Utilitarian vs. Hedonic Shopping: Exploring Northwest Chinese Consumers’ Shopping Motivations

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As one of the largest and most promising consumer markets in the world, China has become very important for international companies. However, there is limited research on Chinese consumers’ consumption and shopping behavior. For example, existing shopping literature focuses mainly on Chinese consumers’ mall shopping behavior (e.g. Li et al., 2004; Tsang, et al., 2003). In addition, China is composed of a number of regional markets and consumers in each regional market have their unique consumption behavior (Tsang, et al., 2003). Since the majority of research on Chinese consumers focused eastern and southern China (e.g. Tang, et al., 2001; Tai, 2005), there is little information available to help international marketers and retailers to understand consumers’ consumption and shopping behaviors in the western part of the country (Tsang et al., 2003). So, the purpose of this study was to explore the shopping behavior, specifically shopping motivations, of Chinese consumers in northwestern China.

For decades, consumer behavior researchers believed that consumers go shopping only when they need to purchase certain products or services. However, Tauber (1972) argued that shopping behavior is motivated by a range of psychosocial needs that go far beyond the acquiring of products and services, and there existed both personal and social shopping motivations. Further studies pointed out that shopping motivation can be more product oriented (acquiring products or services) or more experience oriented (not related to acquiring product or services) (Babin, Darden and Griffin, 1994; Westbrook and Black, 1985). Literature concludes that Chinese consumers’ mall shopping visits were motivated mainly by purchasing products and browsing products for the purpose of purchasing (Li et al., 2004; Tsang et al., 2003). Those conclusions suggest that Chinese consumers’ shopping motivations are more product oriented. With the growth in the Chinese economy and improvement in personal well-being, however, today Chinese consumers may have become more similar to western consumers.

For the purpose of this study, an in-depth personal interview was conducted in Lanzhou City, Gansu Province, one of the most important cities in northwestern China. The interview aimed to gain insights into consumers’ shopping behavior from consumers’ own perspectives (Ruyter & Scholl, 1998). Eleven lightly structured open-ended and non-directive questions regarding consumers’ shopping motivations and experiences were asked during the interview. Twenty two adult Chinese consumers from different age groups, education levels, occupations, and income levels participated in the study, ensuring an opportunity to gain a variety of views and opinions. All interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the participants and later transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

Results of content analysis revealed seven major shopping motivations: product purchase, market exploration, social obligations, socialization, self gratification, diversion from routine, and visual appreciation. The data reveal that shopping is generally motivated by the need for purchasing a specific product. Participants expressed the need for a wide arrange of products, from groceries, clothing, shoes, accessories, medicine, computer, to housing. When it comes to market exploration, the data reveal that
participants explored the market for different purposes, including learning the newest fashion trends and popular styles, checking the availability of new products, learning more about specific products, observing market trends such as the change of product prices, and finding deals and bargains. Social shopping motivations which surfaced are social obligations and socialization. Some participants go shopping because of the obligation of going with others, such as colleague, girlfriends, or relatives. This is especially true for participants who claimed to prefer shopping by themselves. Some participants go shopping to socialize with friends and families. In this case, shopping is about spending some time and having some fun with the family and friends. Self-gratification, that is, to release stress, to relax, to improve negative moods, or to treat oneself, is another important shopping motivation for participants. Some participants claimed that they go shopping when they got bored at home, which means that diversion from the routine is an important shopping motivation. In this case, shopping is treated as a simple leisure outdoor activity. The last shopping motivation revealed by the data is visual appreciation. For some participants, shopping is about appreciating beautiful products such as arts, crafts, and jewelry, or the nice visual appeal from retail stores.

This study contributes much to the literature on Chinese consumers’ shopping behavior. First of all, contrary to the traditional belief that Chinese consumers are more likely to shop for the purpose of purchasing, the participants of this study revealed that they also go shopping for experiences. This implies that hedonic shopping has become more important for modern Chinese. So retailers should not only focus on providing quality merchandise, but also improving other factors affecting consumers’ shopping experiences. Secondly, as a modern society with a collective culture, pleasing others in a social group may still be important for many Chinese. This might explain why some participants go shopping because of an invitation from friends or colleagues even if there are no personal shopping needs. On the other hand, socialization may be a more important shopping motivation for Chinese consumers than their western counterparts. For example, over 70 percent of participants claimed they love to shop with others. The study helps us to understand western Chinese consumers from their own perspective. However, because of the exploratory nature of this study and because the interviews were conducted in only one region, the findings cannot be generalized to the larger Chinese population. Large-sample quantitative research will be necessary to follow up and verify the findings of this study.
Reference


