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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF TELEVISION

ADVERTISING IN URBAN CHINA

Keywords: China --- children --- television advertising --- focus group interview

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Abstract

The one-child policy in the People's Republic of China has created a generation of only children in most of its urban areas. Popularly called little emperors, these only children are spending a great deal of money as well as exerting tremendous influence on their family spending. Consequently, they are the targets of an increasing amount of advertising. The objectives of this study were to explore urban Chinese children's understanding of television advertising, their attitudes towards it, and their perceived truthfulness of it. Three focus group interviews of 22 urban Chinese children ages 6 to 12 were conducted in Beijing, China in October 2001. The findings yielded similarities and differences with previous studies of children in the US and Chinese children in Hong Kong. Mainland Chinese children's were similar to Hong Kong Chinese and US children in their increased understanding and decreased trust of television advertising with age. Similarly, they enjoyed commercials that were funny and disliked commercials that were boring. Contrary to previous findings, Mainland Chinese children showed a high awareness of public services advertising. They also held negative attitudes toward television commercials of health products and medicines. Older Mainland Chinese children had some negative perceptions of advertised brands; they did not agree that television advertising would enhance their buying confidence in products. Insights for further study provided by this exploratory research are presented.

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ADVERTISING IN URBAN CHINA

1. Introduction and previous studies

As China rapidly becomes a market-driven economy, and its one-child-per-family policy spreads throughout society and repositions children as focal points of family life, effective marketing to parents and children demands good information about them. The study reported here is part of an ongoing major research project undertaken in this spirit. Marketers in China and worldwide have already discovered that Chinese children have enormous economic clout. China adopted a one-child policy in 1979 and today it is the rule in urban China (Zhang and Yang 1992). As only children, Chinese children act like "little emperors/empresses" according to recent observers (e.g., Shao and Herbig 1994). These only children are increasingly believed to constitute an important market force (McNeal and Yeh 1997). There are 290 million children under the age of 14 in China (The State Statistical Bureau 2000), compared to around 60 million for the entire population of the United States. It is estimated that in 1999, the approximately 60 million children, ages 4-12, in the largest cities of China spent around US\$6.2 billion of their own money on their own wants, and influenced the spending by parents and grandparents of over US\$61 billion, giving them a market potential of US\$67 billion (McNeal 2000). Rapid commercialization of childhood as a result of economic restructuring, new affluence, and innovative retailing practices is not unique to China. The

one-child policy and the rapid economic development in China, however, has enabled the process to unfold at a fast pace and across all social strata ([Davis and Sensenbrenner 2000](#)).

A survey of 1496 Chinese families by [McNeal and Yeh \(1997\)](#) indicated that children were given money as early as age 4 and that they were often taken to the marketplace by parents as co-purchasers. Compared to US children they found that Chinese children spent a higher proportion of their own money on educational items. Further, not only did they spend a substantial amount of their own money on their own needs and wants, they also exerted great influence on the spending of their families. This study also found that Chinese children's overall index of influence on family spending on 24 routinely purchased items was around 68 percent, substantially more than the 45 percent for U.S. families ([McNeal 1992](#)).

A recent survey of 460 children in Beijing indicated that Chinese children utilize a wide variety of information sources to learn about new products including parents, retail outlets, and the mass media, and that they consider television to be the most important source ([McNeal and Ji 1999](#)). The researchers concluded that a new generation of young Chinese consumers is emerging that is more exposed to and more open to commercial sources rather than interpersonal sources for information about products and services.

Given the importance of television in the consumer socialization of Chinese children, it is crucial to research Chinese children's understanding of television advertising. In the Western perspectives of child development, Piaget's (1970) theory of cognitive development has had great impact on research related

to the communication process of advertising to children. The theory proposes that a child's ability to think and to reason progresses through a series of distinct stages that are closely related to age. Most of the studies on children's communication processing of television advertising are based on Piaget's cognitive development theory. Studies have generally indicated that children's ability to distinguish programs from commercials increases with age (Meringoff and Lesser 1980) as well as their comprehension of television advertising and its persuasive intent ([Ward 1972](#); [Rubin 1974](#); [Blosser and Roberts 1985](#)). Research also suggests that by the age of nine children show marked improvement in understanding ambiguous wording, humor, and imagery found in advertisements ([Belk, Mayer and Driscoll 1984](#); [Nippold, Cuyler and Braunbeck-Price 1988](#)).

Many studies have found that attention during commercials and selective viewing of commercials decrease with age ([Ward 1972](#); [Ward, Levingson and Wackman 1972](#)). Attention to television commercials depends on personal factors and stimulus factors ([McNeal 1987](#)). Personal factors include parental and peer influence, the level of motivation, and attitudes toward commercials. Stimulus factors include the nature of the TV program, the content of the commercial, and the product advertised. Other studies have found that older children perceive advertising to be untruthful in varying degrees ([Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977](#); [Gaines and Esserman 1981](#)). Several studies have reported that children, even the younger ones, are able to encode and subsequently remember commercials in terms of their component attributes such as premiums, product symbols and brand names ([Gianinno and Zuckerman 1977](#)).

Most of the research literature on advertising and children is based on research conducted in Western societies, and there are very few comparable studies in Asian countries. When examining Chinese perspectives toward child development, Confucianism is one ideology that has been widely investigated by Chinese and Western researchers. Some important characteristics include an emphasis on moralistic orientation in bringing up children ([Ekblad 1986](#)); filial piety (Kelly and Tseng 1992); self-fulfillment (Kelly and Tseng 1992); good manners, and the importance of education ([Ekblad 1986](#); [Ho 1989](#)). The implications of all these studies suggests that Chinese parents tend to be more concerned about the moral behaviors in the commercials, and they will exert more control over their children's behaviors. In a survey of Chinese children's understanding and comprehension of television advertising in Hong Kong, [Chan \(2000\)](#) found that children in grade 2 (aged 7-8 years) are beginning to know what advertising is and are aware of its persuasive intent. Further, over one-third of older children from grade 4 understand that television stations carry advertising for money. Nearly equal proportions of these children perceive television advertising to be mostly true or mostly not true with older children depending more on personal user experience and younger children relying on others' viewpoints. Like children in the West, perceived truthfulness and liking of commercials decrease with age ([Chan 2001](#)).

In addition to cultural factors children's advertising in China has several unique characteristics not shared by Western and more developed societies. First, there is a lack of specific regulation of television advertising targeted to children. For example, the United States has laws and regulations to protect children from excessive and unfair advertising on television and in schools. The Federation Trade

Commission is responsible for protecting both consumers and business from anti-competitive behavior and unfair and deceptive practices. A number of self-regulatory mechanisms also have been established by the business community in an effort to control advertising practices. For instance, the Children's Advertising Review Unit of the Council of Better Business Bureaus established the 'Self-regulatory Guidelines for Children Advertising' for advertising that is directed to children under 12 (Council of Better Business Bureaus, Inc. 2000). The Guidelines were edited from an earlier version published by the Association of National Advertisers that came into existence in 1972. Television advertising in Hong Kong also is governed by stringent regulation. There are separate sets of specific rules dealing with particular issues, including advertising to children. The underlying principle is to encourage truthful and accurate advertising sensitive to the special nature of children (Hong Kong Broadcasting Authority 1993). China's advertising regulation standards, however, focuses more on the cultural impact of advertising to children than the misleading effect of advertising on children's consumption of products and services. Half of the items in the Interim Advertising Censorship Standards deal with the cultivation of children's good behavior and values (Ha 1996). In the 'Self-regulatory Guidelines for Spiritual Civilization in Advertising' established by the China Advertising Association in 1997, children's advertising is defined as 'advertising of products to be used by children or advertising using children as models' (The State Administration of Commerce and Industry 1999). Children's advertisements should be beneficial to children's mental and physical health, and should establish good moral standards. Children's advertisements should not contain the following contents:

1. induce children to put pressure on parents;
2. children not paying respect or not friendly to their elders or other persons;
3. instill in children a sense of superiority or inferiority for owning a specific product;
4. deceive children by using descriptions beyond the judgement capacity of children;
5. show acts that children should not be doing alone; and
6. children smoking or drinking.

Article 8 of the Advertising Law enacted in February, 1995 specifies that advertisements may not be harmful to the physical and mental health of minors and disabled persons (Asia Law and Practice Limited 1994). It does not have a separate section dealing with advertising to children.

Second, children in China have been exposed to a high level of irresponsible advertising practices. China's advertising industry has developed rapidly since it introduced the reforms and open policies, but the industry has experienced a range of problems such as false advertising, inferior quality, and sub-standard advertising practices (Xinhua News Agency 1995). Since the implementation of the Advertising Law in 1995, local and central level officials of the State Administration of Commerce and Industry have prosecuted more than 160,000 illegal cases with fines totaling 450 million yuan, or about 58 million US dollars (Xinhua News Agency 2000). Ads for fake medicine, illegal medical services, and illegal food ads account for the biggest share of illegal advertising activities (Xinhua News Agency 1998). Some advertising to children has been accused of misleading them and promoting unhealthy lifestyles (Zhou 2001). For example, according to the China Consumer Association, food advertisers

have claimed that certain biscuits can increase children's intelligence, certain health food can enable students to score one hundred percent on examinations, and certain shoes can enhance growth. Some sales promotions also encourage children to consume excessively in order to obtain certain premiums or enter certain competitions. (Luo 2000).

Third, the development of advertising is highly uneven within the nation. Children in different provinces have different level of exposures to advertising. In the year 2000, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong province in the South were the country's three advertising centers, accounting for nearly half of advertising expenditures (Fan 2001). There is a strong monopoly among the major advertising media. For example, China Central Television (CCTV) used to be the only television station covering the whole country. However, as more provincial television stations were able to broadcast programs nationally, CCTV's monopoly position has been threatened (Xinhau News Agency 1998).

2. Method

The data examined in this study represent a pilot study of a larger survey of Chinese children's understanding of television advertising being conducted in three Chinese cities. Because of the limited research on Chinese children's literacy of television advertising, focus group interviews were designed as a means of discovering how best to plan and carry out the large-scale survey. The focus groups were intended to help determine more specifically what needs further study and how to construct a valid questionnaire. The focus group method also allowed in-depth exploration of particular areas of concern.

Altogether three focus groups, consisting of 22 children, were conducted in October 2001 in Beijing, China. Beijing, with a population of around 13 million (The State Statistical Bureau 2000), was selected as a representative site for a study of cities with more mature development of advertising. Advertising expenditures in Beijing in 2000 accounted for 15 percent of the national advertising expenditures and was the third biggest advertising market in China. The top two advertising markets in China were Shanghai and Guangdong. These three regions accounted for nearly half of the national advertising expenditure (Fan 2001).

The three focus groups represented different age ranges of children (6-8, 9-10, and 11-12 years). A graduate student of the Psychology Department of Peking University coordinated recruitment of respondents. All the children came from a school situated in the urban area near Peking University, and most were considered members of middle-income families.

One of the authors who is proficient in English and Chinese acted as the moderator of the focus groups. The list of questions for the children was based on an earlier in-person survey among Hong Kong children regarding their understanding of television advertising ([Chan 2000](#)). The author introduced herself to the children and first asked several questions about their general interest in television programs. Then the moderator's opening query about advertising was, "When we watch television, there are some messages broadcast before or after the television programs that are not related to the programs. They are called commercials. Can you tell me what are television commercials?" Once discussion was obtained about this basic topic, several more questions were injected that were related to

children's interest, liking, and knowledge as they pertain to commercials. The topics of these questions are noted in the findings. Each focus group took around 45 minutes and was audiotaped, transcribed and translated by the authors, together with a psychology graduate research assistant employed for the project.

3. Findings

The overall finding from the examination of the data is that, at least in Beijing, China, children's understanding of advertising's intentions was directly related with age of the respondents. Children ages 6 and 7 had difficulty in explaining what television advertising was and why television stations carried commercials as evinced by the following three remarks.

A commercial features some human characters and was being shown one by one. (Girl, 6)

Commercials give us a break to drink water, or doing other things. Our eyes need a rest too. (Boy, 6)

Commercials tell us about new scientific information. (Girl, 7)

Children ages 9-12 demonstrated some understanding of the functions and the selling intention of television advertising. For example,

Commercials tell us different functions of the products. Some products are new and they need to introduce them. (Girl, 9)

When people saw the ad, they will buy their products. The company can make more money. They will advertise more and get more sales. (Boy, 10)

Television advertising promotes products. It is better than personal selling or

telemarketing. People nowadays get tired of personal soliciting. Since people like to watch TV, it is better to advertise on TV so that everybody will know about your product. (Boy, 12)

Commercials want people to buy the products. When more people buy the products, a company can expand its business and become a well-known international company (Boy, 11)

Children, ages 9 and up also indicated an understanding of a particular type of advertising, the public service announcement ads.

Some public service advertisements teach us to protect the environment. (Girl, 9)

A public service announcement ad tells us not to litter. It shows a man throwing a banana skin and melon skin out of the window. When he goes out, he steps on the banana skin and falls off the ground. He gets what he deserves. This commercial is meaningful. It says if you don't protect the environment, you may eventually get hurt. (Girl, 12)

When being asked about the difference between public service announcement ads and commercial ads, children ages 9 and above saw a difference. For example,

A public service announcement ad is beneficial to everyone, while commercials are beneficial to advertisers only (Boy, 11)

However, there was still some misconceptions about the financial aspects of advertising placements as demonstrated in these statements.

The television stations carry commercials to make money. They don't make a lot of money from the programs but they make a lot of money from the commercials. For example, broadcasting a program can get 10,000 dollars and broadcasting a commercial also gets 10,000 dollars. If they

broadcast the same commercial ten times, they'll get 100,000 dollars. (Boy, 10)

The commercial times are very expensive. It costs 30,000 dollars a minute, and a million for an hour. (Boy, 11)

When we asked children their favorite commercials and why they liked them, the discussion became exciting. Three boys in the age group 11-12 sang jingles from the commercials and two boys in the age group 9-10 acted out their favorite commercials. Altogether the children mentioned twenty-two favorite commercials and among which, six were public service announcement ads. Younger children liked funny commercials, commercials with a jingle, and commercials of products that they preferred. None of the children in the age group 6-8 mentioned public service announcement ads. Older children liked funny, meaningful commercials and public service announcement ads. Children in age groups 9-10 and 11-12 both mentioned three favorite public service announcement ads. These ads were about environmental protection, protecting the ozone layer, and industrial safety.

I like commercials of books, especially scientific fictions, because they carry a lot of science information. I sometimes asked my mother to buy it after watching the commercials. (Girl, 6)

I like a commercial of a health food called 'Naobeijin' (means platinum brain). It shows an eyeball jumping out. It is so funny. (Boy, 7)

I like a jelly commercial. It says 'A jelly that you can suck'. It has a jingle. The jelly tastes good. (Girl, 9)

I like a commercial about shooting of birds. The bird is singing happily on a tree and a man tries to shoot it. The bird says, 'we are friends and why should you do this to me?' I like this commercial because we should care about birds. (Girl, 10)

I like a series of commercials by a brand of cold cure. In the birthday party, people all sing and ask the girl to make a wish. She sneezes and all the candles are blown off. In another commercial, a man wins a lottery. But after a sneeze, the lottery ticket is gone forever. They are so funny. (Boy, 11)

I like the commercial about the television program 'Cartoon hour'. It shows the best shots of the program. (Boy, 12)

I like a commercial about safety at the construction sites. I heard from the news that many workers were hurt in the construction sites. The commercial reminds people to take precautions to protect their lives. I think it is meaningful. (Girl, 12)

Children at all ages said they disliked commercials that were slow, long, and repetitive. Older children were critical about commercials that exaggerate and commercials that make false claims.

I don't like a computer commercial. I was enjoying my favorite cartoon program and the commercial interrupted it. The commercial is boring and it doesn't have a lot of actions. (Boy, 6)

I don't like a commercial of a vitamin. It is awful and exaggerating. At the end of the commercial, it says 'buy one and get one free. You'll become double beautiful'. How can a person become double beautiful? It is meaningless. (Boy, 9)

Commercials make the program too long. A one-hour program becomes one and a half hour with the commercials. Sometime it becomes so late that my mother doesn't allow me to watch. So, I cannot finish my favorite program. (Girl, 11)

Some commercials are broadcast back-to-back and is so annoying. (Boy, 12)

Commercials are boosting their effects, especially medicine and health foods. The products are not as good as they claim. (Boy, 11)

They only tell you the good things and they never tell you the bad things. For example, a medicine may have bad side effect. What if people don't know about it and take it? (Girl, 12)

A commercial says you can dial a toll-free number for information. But when you call them, they charge you very high telephone fee. (Boy, 12)

When we asked children to what extent commercials were true and how they know it, children from all age groups expressed some doubt about advertising content. Two children (one age 6 and one age 9) said all commercials are true. One girl aged 7 said she is not sure. The other nineteen children said some commercials are true and some are not true. Skeptism of television commercials seemed to increase with age. All respondents in the age group 11-12 thought that commercials are mostly not true. Younger children said they perceived commercials not true because the visual presentation was not real. Older children suggested more ways to test whether a commercial was true. Children in the age group 11 to 12 were more likely to use personal experience to determine if a commercial was true. Older children were also very skeptical about sales promotions and other sales gimmicks.

A commercial shows a man coming out from a bubble. It is impossible. Therefore, it is definitely not true. (Boy, 6)

A commercial shows two men pushing a big boat. It is impossible; therefore, it is not true. (Girl, 7)

Those medicine commercials that exaggerate must be untrue. We can tell from common sense. For example, a cold cure said you would recover immediately or within ten minutes. We know that all medicine takes at least one or two days to be effective. So, it must not be true. (Boy, 9).

When I am not sure whether a commercial is true, I can go to the store and ask the sales people to find it out. (Girl, 10)

[A boy challenged her suggestion.] This doesn't work. The sales person won't say anything bad about the product. (Boy, 10)

I'll see if a famous person endorses it. A commercial with a famous celebrity would be true. A commercial with someone that I don't know would not be true. (Boy, 9)

I'll try the product to see if its commercial was true. (Girl, 11)

I think most of the commercials are untrue. They are so exaggerating. Especially if they tell you there is a big discount, you need to be cautious. Sometimes, they increase the price dramatically and give you a big discount. You probably don't gain anything. (Boy, 12)

If a commercial is being shown for a few days and then stops suddenly, it must be not true. (Girl, 11)

Commercials with celebrities are doubtful. They probably haven't tried the product before. (Boy, 11)

When asked about the difference between an advertised brand and an unadvertised brand, younger children reported in various ways that they had greater confidence in an advertised brand. Older children were skeptical. They perceived that advertised brands were of lower quality.

Advertised brands are being tested or used by someone. They should be better. So, we have confidence to buy them. (Girl, 7)

Advertised brands are those that can't sell well. Unadvertised brands are those with high quality. They don't need advertising to promote their products. (Girl, 9)

[A boy challenged her point-of-view.] I don't think so. The computer brand 'Legend' also advertises on TV. However, it is a high quality brand. (Boy, 10)

Advertised brands make more money and unadvertised brands make less money. (Boy, 11)

Advertised brands are usually sold quicker and easier. (Girl, 11)

Quality brands have good sales and they don't need to advertise. Only brands of poor quality or those over-produced need to advertise. (Girl, 12)

4. Discussion and future research

The findings of this research support the need to further explore Chinese children's understanding of television advertising. From a tentative and preliminary examination of these few research findings, it is believed that there are both similarities and differences between Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese children's understanding of television advertising. Mainland Chinese children are similar to Hong Kong Chinese children in their increased understanding and decreased trust of television advertising age. Further, both enjoy commercials that are funny and dislike commercials that are boring.

Some differences between Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese children were also identified. First, Mainland Chinese children have a higher awareness of public services advertising. Some of these children were able to differentiate public service advertising from advertisements of a commercial nature. Public service announcement ads were frequently cited as favorite commercials. Children considered public service advertising meaningful and could be used as guidance for proper behavior. They liked commercials about protecting the environment. Second, Mainland Chinese children disliked medicine commercials. They found these commercials repetitive, long in duration, and containing exaggerated claims. Health products and medicine account for a lion share of the advertising

expenditures in China. Adult Chinese consumers report very negative perception about advertising of medicine, medical treatment and health products (China Consumer Association 2001). Because of the lack of regulation regarding repetition, these commercials sometimes broadcast two or more times within the same commercial break. Third, older Mainland Chinese children hold negative perceptions of advertised brands (as compared to unadvertised brands). They do not agree that television advertising would enhance their buying confidence in the products.

It is important to point out the limitations of these findings before noting their implications for future research. The purpose of this study was an exploratory look at the understanding and perception of television advertising by Mainland Chinese children. The small sample utilized for this study is not considered to be representative and therefore is not generalizable to the urban Chinese population. The information only offers an initial step in the ongoing study of children's literacy of advertising in China.

The insights provided by this exploratory study can be utilized to identify areas for further research. First, the research propositions can be further investigated with a larger, more representative sample. A second area that may offer interesting insight is to compare children's liking and disliking of commercials using different execution strategies. It seems that children have different views about commercials using celebrities. A further interesting research area is to compare Chinese children's perception of advertised brands and unadvertised brands for different product categories.

Altogether, these findings and their future research suggestions are significant in that they highlight the importance of considering how Chinese children perceived television advertising. This is

particularly important to both domestic and global marketers who target Chinese children as primary and influence consumers.

(4,250 words, exclude references)

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Biographies

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Dr James U. McNeal is Visiting Professor at Guanghua School of Management, Peking University, China where he teaches course in children consumer behaviour. He has studies children's consumer behaviour for over 35 years. He is author of over 50 articles on the subject, and three books: 'Children as Consumers: Insights and Implications' (Lexington, 1987); 'Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children' (Lexington, 1992); and 'The Kids Market: Myths and Realities' (Paramount Market Publishers, 1999). He is a consultant to a wide range of producers and retailers that target children and their families in the US and worldwide, and also advises a number of not-for-profit organisations that are interested in children.