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Consumer socialization of Chinese children in schools:

Analysis of consumption values in textbooks

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**Consumer socialization of Chinese children in schools:
Analysis of consumption values in textbooks**

Kara Chan
Journal of Consumer Marketing

Research paper

Purpose

To examine what types of consumption values are taught at elementary schools in Mainland China, how these values are presented, and how these values relate to traditional Chinese cultural values

Design/methodology/approach

A content analysis of 72 lessons in textbooks on moral education for elementary school children in national China was conducted. The themes about consumption values, desirable and undesirable consumer behaviors, and the reasons provided in the textbooks for adopting these consumption values were analyzed.

Findings

Eight out of 72 lessons (i.e. 11%) were about consumption. The media contents put strong emphasis on thrift and frugality. Children were taught that there were private goods and public goods. All material goods were the results of human labor. Goods should be used properly. Wasting goods was portrayed as sin. The consumption values conveyed in textbooks reflect a mix of communistic values as well as traditional Chinese value of long-term orientation and inner experience of meaning. The consumption values taught at school were in sharp contrast with the consumption values of uniqueness, fun and enjoyment portrayed in children's television programs and commercials.

Research limitations

The study did not measure how children respond to the consumption values taught in schools. In other words, we did not have information about whether Chinese children understand or believe in these values.

Practical implications

This paper offers advice for marketers and advertisers to frame the benefits of their products in line with desirable Chinese cultural values. For example, in view of the strong emphasis on meaning in consumption, there is a big market for products and services related to saving. Also, companies should consider sponsoring charity activities of non-profit making organizations in order to establish positive and responsible corporate images.

Originality/value

This paper offers insight to understanding the inherent hindrance to children's pursuit for hedonism in consumption. It also provides suggestions for product design, planning of promotional activities as well as brand positioning to appeal to parents and children in China.

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Introduction

Consumer socialization is the process by which consumers acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to operate as consumers (Ward, 1974). The process has received much attention from marketers and advertisers, parents, educators, and policy makers because each wishes to make significant input to it. Marketers and advertisers are interested from the standpoint of designing effective ways to sell products and services to children. Parents are concerned about undesirable effects of marketing and advertising targeted to their children, e.g. causing parent-child conflict and encouraging materialistic values (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003). Educators are concerned about the teaching of proper consumer skills and rational purchase decision-making to children. Policy makers are interested because they want to develop appropriate legislation to protect children's consumer rights.

In the consumer socialization process, socialization agents are specific sources from which norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors are transmitted to young consumers. A socializing agent can be a person or an organization that provides influence through frequent interaction with an individual, primacy over the individual, or control over rewards and punishments given to the individual (Brim, 1966). Television, families and peers are often identified as major socializing agents among young consumers (Churchill and Moschis, 1979). Schools can also play a role as there are some observations that materialism is discouraged in Mainland schools (Chan and McNeal, 2004).

Previous research on consumer socialization has mainly adopted two theoretical models, the Cognitive Developmental Model and the Social Learning Model. The cognitive developmental model attempts to explain the formation of consumer knowledge, skills and behaviors as a function of qualitative changes in cognitive development stages. Children are conceptualized to have gone through different stages from infancy to adulthood, each marked with its cognitive structure. John (1999) proposes a model of consumer socialization that is shown to be particularly useful in characterizing children's response to commercial communication and understanding of symbolic meaning in consumption. On the other hand, the social learning model attempts to explain the formation of consumer knowledge, skills and behaviors as a function of interactions between socialization agents and individuals in different social settings (McLeod and O'Keefe, 1972). Attitudes, motivations, and values are learned through modeling, reinforcement, and social exchange. The social learning model implies that the more interaction between the socializing agents and the individuals, the more likely learning will take place.

In a study of children's perception and attitudes towards toys using drawing method in Mainland China, it was found that some respondents perceived that a child with many possessions would be unwilling to share, looking down on others, not knowledgeable, not concentrating on study, and wasting money (Chan, 2004). There seems to be existence of strong anti-materialistic value being communicated to children in China. Or in other words, children in China are being socialized to be ethical consumers who place a strong emphasis on the impact of their consumption on the social, economic and ecological environment. We suspect that these consumption values may originate from teaching in schools, as one of the ten moral requirements for elementary school children in China is to work hard and live a simple life (Lu and Gao, 2004).

The current study focuses on one particular aspect of consumer socialization, schools as socializing agents for transmission of consumption values. Emphasis on socialization can be seen in the dominant themes of educational materials. At issue is how Chinese children learn about consumption values in schools. What types of consumption values are taught and how are these values presented? What are desirable as well as undesirable consumer behaviors? How do the consumption values taught at schools relate to traditional Chinese cultural values or communists values in China? By investigating the consumer socialization process conducted at school, we will be able to understand how Chinese children become consumers.

Literature review

Children are brought up in different cultures. Culture is the “collective mental programming” that distinguishes one society from another (Hofstede, 1983, p.76). All societies have the needs to orientate new members of the society (or socialize them) through communication. According to Schramm (1977), parents and senior tribal elders took up the role of socialization in traditional societies. In modern societies, parents, schools, mass media and peers are responsible for socializing new members. The objectives of the socializations are to pass along values and social norms of the particular culture. Values and social norms are different. Values are concerned about preferences internalized among the members, while social norms are concerned about subjective perception of the preferences of significant others by the members in the societies (Pan, Chaffee, Chu and Ju, 1994).

Chinese values and norms

In the past two decades, one of the major frameworks for understanding and measuring culture has been Hofstede’s (1980; 1983) typology of cultural dimensions. Hofstede’s (1980)

original work mainly described four cultural dimensions: individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity and later included long-term/short-term orientation (Hofstede, 1991). Individualism/collectivism refers to a country's cultural position with respect to the importance of the individual or the group. Power distance captures the desire within a society for hierarchy versus egalitarianism. Uncertainty avoidance is related to a society's tolerance for ambiguity. While masculinity stands for a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success, femininity refers to a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and the quality of life (Hofstede, 1983). Wu (2002) pointed out that China is a typical example of collective and long-term oriented culture. Chinese people have clear distinction between in-group and out-group. They are willing to practice perseverance and thrift in order to prepare for the future.

Pan et al. (1994, p. 24) compare six dominant American cultural dimensions with traditional cultural dimension and come up with the following conclusion.

1. U.S. culture emphasizes "active mastery" in the person-nature relationship, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes "passive acceptance" of fate by seeking harmony with nature.

2. U.S. culture tends to seek for external experiences and the world of things, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes inner experiences of meaning and feeling.

3. U.S. culture is characterized by an open view of the world, emphasizing change and movement, whereas traditional Chinese culture is typified by a closed world view, treasuring stability and harmony.

4. U.S. culture places primary faith in rationalism and is oriented toward the future, whereas traditional Chinese culture relies heavily on kinship ties and tradition with a historical orientation.

5. U.S. culture emphasizes horizontal dimensions of interpersonal relationships, whereas traditional Chinese culture emphasizes vertical interpersonal relationships.

6. U.S. culture values the individual personality, whereas traditional Chinese culture weights heavily a person's duties to family, clan, and state.

Although traditional Chinese cultures have its own distinct dimensions, scholars also emphasize that culture is not a stagnant system. Contemporary Chinese cultural values are also shaped by communistic education and modernization (Pan et al., 1994; Zhao, 1997). Through interacting with other cultural systems, the nature of Chinese cultural values is undergoing tremendous and continuous changes (Lin, 2001). Lu (2002) described that China has been characterized by a tension of traditional and modern, idealistic and pragmatic values, and a struggle between an authoritarian state and market economy.

In the consumer socialization process, socialization agents are specific sources from which norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors are transmitted to young consumers. A socializing agent can be a person or an organization that provides influence through frequent interaction with an individual, primacy over the individual, or control over rewards and punishments given to the individual (Brim, 1966). Attitudes, motivations, and values are learned through modeling, reinforcement, and social exchange. Other than being with families, children spend long hours in schools. They interact with friends and learn from teachers. Research indicated that children often learned about new snacks from classmates through food sharing (Guo, 2000). A survey of urban Chinese

children indicated that they seldom consult teachers about truthfulness of television commercials (Chan and McNeal, 2004).

The current study focuses on one particular aspect of consumer socialization; socialization of consumption values through the medium of textbooks in China. To our best knowledge, we know that consumer education is excluded in formal curriculum of elementary schools in China. However, we notice that consumption values are included in textbooks in moral education. Moral education is a curriculum subject in China from grade 1 to 9. Students in grade one to four are required to attend two 40-minute sessions of moral education a week and students in grade 5 to 6 are required to attend three 40-minute sessions a week. The curriculum is designed with an objective to help Chinese children to live a healthy, safe, happy, positive, responsible, caring, creative, and an intelligent life (PRCMOE, 2002a). It also teaches Chinese children to relate in a meaningful way to their family, school, community, the nation and the world (PRCMOE, 2002b).

The specific research questions of the current study are:

1. What types of consumption values are taught in elementary schools in Mainland China?
2. How are these values presented?
3. How are these values related to traditional Chinese cultural values?

Methodology

Sample

One set of moral education textbooks published by People Education Press in Beijing in 2002 was selected. It was the only set of moral education textbooks that was available in one of the most popular bookstores in Beijing in June 2004. A complete set of textbooks consisted of twelve volumes titled “Thoughts and moral education volume 1 to 12 (Sixiang Pinde)”. Six volumes were used for the fall semester and six volumes were used for the spring semester. The six volumes used for the spring semester (i.e. volumes 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 12) were selected for study as the other six volumes were not available in the bookstore. It was among the new textbooks designed and approved to be published after the implementation of the Guidelines for primary school Ideology and Morality curriculum and junior secondary school Ideology and Politics curriculum in nine-year compulsory education in China (Revised version) (PRCMOE, 2001). Each volume contained twelve lessons and each lesson took up five to six pages. The lessons were structured in almost the same pattern, with two to three pages of a main story, two pages of good and bad examples, and one page of cases and questions for discussion.

Analysis

For each case, the title was recorded and coded according to its theme. Coding categories were determined by the author during the content analysis process. Additionally, the good and bad consumption behaviors, and the justifications given for the specific consumption values were coded. Another researcher (a female university graduate working as a research assistant) was provided with the coding categories developed by the author and coded independently for the themes and justification. Inter-coder reliability (Perreault and Leigh, 1989) for the theme was 0.89 and coder reliability for the justification was 0.86. All disagreements were settled by discussion and consensus. We also analyzed how these consumption values were presented by

studying the narrative form and illustrations used in the textbooks. Extracts from the lessons would be used to illustrate the categories that we had developed.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the themes used in all the lessons in the sampled textbooks. It was found that the three most frequently featured themes were about personality traits, social relations and manners, and learning attitudes. These three themes accounted for more than half of the lessons. Consumption values contributed with 11 percent of the total number of lessons. Other themes covered in the textbooks included safety and health, patriotism, collectivism and environmental protection.

In the coming paragraphs, we will analyze the eight lessons about consumption values. We will briefly describe the key message in each lesson. We will summarize the desirable as well as undesirable consumer behaviors in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively. In the last section, the reasons provided in the textbooks to support the featured consumption values will be presented in Table 4.

The first lesson about consumption was in grade 1 with the title “treasure household goods”. It featured Zhou Enlai, China’s first premier. The story told that when Premier Zhou was a child, he took good care of his belongings. He always wore the same set of clothes and he took good care of it. The second and the third lesson about consumption were in grade 2. The titles of these two lessons were “treasure each single grain of food” and “save water and electricity”. The second lesson described the various kind of food and discussed how grains were grown. Using poems and illustrations, it demonstrated how difficult it was to grow grains. It also discussed the threat of not enough food when there was natural disasters. The third lesson

featured a grandpa who taught a boy how to save water and electricity. The lesson talked about the importance of water and electricity. It ended with the discussion of proper and improper consumption of water and electricity. The fourth to the sixth lessons about consumption were in grade 3. The fourth lesson was titled “treasure the fruits of labor”. It featured the daughter of Tung Bei-wu, a veteran revolutionist, recalled how her dad lived a frugal life. Her father demanded her to pick up the rice on the table. Her father used tree gum as a replacement for glue and he practiced calligraphy on waster papers. The fifth lesson was titled “not comparing clothes and food”. The lesson started with a story of a girl who asked her mom to buy her a new dress, just like the one her friend had. Coming from a not so well-off family, her mom denied her request and made her a dress instead. The girl was not happy with it. The lesson went on to tell a historical story that happened in the Song dynasty. A prime minister lived in such a simple and frugal life that made the emperor and the other officials feel shameful of their lavish lifestyles. The sixth lesson was titled “stories of public utilities”. It introduced street lights, public phones and bus stop signs as public goods that help people lives. It went on describing how we can protect these facilities. The seventh lesson about consumption was in grade 5. The title was “frugality is honorable and waste is shameful”. The central character of the lesson was Zhou Yu-lu, a government official from a poor county. The lesson described his frugal life in the public domain (his work) and the private domain (his family life). The eighth lesson about consumption was in grade 6. The title was “love and protect public goods.” It started with the introduction of public goods, using natural resources, infrastructures, factories and public utilities as examples. It went on with two stories about a young lady and two girls who risked their lives in saving the properties of a factory and a herd of sheep respectively. The last part of the lesson condemned people who did not treasure the public goods.

Social norms are often established through the demonstration of behaviors that are acceptable and behaviors that are not acceptable. Table 2 and Table 3 summarize these behaviors used in the textbooks. These behaviors are described either in narrative form or in the illustrations. Figure 1 showed some of the illustrations demonstrating undesirable consumption behaviors.

In order to encourage certain behaviors, children should know why they need to adopt these behaviors and what will happen if they do not confirm to the social norms. Throughout the eight lessons, four reasons were given to the practice of frugality and thrift. The most frequently mentioned reason was attributed to a communistic nature. It was said that products are the results of people's work and labor, and it took a lot of hard work to produce food as well as other products. The hard work in producing food by farmers was mentioned three times in the eight stories. Authors of the textbooks argued that careful use of the products symbolize paying respect to the farmers and the workers. In contrast, wasteful behaviors were seen as a sin, as well as a failure to pay tribute to the people involved in the production process. In one lesson in grade 6, it was said that "a person's attitude toward public goods reflect his or her attitude toward the country and its people. Caring of public properties is a demonstration of love and respect for the country and its people."

The second justification provided was scarcity in resources. China was portrayed as a developing country, and resources such as electricity and water were in limited supply. Excess consumption of the scarce resources would result in poor living conditions in other parts of the country. If one could save his or her own part of resources, the saved part would benefit the under-resourced parts of the society. In one lesson, it was said that "if every Chinese citizen saves one grain of rice, we shall have enough to feed one hundred children for more than one

year.” Saving resources also help to prepare the nation for the future. In a lesson that featured the production of food, it was said that “... wasteful is a pity. During the time of natural disasters, not having enough food will cause great trouble.” The textbook authors were aware of the fact, that uneven distribution of wealth and the rapid economic development of China would encourage children to spend lavishly. In three out of eight lessons, children were told to keep the frugal attitudes even if their families could afford higher living standards.

The third reason specifically deals with the protection of public goods. Treasuring public goods was said to “bring convenience to our work, our study and our lives.”

Regarding the final reason, frugality was considered as a learning process to protect the benefits of the nation. In one lesson in grade 6, it was quoted from the Constitution that “socialist public properties are sacred and inviolable.” Just as the same article in the Constitution stated that “the country must protect socialist public property and must prohibit any organization or individual from taking over or destroying any state or collective property by any means whatsoever,” the authors of the textbook requested children to keep an eye on the public goods from any possible abuse.

Discussion and conclusion

The content analysis of moral education textbooks in China indicated that teaching of consumption values occupied one-eighth of the current curriculum. This indicated that socialization about consumption values were less important when compared with socialization about appropriate personality, social relations and learning attitudes. Contents in Chinese textbooks put strong emphasis on thrift and frugality. Children were taught that there were private goods and public goods. All material goods were the results of human labor. Goods

should be used properly. Creative use of goods was not encouraged. Wasting goods was portrayed as a sin. Wasting food was seen as almost an unforgivable crime. Even buying a birthday present for a classmate was considered as unnecessary.

The teaching of frugal living and saving as much as possible is prominent and consistent from early school grades to higher grades. Chinese children were socialized to be “ethical consumers”. This may be good news to the Chinese government as their future generations are taught about social, political and environmental responsibility in consumption from early ages.

The consumption values were presented using story-telling techniques, illustrations and discussions. Very often, bad behaviors were illustrated and children were asked to comment whether the particular behavior was right or wrong. Social norms and peer pressure were employed as the textbooks often asked children to find out and praise classmates who practiced thrift. Historical figures, heroes, and ordinary members of the Chinese societies were used to demonstrate desirable consumption behaviors and values.

As simple and frugal life was stressed in the textbooks, the textbooks did not portray any western consumer values of modernization, individualism, youth, or hedonism. As a result, consumption values displayed in the textbooks were in sharp contrast with consumption values of uniqueness, fun and happiness portrayed in Chinese children’s television commercials (Ji and McNeal, 2001). It was also different from the portrayal of fun and enjoyment values in popular Chinese children’s programs produced by the State-owned television broadcasters (Xia, Chan, and Chan, 2004). The weak link between consumption, happiness and success, and the advocacy of sacrificing consumption for other life goals contribute to a body of anti-materialistic values taught in schools. Chan’s (2004) interviews of children did reflect that these anti-materialistic were picked up by even very young children. We can conclude that

consumption values taught formally in schools are in rivals to the consumption values in children's mass media contents.

The justification to support frugal consumption values provided in the textbooks stems from both traditional Chinese values of long-term orientation, inner experience of meaning, as well as Communistic value of glorifying the working class. The traditional Chinese value of historical orientation was demonstration through the use of historical figures in teaching about consumption values. However, Chinese education scholars pointed out the limitation of using heroic figures and historical examples in teaching contemporary lifestyles. For example, Lu and Gao (2004) reported that when teachers taught about Premier Zhou Enlai's simple life, children laughed and found his spirit of frugality far from comprehensive. The traditional Chinese value of long-term orientation and preparing for future was used as one of the reasons for a simple life.

The consumption values portrayed in the textbooks echoed parents' preference for living within their means and refraining from buying luxury goods (Chan, 2004). A survey of young consumers in China also reflected that they were not brand conscious, but were highly price and quality conscious (Fan and Xiao, 1998). This may indicate that the consumption values taught in schools were in line with traditional Chinese values endorsed by the parents and young adult consumers. As Chinese parents have high control over types of products that children can or cannot buy (Chan and McNeal, 2003), it is important that the marketed products and services should be in line with the consumption values endorsed by both parents and children.

Based on our findings and discussions, we have the following suggestions for marketers that aim at entering the Chinese children's market in a successful way:

1. They should be aware that parents and schools give high priority to development of children's personality, social relations and learning attitudes. So, products and services that enhance such development will appeal to parents.
2. As saving is a desired consumption value, companies should explore co-branding with banks to promote children to save money for a particular purchase of expensive goods or services.
3. Companies should consider sponsorship of events with charity organizations to add meanings to consumption.
4. Companies should differentiate the marketing of basic models vs. advanced models for a particular type of products. Advanced models should be backed up with clear distinction of added features and values. Advanced models with cosmetic accessories would not be welcomed by the parents.
5. Parents may have difficulties to understand the value of toys that rely heavily on children's. Parents will consider these toys impractical. A typical example will be jars of playing clays. Demonstration of how the products boost creativity is needed to convince parents and children.
6. Parents may consider jumble pack of food of the same taste potentially wasteful if children do not like it. Bundling food of different tastes into an assorted package can be an alternative to encourage trial and reduce risk.

We have the following advice for marketers should avoid in entering the Chinese children's market:

1. Advertising of premium products and brands for children should stress their superior quality rather than the symbolic meaning of social status.

2. Advertising appeals and advertising copy should not encourage children to compare among themselves in terms of material possessions.
3. Food products using premiums for promotion should not devote all the attention to the premiums in advertising. Buying the food just for getting premiums is not acceptable to parents.
4. Toys consuming many batteries or needing frequent replacement of battery will be seen as wasteful.

Research limitations

The current study only investigates the consumption values presented in the textbooks. It did not study consumption values conveyed in other curriculum subjects, the interaction between teachers and students, and extra-curriculum activities that students would participate. The study also did not measure how children response to the consumption values taught at schools. Further research is needed to explore to what extend Chinese children understand or believe in the consumption values taught at schools.

Table 1. Themes (n=72)

Theme and frequency	Sub-total
Personality: honesty (4), self-reflection (2), love to work (2), courage (1), take care of oneself (1), not greedy (1), keep promise (1), self-respect (1), critical thinking (1), humble (1), creative (1)	16
Social relations and manners: helping others (4), filial piety (2) respect seniors (1), respect teachers (1), kind words (1), greet others (1), not disturb others (1), not taking other people's belongings (1)	12
Good learning attitudes: hardworking (2), serious in learning (2) scientific (2), persistent (2), love to read (1)	9
Consumption values: Frugal and treasuring private goods (6), frugal and treasuring public goods (2)	8
Health and safety: traffic accidents (1), personal safety (3), safe environment (1), mental health (2), physical fitness (1)	8
Patriotism: People's Liberation Army (1), proud of one's country (2), care about the country (2), contribute to the country (1), Chairman Deng (1), sovereignty and Hong Kong hand-over (1)	8
Collectivism: identification with groups (3), self sacrifice (1), yield to group norms (2), put group benefits on top priority (1)	7
Environmental protection: keep clean and tidy (1), nice to animal and plants (2), combat pollution (1)	4

Table 2 List of desirable behaviors in consumption

Theme	Desirable behaviors
Treasure goods that we use or we own	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take good care of the clothes • Try hard not to make clothes dirty • Store clothes in a proper place
Treasure goods that belongs to the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take good care of public goods • Stop others who vandalize public properties • Establish a code of conduct within the school to protect public goods
Frugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wear the same set of clothes over and over again • Eat the rice that dropped on the table • Screw up water tap tightly • Turn off light when not in use • Use recycled papers • Present home made birthday presents • Pack away leftovers at restaurants • Choose clothes in basic and simple style • Request for basic accommodation and office furniture in work • Eat basic meals during business trips • Wear a hat for seven years and wear a pair of shoes for over ten years
Self-sacrifice to protect properties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A female worker saved the factory by using her body to fight with fire • Two girls lost their legs to save a herd of sheep that belongs to the community • Two workers risked their lives to save the money of the community in the credit bureau

Table 3 List of undesirable behaviors in consumption

Theme	Undesirable behaviors
waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put too much toothpaste on the toothbrush • Let a bar of soap floating in the water • Step a new pair of shoes in dirty puddles • Sleep with the lights on • Eat the meat filling and throw away the buns • Step on field of grains • Throw away bread and fruit • Throw away papers with only a few words • Buy expensive birthday gifts for classmates
Improper use of or not taking care of private goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use an umbrella and a broom in fighting • Put clothes on the floor • use tap water for fighting • play with a cap
Improper use of or not taking care of public goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • draw pictures on a mail box • draw pictures on buildings and trees • take away tools and materials from factories • illegal mining of minerals and coal
Consumption as status symbol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consume expensive clothing and fine dining to show status • social comparison with peers

Table 3 Justification to support the consumption values

Reason and frequency*	Sub-total
Production of goods is hard work and frugality is a mean to pay respect to the people who produce the goods	6
Resources are scarce and we should prepare for future's needs	2
To facilitate people's work and study	1
To protect the benefits of the nation	1

*Each lesson could have none or more than one reason

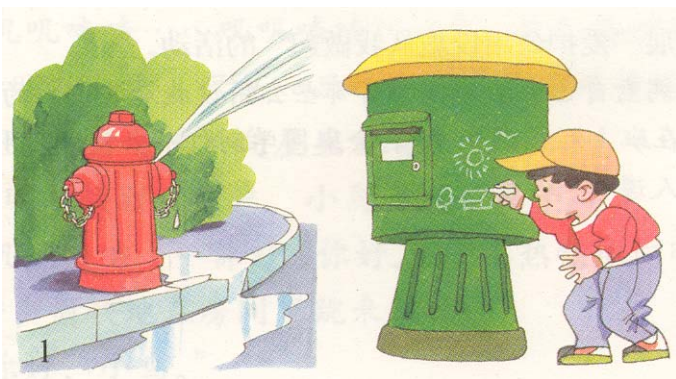
Figure 1 Illustrations to demonstrate undesirable consumption behaviors



1.1 waste food: eat the meat filling and throw away the buns



1.2 improper use of goods: fight with an umbrella and a broom



1.3 Not taking care of public goods: let water spill and draw pictures on a mail box

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