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**Chinese children's attitudes toward television advertising:
Truthfulness and liking**

Keyword: Television advertising – children – China – truthfulness – liking – attitudes

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**Chinese children's attitudes toward television advertising:
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Abstract

This benchmarking study examines Chinese children's perceived truthfulness and liking of television advertising in three Chinese cities with different developmental levels of advertising. An in-person survey of 1758 children (ages 6 to 14) was conducted during December 2001- March 2002 using a structured questionnaire. Results indicate that a majority of children perceive that half of the television commercials are true, although this varies by grade and geography. Children in Beijing perceived television commercials to be more trustworthy than did children in Nanjing and Chengdu. The percentage of children that perceive that all commercials are true consistently declines with grade in all three cities. There is a high proportion of first graders who perceive all commercials are not true. The basis for judgment varies predominantly by grade. Children in higher grade depend more on brand and user experience while children in lower grade rely mainly on authority (i.e. parents or teachers). A high proportion of first graders hold both strong liking and disliking of commercials. These strong feelings toward advertising decreased with grade, being replaced by a marked increase in neutral or indifferent feelings. Gender and level of television viewing do not show a consistent impact on perceived truthfulness and liking of commercials. Perceived truthfulness of television advertising is positively related with liking of commercials.

(213 words)

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INTRODUCTION

Advertisers target children because of their high disposable income, their influence on parental purchases, their early establishment of loyalty to certain brands, and a conventional wisdom that they buy products on impulse (Fox, 1996; McNeal, 1999). Many parents and critics fear that children are overly susceptible to commercial appeals because young viewers lack the necessary cognitive skills to process the highly persuasive messages and make appropriate judgments about them (Choate, 1975). Educators and researchers have attempted to design programs that will teach children about the intent of advertising and help them construct defenses from commercials messages (Pecora, 1995).

Twenty-five years of consumer socialization research have yielded impressive findings on the developmental sequence characterizing the growth of consumer knowledge, skills, and values as children mature throughout childhood and adolescence. Much evidence (e.g., John, 1999) shows that as children grow cognitively and socially, there is growth in their parental influence strategies, consumption motives and values, and their knowledge of products, brands, and advertising, the latter being the subject of this report. Although children and advertising is a largely explored issue in the United States, there has been limited investigation of it in China where there exists the largest population of children of any country in the world.

While there is some evidence that Chinese children interact regularly with most advertising media, recent findings show that television is by far the most important of the media (McNeal and Ji, 1998). In fact, in China, a society where the most basic unit of humanity is not the individual but the family, television has surpassed the parents as the most important source of information about new products (McNeal and Ji, 1998). Therefore, this study will limit its focus just to television in order to answer the research questions about children's truthfulness and liking of advertising.

Children in China increasingly are exposed to a large amount of advertising, especially through television, as China changes over from a central controlled economy to one that is market driven. For example, according to a recent television rating report (CVSC-TNS Research, 2002), the average rating among all Chinese children, ages 4-14, for the evening hours of 6 to 9 p.m. on CCTV-1, the national Chinese channel 1, was 3.5 which is equivalent to an audience size of 8,330,000. Chinese children watch even more television during school holidays. A Chinese child who spends three hours per day watching television may be exposed to 16,000 commercials during the year.

Perceived truthfulness of television commercials should be related with the level of control or regulation of advertising messages. Chan and McNeal (2002) discussed three differences between children's television advertising regulation in China and that in Western and developed societies. First, unlike advertising in the US or in Hong Kong, there is a lack of specific rules and guidelines to protect Chinese children from excessive and unfair advertising on television and in other advertising media. Article 8 of China's Advertising Law enacted in February, 1995 does specify

that advertisements may not be harmful to the physical and mental health of minors and disabled persons (Asia Law and Practice Limited, 1994), but it does not have a separate section dealing with advertising to children. China's advertising regulation standards mainly focus on the cultural impact of advertising on children. Half of the items in the Interim Advertising Censorship Standards, a government-regulated censorship guideline enacted in 1993, deal with the cultivation of children's good behavior and values (Ha, 1996). Accordingly, the Self-regulatory Guidelines for Spiritual Civilization in Advertising, established by the China Advertising Association in 1997, states that children's advertisements should not contain contents that induce children to put pressure on parents. Children in commercials need to pay respect to their elders or other persons. Children should not be shown in acts that are unsafe, including engaging in drinking and smoking. Children's advertisements should not instill a sense of superiority for owning or inferiority for not owning a specific product, and should not deceive children by using descriptions beyond the judgment capacity of children (China Advertising Association, 2002).

Second, consumers in China, including children, have been exposed to a high level of deceptive advertising. According to the statistics released by the State Administration of Commerce and Industry for 2000, the department uncovered 13986 cases of illegal drug advertisements, 5213 cases of illegal food ads, and 1149 cases of illegal advertisements concerning medical equipment. The contents of the false or exaggerated ads were released in the form of a special report. In some cases, the advertisements use testimonies in the name or image of medical institutions, doctors, experts and patients, or they are released with claims that go well beyond the

products' scope (ChinaOnline, 2001). Illegal ads are mostly about fake medicine, medical services, and food (Xinhua News Agency, 1998). Some advertising to children has been accused of being misleading (Zhou, 2001). For example, according to the China Consumer Association, food advertisers have claimed that certain snacks can increase children's intelligence, certain health food can enable students to score full marks in examinations, and certain shoes can enhance growth (Luo, 2000).

Third, advertising regulation in China seems to be followed strictly in larger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai where advertising is well established and television commercials are regulated by the provincial officers of the State Administration of Commerce and Industry. In other smaller inland cities, gatekeepers seem to be more relaxed, perhaps due to lower advertising literacy (Gao, 2001). The Managing Director of J. Walter Thompson China noted that if a story board of a medicine commercial was approved in Beijing, it probably would be approved in all other provinces (Hui, 1995).

Previous study indicated that perceived truthfulness of commercials is positively related with liking of commercials. Children who put more trust in commercials liked them more (Chan, 2001).

With all these efforts to control advertising's integrity, do Chinese children perceive commercials to be truthful, and if so, on what bases do they make such judgments? The study reported here represents the first large-scale attitudinal survey among Chinese children to answer these questions. The study adopts John's (1999) stages of consumer socialization as a guide. Her model conceptualizes distinct stages of cognitive and social development at different age levels

and postulates that children in these stages will manifest differences in the ways they select, evaluate, and use information. Children's attitudes toward television advertising therefore will be analyzed primarily by grade.

The objectives of the current study are:

- a) To study children's perceived truthfulness of television commercials and how they judge whether commercials are true or not;
- b) To examine children's liking of television commercials;
- c) To investigate whether children's perceived truthfulness and liking of television commercials differ by grade, sex, amount of television viewing, and level of development of advertising in the residing city; and
- d) to investigate whether perceived truthfulness of television advertising is related to liking of it.

The study results should be of major interest to both marketers and to public policy makers. Marketers are keen to know if their target audiences believe their commercials and whether they like television commercials in general. Policy makers are concerned with whether existing regulations are effective to protect the interests of the children. The study has much to contribute as there is a paucity of empirical information on these topics in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integrating Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1970) and Selman's theory of social developments (1980), John (1999) proposes a model of consumer socialization. In the model, consumer socialization is a developmental process from the perceptual stage (3-7 years) to the

analytical stage (7-11 years) to the reflective stage (11-16 years). The perceptual stage is characterized by a general orientation toward the immediate and readily observable perceptual features of the marketplace. The analytical stage marks a more sophisticated understanding of concepts such as advertising and brands, and new perspectives that go beyond their own feelings and motives. Marketplace information is analyzed on multiple dimensions. The reflective stage is characterized by further development in several dimensions of cognitive and social development. Children develop even more sophisticated understanding of brands and pricing, and move into more reflective ways of thinking and reasoning.

By the time US children reach the age of eight, they usually are able to understand to some extent advertising's persuasive intent and recognize the existence of deception in some advertising. Children ages eight and older no longer believe that 'commercials always tell the truth' (Bever *et al.*, 1975; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Ward *et al.*, 1972; Ward *et al.*, 1977). However, children from black and lower-income families are less discriminating (Bearden *et al.*, 1979; Meyer *et al.*, 1978). Beliefs about the truthfulness of advertising become even more negative as children move into adolescence (Bever *et al.*, 1975; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Rossiter and Robertson, 1976; Ward *et al.*, 1972; Ward *et al.*, 1977). A national survey of over 500 British children aged 4 to 13 found that only six percent thought that commercials 'always' tell the truth, while 15 percent thought they 'quite often' are truthful. Sixty percent of children reported that commercials 'sometimes' tell the truth while the remaining 20 percent perceived commercials as 'rarely or never' telling the truth. Perceived truthfulness of advertising did not depend on gender or social

class of the children, but depended on age (Greenberg *et al.*, 1986).

Chan (2001) surveyed 448 children in Hong Kong and reported that the percentage of kindergartners and first graders, second and third graders, and fourth to sixth graders believing that advertising was mostly not true increased from 32 percent to 41 percent to 45 percent, respectively. Differences among these Chinese children in perceived truthfulness of television advertising according to school year was significant for boys but not for girls. Boys demonstrated increased skepticism of commercials with school year, but girls did not. A recent focus group interview of urban children in Beijing, China indicated that skepticism of commercials increases with age (Chan and McNeal, 2002).

Along with these more critical views comes an understanding of why commercials are sometimes perceived as untruthful and how one can distinguish truthful from untruthful ads. Ward *et al.* (1977) reported that kindergartners were not able to explain why commercials lie whereas older children connected lying to persuasive intent suggesting that the ability to detect specific instances of bias and deception tends to increase with age. Bever *et al.* (1975) reported that most of the 7-10-year-olds in their study could not detect misleading advertising and admitted to their difficulties. Eleven to 12-year-olds, however, were more discriminating, using nuances of voice, manner, and language to detect misleading advertising.

Chan (2001) found that a majority of children's judgments about perceived truthfulness of TV advertising was based on perception of advertising content and intrusive feelings. For those children who considered advertising to be mostly true, judgments did not differ by age. For those

children who considered advertising to be mostly not true, their bases for judgments differed by age. The youngest children based their judgements on others' opinions while the older children based theirs on personal experience. In a focus group of urban children in China, younger children considered a commercial not true if they perceived its presentation not real while older children were more likely to use personal experience to decide (Chan and McNeal, 2002). Increased purchase and consumption experience, together with the developments in perspective taking that occur as children enter the reflective stage, facilitate the ability to associate advertising executions with deception.

Family communication and control, peers, and television exposure also contribute to the development of skeptical attitudes toward advertising. For young children, critical attitudes seem to be furthered by parental control over television viewing (Soley and Reid, 1984) and less television viewing in general (Atkin, 1975; Robertson and Rossiter, 1974). Adolescents' skepticism toward advertising tends to be related to the development of independent thinking and access to alternative information sources. Mangleburg and Terry (1998) reported higher levels of advertising skepticism among high school students that had access to alternative sources of information (friends) and came from families that foster critical thinking (concept-oriented families), despite self-reports of heavier television viewing. Also, less skepticism was observed among students conforming to peer group norms.

The ability to recognize deception in ads, together with an understanding of advertising's persuasive intent, results in more negative attitudes toward commercials (Robertson and Rossiter,

1974; Rossiter and Robertson, 1976). Other studies have demonstrated a similar pattern of downward trends in liking of advertising from the early elementary school grades to high school (Lindquist, 1978; Moore and Lowndes, 1975; Chan, 2001).

Despite their skepticism, children seem to have favorable attitudes towards certain type of commercials. A survey of children age 9 to 10 in Belfast, Northern Ireland found that two-thirds believed that advertisers sometimes tell the truth. However, most of the children said they enjoyed particular commercials, especially those featuring humor (Collins, 1990). Chan (2001) found that perceived truthfulness of TV advertising was related with attitudes toward TV advertising. Those who perceived commercials as ‘mostly true’ were more likely to enjoy commercials.

Review of the literature indicates there are a few under-researched areas and inconsistent findings that need further study. First, there is a lack of studies that investigate how children viewers make judgments about the degree of truthfulness of commercials. Second, gender differences in consumer socialization do not yield a consistent pattern. Third, research of children’s socialization in the Western societies is based on an assumption that the advertising environment is homogeneous within the society. However, advertising literacy and perceived truthfulness are seldom measured in more than one city and therefore inter-city comparison within a country is rarely conducted. In the case of China, level of advertising development varies among different provinces; therefore, it should be interesting to examine how perceived truthfulness and liking of television commercials differ for children in cities with different levels of advertising development as was done in this current study.

METHODOLOGY

The data analyzed in this study were collected as part of a study of consumer socialization of Chinese children in three large cities in China--Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu--during the period December 2001 to March 2002. The three cities were selected to represent high, medium, and low levels of development of the advertising industry respectively, according to the provincial advertising expenditures in 2000 (Fan, 2001). The respective provincial advertising expenditures of the three cities were 14.8 percent, 8.1 percent and 2.7 percent of the national advertising expenditure. Also, the selection of these three cities located in different parts of China was an attempt to better represent it as compared to single-city studies that are usually done since lack of development of its infrastructure has maintained China in relatively disparate regions.

Two elementary schools were recruited in each of the three selected cities. Students generally came from lower to middle class. The total number of students in each school ranged from 800 to 1700. Average class size ranged from 40 in Beijing and Nanjing, to 65 in Chengdu. One class each from grade 1 to grade 6 was randomly selected from each of the two schools in each of the three cities to form the child respondent sample. Thus, all the children were in the age group of 6 to 14. A doctoral student in psychology, a faculty member in the mass communication department, and a faculty member in the statistics department were utilized as researchers to coordinate the data collection.

A draft questionnaire was prepared based on Chan's Hong Kong (2000) study and utilized in

a focus-group interview of twenty-two urban children ages six to twelve conducted in Beijing in October 2001 (Chan and McNeal, 2002). The questionnaire was pretested in Beijing by personally interviewing eight children about its clarity. The questionnaire was revised and tested in Nanjing by personally interviewing eight children. After a subsequent round of revision, the questionnaire was finalized and distributed. The final questionnaire consisted of 15 closed end questions. There were four questions on perceived truthfulness of television commercials, six questions on perceptions of commercials, two questions on extent of television viewing, and three demographic questions.

The children were asked to fill out the questionnaire in their classrooms. Children in grades 3 to 6 were instructed to complete the questionnaire on their own in the class. For children in grades 1 and 2, the researchers read out the questions as well as the answers, and ask the children to check the most appropriate answers. Students were assured that feedback was anonymous and there were no right or wrong answers in each question. Altogether, 1758 questionnaires were collected from the children (460 from Beijing, 557 from Nanjing, and 741 from Chengdu). Several questionnaires were not usable because most of the questions were left blank or checked with two or more answers, leaving a net total of 1744 usable questionnaires.

FINDINGS

Perceived truthfulness of television commercials. Table 1 and Figure 1 summarize the children's perceptions about the truthfulness of television commercials in the three cities. A major portion of the respondents (42 percent) perceived that half of television commercials are true. About ten

percent and 19 percent thought that ‘nearly all’ or ‘most of’ the commercials were true, respectively. On the negative side, ten percent believed that ‘nearly all commercials are not true’ and 13.2 percent thought that ‘most of the commercials are not true’. The remaining 5.7 percent reported that they don’t know.

Perceived truthfulness of advertising differed with grade and city of residence and level of TV viewing. Overall, children in Beijing perceived television commercials to be more truthful than children in Nanjing or Chengdu. In all three cities, with increasing grade there was a sharp decrease in percentage of children perceived that ‘all commercials are true.’ However, the percentage of children stating that nearly all or most of the television commercials were not true varied by city. In Beijing, the percentage of children perceiving that ‘nearly all or most are not true’ was around 27 percent for first graders. It dropped to 14 percent for sixth graders. In Nanjing, the percentage of children perceiving ‘nearly all commercials are not true or mostly not true’ increased from 22 percent for first graders to 28 percent for sixth graders. Chengdu had the highest proportion of first graders believing that nearly all or most of television commercials were not true (46 percent). It dropped to 21 percent for sixth graders. There was a marked increase in the percent of children perceiving that ‘half of the television commercials are true’ with grade in Beijing and Chengdu. In Beijing, the percentage increased from 23 percent for first graders to 47 percent for sixth graders. In Chengdu, the percentage increased from 19 percent for first graders to 55 percent for sixth graders. The Chi-square values of perceived truthfulness by grade for Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu were 47.8 ($p < 0.01$), 36.7 ($p = 0.06$), and 113.4 ($p < 0.0001$) respectively.

No significant difference was found between boys' and girls' perceptions of the truthfulness of television commercials in Beijing and Nanjing. However, girls in Chengdu perceived television commercials to be more truthful than boys. Also, no significant difference was found between the level of television viewing and perceived truthfulness of television commercials in Nanjing and Chengdu. However, heavy TV viewers in Beijing were more likely to report that they did not know whether commercials are truthful (13 percent of heavy viewers reported 'don't know' versus 4 percent of light viewers reported 'don't know'). The Chi-square values of perceived truthfulness by level of television viewing for Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu were 19.2 ($p < 0.05$), 14.6 ($p = 0.15$), and 17.5 ($p = 0.07$) respectively.

[INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Criteria to differentiate true from false commercials. Table 2 tabulates the means by which children judge which television commercials are true and which are not. Overall, a significant higher proportion of respondents reported that they will 'try the products,' or 'see if the products are by a trustworthy brand or by a trusted advertiser' to decide whether commercials are true (27 and 25 percent, respectively). About 18 percent said they would check the products at the stores and 16.3 percent would ask their parents or teachers. (Due to the small percentages of children consulting teachers, the two categories of consulting parents and consulting teachers are combined in the tables.) Nearly ten percent reported that their judgment was based on intuitive feelings about whether the commercials seem to be true or not. Just over four percent would 'see if the products

were endorsed by trustworthy persons?.

The basis for judging truthfulness of commercials did not differ by sex and level of TV viewing, but did differ by grade for all three cities (chi-square value=226.8, $p < 0.0001$). First graders mainly depended on authorities to help the differentiation. Twenty-nine percent of first graders reported that they would ask their parents and six percent reported that they would ask their teachers when they felt doubtful about a commercial's truthfulness. Older children relied much less on authority. Only seven percent of the sixth graders would ask help from parents or teachers. Older children mainly used their personal experience and trust in the brand/advertiser as bases for judgment. About one-third of the children in fourth grade or above would see if the commercials were by a trustworthy brand or a trusted advertiser.

[INSERT TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE]

Liking of TV commercials. Table 3 summarizes the children's liking of television commercials in the three cities of China. Almost one-third of the respondents (31 percent) hold neutral feelings toward television commercials. Just over 24 percent reported that they like television commercials and 9 percent reported that they like television commercials very much, while 20 percent claimed that they dislike television commercials and 15 percent reported that they dislike television commercials very much. Liking of television commercials differed with grade, sex, city of residence and the level of television viewing. In all three cities, the extent of strong feelings (either 'dislike very much' or 'like very much') towards television commercials both declined with grade whereas the percentage of neutral feelings towards television commercials increased with grade

(Chi-square value=188.5, $p<0.0001$). Overall, children in Beijing liked television commercials significantly more than children in Nanjing and Chengdu (Chi-square value = 37.3, $p<0.0001$). The percentages of 'like' or 'like very much' for children in Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu were 41 percent, 29 percent, and 32 percent, respectively.

Girls in Nanjing and Chengdu like television commercials more than boys. In Beijing, however, there is no significant difference between sex and liking of commercials. The Chi-square values of liking of commercials by sex for Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu were 7.0 ($p=0.14$), 9.8 ($p<0.05$) and 10.6 ($p<0.05$) respectively.

Significant difference was found between the level of television viewing and liking of television commercials in Nanjing (Chi-square value = 22.6, $p<0.005$) and Chengdu (Chi-square = 19.5, $p<0.05$). In Nanjing, heavy TV viewers reported disliking television commercials more than light viewers. In Chengdu, a reverse pattern was found. Light viewers in Chengdu said they disliked television commercials more than heavy viewers. In Beijing, there was no significant difference in liking of commercials for light, medium and heavy television viewers.

[INSERT TABLE THREE ABOUT HERE]

Perceived truthfulness and liking of television commercial The Pearson correlation between children's perceived truthfulness of television commercials and liking of commercials in Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu were 0.30 ($p<0.0001$), 0.31 ($p<0.0001$) and 0.31 ($p<0.0001$). Those who perceived television commercials to be true liked commercials more than those who perceived television commercials to be untrue.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that Chinese children are not totally susceptible to advertising appeals. Even first graders have doubts about the truthfulness of commercials. The current study of Chinese children's perceived truthfulness shows both similarities and differences when compared to children in the US and in Hong Kong. Chinese children are similar to children in the US in that with increased grade there is a decrease in the percentage of children believing commercials are true. However, instead of doubting the truthfulness of most commercials, children in higher grades believe that half of the commercials are true and half of them are not. This is in contrast, for example, with the US study by Ward *et al.* (1977) which found that 97 percent of sixth graders doubt the veracity of TV commercials, and with a Hong Kong study by Chan (2001) who reported that 45 percent of fourth to sixth graders felt similarly. Thus, while there is mistrust of advertising among older Chinese children, it is not as great as that of children in the US or in Hong Kong.

It is speculated that in a newly emerging consumer market such as China, advertising is one of the important sources of information about products and services. As Chinese children are in the process of learning to become consumers, they consider television advertising a valuable medium, so valuable that they do not want to be very skeptical of it.

Gender does not seem to be a factor in the perceived truthfulness of television commercials among Chinese children. This appears to be the case, also, in the US, for example, in findings by Greenberg *et al.* (1986).

In John's (1999) model of consumer socialization, children are theorized to undergo a

developmental process that proceeds through a series of stages as they mature into adult consumers. In other words, age of the children becomes the most influential factor in deciding the knowledge structures of marketplace information as well as their decision-making and influencing strategies as consumers. The current study, however, indicates that the market environment also plays a significant role in the consumer socialization process. The residing city (whether it is Beijing, Nanjing or Chengdu) shows a significant impact on children's perceived truthfulness and liking of television commercials. Children in Beijing, the city where advertising is most established, place more trust in television commercials. This may be attributed to the stricter advertising regulation standards maintained in the city where advertising is well established. Another possibility is that there are more global advertisers and foreign creative personnel in Beijing who are well aware of and adhere to the advertising ordinances in established cities. In cities where advertising is not as well established such as Chengdu, advertising censorship may be loosely maintained and there may be more local advertisers using deceptive creative executions. As a result, the perceived credibility of television commercials among children is lower. Further research is needed to analyze the advertising contents from cities of different advertising development.

Children in cities where advertising is less developed have a more skeptical attitude toward television advertising. There are three possible reasons. First, children reported that they would check the products at the stores to see if the commercials are true. As product distribution systems are less developed in second-tier cities like Nanjing and Chengdu, children may not be able to locate advertised products they want in the stores. As a result, they might think commercials are

not true. Secondly, counterfeit products prevail in cities where advertising and marketing are less developed. Children are more likely to have purchased counterfeit products in those cities and would put the blame on the advertised brands. They therefore think that commercials lie. Thirdly, since advertising is new in these areas, Chinese children may mistrust it more, just reflect their mistrust of the unknown.

Contrary to Robertson and Rossiter's (1974) findings for example, the current study did not report a consistent relation between skepticism of television commercials and television viewing. The study also did not find a consistent pattern of gender differences in perceived truthfulness.

It is interesting to see how children's bases for skepticism about advertising vary by grade. First graders rely mainly on parents to help them in differentiating which commercials are true. This probably reflects the fact that younger children typically cannot read, and simply cannot learn about products from newspapers, magazines, and advertising catalogues. They learn to defend themselves against advertising's persuasive messages mainly from their parents. In the consumer socialization of Chinese children, schoolteachers play an insignificant role. This is probably because materialistic values are discouraged in the schools. Most of the schools in China do not have a tuck shop and students are encouraged to bring their own lunches and snacks to the schools. One of the moral guidelines for school-aged children is 'Live a simple life. Don't be choosy in what you wear and what you eat. Don't spend money irresponsibly'. Although sharing food and snacks and eating together with classmates, and exchanging consumption experience about new food products are common in schools (Yuhua, 2000), the current study indicates that children seldom

consult their teachers about truthfulness of television commercials.

Children in higher grades can read and can therefore access a wider range of sources for product information including newspapers and magazines. They also have more consumer experience to rely on in order to judge which television commercials are true. About one quarter of the children reported they would try the advertised products and check the products at the stores. Older children, as consumers, are better able to compare user experience with advertising promises. Awareness of brands and the use of brand reputation for judging commercials become prominent when a child reaches grade 4. In this study, one third of children in grade 4 or above reported that they would see if the commercials are about a trustworthy brand or they are by a trusted advertiser. This is consistent with John's (1999) model of consumer socialization stages. As the children enter the analytical stage (in about grade 3 to 4), they are able to adopt a dual perspective (their own and that of the advertiser) and have a better understanding of brands.

Another interesting finding is that the basis of judgment about advertising truthfulness did not depend on market environmental factors, but depended mainly on grade. This reflects that processing of information about truthfulness is a cognitive and social developmental variable that is independent of the objective environment.

Most of the respondents reported a neutral attitude toward television commercials. When compared with children in Hong Kong (Chan, 2001), there is a lower proportion of Chinese children who like or like very much (33 percent in the current study vs. 56 percent in Hong Kong). Liking of commercials depends on grade, sex, city and level of television viewing. Consistent with

the finding for perceived truthfulness, children in Beijing, the city where advertising is most established, like television commercials most. Again, this may be attributed to the higher advertising standards in the city. In places where advertising is not well established, there may be more local advertisers using loud and noisy creative executions, and as a result, children dislike the television commercials more.

The current study did not report an increase of dislike of commercials with grade. Instead, we found that the first graders hold strong feelings about commercials. They either like commercials very much or dislike them very much. Children in higher grades, on the other hand, expressed indifference to television advertising. To advertisers, this can be both good news and bad news. It is good to know that disliking of commercials decreases with grade. But it is bad to know that children lose the kind of interest or enthusiasm toward television when they grow up. It will be more difficult to persuade audiences who care less about television advertising.

Perceived truthfulness and attitudes toward television advertising show a positive correlation. Children who put more trust in television commercials also like them more (or vice versa). The result is consistent with Chan's (2001) finding. Implication for marketers is that commercials should be judged credible in order to gain a good impression from children.

The study has several limitations. First, the conclusion is based on a cluster sample of six schools from three selected cities. According to the information provided by the researchers in China, these schools are situated in areas of middle and lower-middle class. The conclusion may not be generalizable to children in the upper class or in the lower-lower class. In China, there are 11

provinces in which advertising is underdeveloped with advertising expenditures representing less than one percent of the national total (Fan, 2001). Our conclusions may not be generalizable to children residing in these provinces. Second, the survey is based on a close-ended structured questionnaire. Students are forced to select the most appropriate answers suggested and cannot give open-ended responses of whatever ideas come to their minds. Some other basis of judging the truthfulness of commercials may not be captured. Third, during the data collection, researcher emphasized that returns are anonymous. The fact that the questionnaires are collected through the schools may trigger children to give socially acceptable answers in order to please the teachers.

To conclude, Chinese children did cast doubt on the truthfulness of television advertising. The percentages of children believing all commercials are true does decrease with grade but not as much as in the US or Hong Kong. Children residing in cities where advertising is underdeveloped show a consistent pattern of higher level of skepticism and less liking of commercials. Further research is needed to investigate how the contents and advertising standards vary in cities of different advertising development. Interviewing those officers who censor commercials and advertising creative personnel in different cities may help to explore and explain the differences. Chinese children generally hold a neutral attitude toward television advertising, although children who perceive commercials to be true are more likely to like them. The study shows evidence of a developmental process of consumer socialization. There is no consistent pattern of gender differences in perceived truthfulness of advertising and its relation with television viewing. However, the environment variable of development of advertising sophistication does also play a significant role. (5611 words)

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Biographies

Dr Kara Chan is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University where she teaches course in advertising. She worked in the advertising and public relations profession and as a statistician for the Hong Kong Government. She is author of over 10 articles on advertising and consumer behaviour in Hong Kong and China. She is a Fulbright Scholar at Bradley University, Illinois for 1999 to 2000.

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Table 1 Children's perceived truthfulness of TV commercials

| Television advertising is | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) |
|---------------------------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------|--------|---------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|--------|------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | |
| | N=281 | 261 | 284 | 298 | 314 | 299 | 884 | 846 | 455 | 555 | 739 | 620 | 577 | 529 | 1749 |
| Nearly all are true | 17.4 | 10.3 | 12.3 | 9.1 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 10.0 | 9.7 | 11.4 | 9.0 | 9.6 | 10.2 | 10.7 | 9.1 | 9.9 |
| Mostly are true | 15.3 | 19.5 | 18.0 | 19.1 | 20.7 | 19.7 | 20.2 | 17.4 | 23.5 | 18.0 | 16.4 | 19.5 | 18.4 | 18.3 | 18.8 |
| Half of them are true | 25.6 | 42.5 | 42.3 | 50.7 | 44.3 | 47.5 | 39.4 | 45.5 | 41.8 | 42.3 | 42.6 | 37.3 | 47.0 | 43.1 | 42.3 |
| Mostly are not true | 11.7 | 10.3 | 12.7 | 11.1 | 16.6 | 16.1 | 12.6 | 13.6 | 10.1 | 13.5 | 14.9 | 15.2 | 11.4 | 12.7 | 13.2 |
| Nearly all are not true | 21.7 | 10.7 | 12.0 | 5.4 | 7.0 | 5.4 | 11.6 | 8.7 | 6.4 | 10.5 | 12.3 | 12.7 | 6.9 | 10.6 | 10.2 |
| Don't know | 8.2 | 6.5 | 2.8 | 4.7 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 6.1 | 5.1 | 6.8 | 6.7 | 4.2 | 5.2 | 5.5 | 6.2 | 5.7 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 127.3 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 10.3 (N.S.) | | 29.2 (<0.001) | | | 21.8 (<0.05) | | | |

Table 2 How children know which commercials are true and which are not true

| Judgments | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) |
|---|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------------|--------|-------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|--------|------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | |
| Try the products | 19.3 | 41.2 | 31.0 | 22.2 | 25.6 | 26.7 | 26.3 | 28.5 | 22.7 | 29.0 | 28.9 | 27.8 | 26.3 | 28.5 | 27.3 |
| See if they are about a trustworthy brand or they are by a trusted advertiser | 12.9 | 15.8 | 23.1 | 33.0 | 29.5 | 31.4 | 25.1 | 24.3 | 24.3 | 23.0 | 25.9 | 22.3 | 24.6 | 27.0 | 24.6 |
| Check the products at the stores | 10.0 | 13.1 | 18.5 | 20.9 | 19.6 | 24.0 | 17.7 | 18.1 | 18.3 | 17.1 | 18.1 | 17.3 | 19.0 | 16.8 | 17.8 |
| Ask parents or teachers | 34.3 | 21.2 | 13.5 | 12.1 | 11.5 | 7.1 | 15.9 | 16.9 | 18.3 | 17.2 | 14.4 | 18.4 | 16.7 | 13.2 | 16.3 |
| Whether the commercials seem so | 12.5 | 4.6 | 11.4 | 7.7 | 11.5 | 8.8 | 10.9 | 8.0 | 11.9 | 10.0 | 7.9 | 10.5 | 9.4 | 8.8 | 9.6 |
| See if endorsed by trustworthy persons | 11.1 | 4.2 | 2.5 | 4.0 | 2.2 | 2.0 | 4.1 | 4.3 | 4.4 | 3.6 | 4.8 | 3.6 | 4.0 | 5.7 | 4.3 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 226.8 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 5.2 (N.S.) | | 14.8 (N.S.) | | | 13.0 (N.S.) | | | |

Table 3 Children’s liking of TV commercials

| Feeling towards TV commercials | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) | HK* (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|---------------|--------|----------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|--------|------|-----------|---------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | | |
| Dislike very much | 25.8 | 19.5 | 14.2 | 10.7 | 11.1 | 12.7 | 18.9 | 11.9 | 11.4 | 20.3 | 14.2 | 17.5 | 12.0 | 17.0 | 15.4 | 2 |
| Dislike | 23.0 | 13.0 | 22.3 | 20.5 | 19.7 | 23.4 | 19.8 | 21.3 | 16.4 | 18.9 | 23.9 | 21.5 | 19.5 | 19.8 | 20.3 | 15 |
| Neutral | 17.7 | 22.1 | 24.1 | 31.9 | 43.0 | 43.1 | 30.6 | 31.0 | 31.3 | 31.7 | 29.9 | 27.5 | 33.3 | 31.6 | 30.8 | 27 |
| Like | 17.0 | 28.6 | 27.0 | 29.5 | 23.9 | 19.4 | 21.6 | 26.7 | 28.4 | 20.5 | 24.4 | 23.3 | 27.5 | 21.9 | 24.2 | 51 |
| Like very much | 16.6 | 16.8 | 12.4 | 7.4 | 2.2 | 1.3 | 9.0 | 9.1 | 12.5 | 8.6 | 7.6 | 10.1 | 7.7 | 9.6 | 9.2 | 5 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 188.5 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 18.7 (<0.001) | | 37.3 (<0.0001) | | | 17.2 (<0.05) | | | | |

*Source: Chan (2001)

Figure 1. Children's perceived truthfulness towards TV advertising

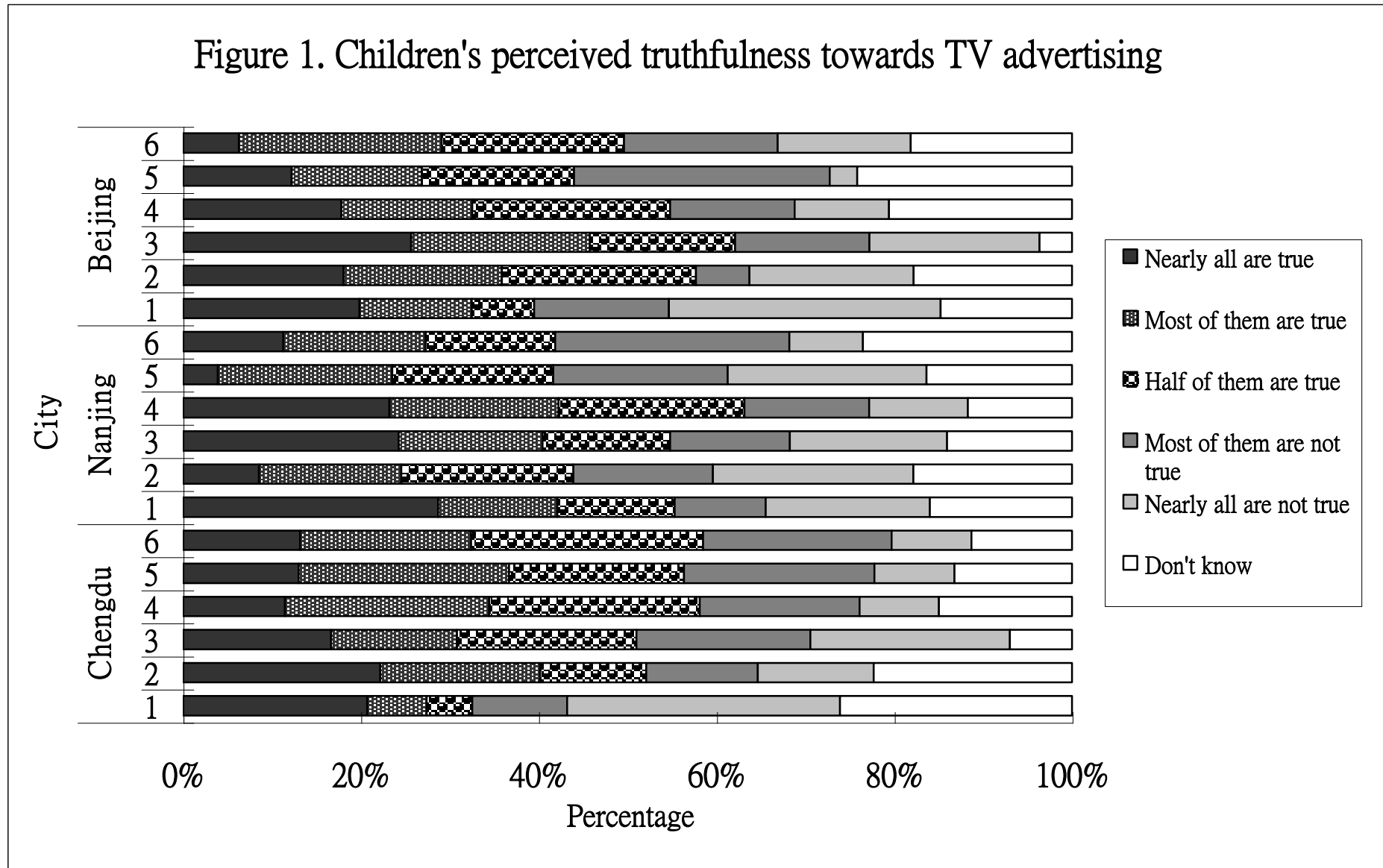


Table 1 Children's perceived truthfulness of TV commercials

| Television advertising is | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----------|--------|-------------|---------|---------|-------------------------|--------|------|-----------|
| | 1 N=281 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | |
| Nearly all are true | 17 | 10 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 6 | 10 | 10 | 11 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 11 | 9 | 10 |
| Mostly are true | 15 | 20 | 18 | 19 | 21 | 20 | 20 | 17 | 24 | 18 | 16 | 20 | 18 | 18 | 19 |
| Half of them are true | 26 | 43 | 42 | 51 | 44 | 48 | 39 | 46 | 42 | 42 | 43 | 37 | 47 | 43 | 42 |
| Mostly are not true | 12 | 10 | 13 | 11 | 17 | 16 | 13 | 14 | 10 | 14 | 15 | 15 | 11 | 13 | 13 |
| Nearly all are not true | 22 | 11 | 12 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 12 | 9 | 6 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 7 | 11 | 10 |
| Don't know | 8 | 7 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 127 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 10 (N.S.) | | 29 (<0.001) | | | 22 (<0.05) | | | |

Table 2 How children know which commercials are true and which are not true

| Judgments | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) |
|---|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----------|--------|-----------|---------|---------|-------------------------|--------|------|-----------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | |
| Try the products | 19 | 41 | 31 | 22 | 26 | 27 | 26 | 29 | 23 | 29 | 29 | 28 | 26 | 29 | 27 |
| See if they are about a trustworthy brand or they are by a trusted advertiser | 13 | 16 | 23 | 33 | 30 | 31 | 25 | 24 | 24 | 23 | 26 | 22 | 25 | 27 | 25 |
| Check the products at the stores | 10 | 13 | 19 | 21 | 20 | 24 | 18 | 18 | 18 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 19 | 17 | 18 |
| Ask parents or teachers | 34 | 21 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 7 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 14 | 18 | 17 | 13 | 16 |
| Whether the commercials seem so | 13 | 5 | 11 | 8 | 12 | 9 | 11 | 8 | 12 | 10 | 8 | 11 | 9 | 9 | 10 |
| See if endorsed by trustworthy persons | 11 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 4 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 227 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 5 (N.S.) | | 15 (N.S.) | | | 13 (N.S.) | | | |

Table 3 Children’s liking of TV commercials

| Feeling towards TV commercials | Grade (%) | | | | | | Sex (%) | | City (%) | | | Level of TV viewing (%) | | | Total (%) | HK* (%) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------------|--------|--------------|---------|---------|----------------------------|--------|------|--------------|------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Male | Female | Beijing | Nanjing | Chengdu | Low | Medium | High | | |
| Dislike very much | 26 | 20 | 14 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 19 | 12 | 11 | 20 | 14 | 18 | 12 | 17 | 15 | 2 |
| Dislike | 23 | 13 | 22 | 21 | 20 | 23 | 20 | 21 | 16 | 19 | 24 | 22 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 15 |
| Neutral | 18 | 22 | 24 | 32 | 43 | 43 | 31 | 31 | 31 | 32 | 30 | 28 | 33 | 32 | 31 | 27 |
| Like | 17 | 29 | 27 | 30 | 24 | 19 | 22 | 27 | 28 | 21 | 24 | 23 | 28 | 22 | 24 | 51 |
| Like very much | 17 | 17 | 12 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 9 | 9 | 13 | 9 | 8 | 10 | 8 | 10 | 9 | 5 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Chi-square statistics | 189 (<0.0001) | | | | | | 19 (<0.001) | | 37 (<0.0001) | | | 17 (<0.05) | | | | |

*Source: Chan (2001)

Figure 1. Children's perceived truthfulness towards TV advertising by city and grade

