0.02	0.42*
2. Your parents answer your argument by saying you'll know better when you grow up.	0.21	0.61*
3. Your parents tell you not to say things that make people angry.	-0.15	0.77*
4. Your parents say that you shouldn't argue with adults.	-0.24	-0.66*
5. Your parents say that you should look at both sides of an issue.	0.57*	-0.37
6. Your parents encourage you to question other people's opinions.	0.29	-0.31
7. Your parents say that getting your idea across is important even if other's don't like it.	0.52*	-0.39
8. Your parents ask for your opinion when the family is discussing something.	0.86*	0.10
9. Your parents say every member of the family should have some say in family matters.	0.83*	0.04
10. Your parents admit that kids know more about some things than adults do.	0.72*	0.10

*Indicates the statement used in the indices.

family purchasing involvement can also be explained by the single-child family. The power and resources owned by single-child helps him/her use his/her power and resources to be involved in family consumption activities.

Another two successful predictors for involvement in family purchasing activities are self-esteem and personal financial resources. Self-esteem carries motivational properties Gecas (1986). It motivates Chinese adolescents to participate in their family purchasing activities.

Identification with Western values did not have any significant impact on adolescents' family purchasing involvement was unexpected. Theoretically, Western values carry motivational properties and

adolescents who identify with them be should more involved in family purchasing activities.

Exposure to American TV programs did not lead to significant identification with Western values. This contradicts the findings of other studies. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, et al., 1980), people pick up values, ideals and beliefs from what they watch on television. Television has become a storyteller, and a carrier of culture (Gerbner, et al., 1980).

This study does have limitations. First, consumer socialization is best investigated through a longitudinal study since socialization is a process. A single period study limits researchers in seeing the complete picture of how Chinese adolescents develop

their consumer cognition, consumer affect and consumer behaviors.

Second, it would be better if a random selection of Chinese adolescents across China was used. The results are only applicable to adolescents in large cities.

Third, the measures of exposure to American television and Western culture in general, should be improved. For example, the media exposure measures did not include cable television programs which have become very popular in Beijing.

Finally, the cultural significance of the concept-oriented and social-oriented measure needs to be reconsidered before being used in China. These measures need to be oriented more to the specific culture. Questions related to social-orientation are of the most concern.

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Endnotes

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