Exploring Chinese Consumers’ Shopping Experiences  
Lizhu Davis, California State University, Fresno, USA  
Keywords: Chinese, shopping experience, retail

Chinese retail industry has grown and transformed dramatically since the economic reform beginning in the late 1970s. With the government deregulation and opening of the retail market to foreign retailers, different ownerships and retail formats came into being. Meanwhile, economic growth with 10% annual GDP in the past decade has significantly improved Chinese consumers’ income and living levels. With an increase in purchasing power and abundant choices of products and retail stores, Chinese consumers have become more demanding. Economic value of merchandise, store image, shopping conditions inside the store and service quality all affect Chinese consumers’ satisfaction (Wang, Li, & Lu, 2006). So today’s Chinese consumers may seek and emphasize shopping experiences rather than pure acquisition of goods and services when they go to the marketplace. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore factors affecting Chinese consumers’ in-store shopping experiences.

Literature suggests that factors affecting consumers’ shopping experiences include personal factors, situational factors, and merchandise factors (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006). Situational factors include atmospherics, store design and social environment (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006). Atmospherics refers to the intangible elements of store atmosphere, such as colors, music, temperature, scents (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006). Store design, on the other hand, commonly refers to tangible elements of store atmosphere such as “the building, carpeting, fixture, point-of-purchase decoration” (Hoffman & Turley, 2002, p.35). Social dimensions consist of all the interactions consumers have with other shoppers and store personnel (Sullivan & Adcock, 2002). However, few studies intended to understand Chinese consumers’ shopping experiences. Zhou and Wang (2004) studied the in-store stimuli, specifically the promotional and atmospheric effect of point of purchase (POP) posters on Chinese consumers’ impulse buying behavior. They (2004) concluded that in-store POP poster have both informative and experiential influences on Chinese consumers. In another study, Tang, Chan and Tai (2001) found out that perceived physical environment does affect Chinese consumers’ emotions, patronage intention, and expenditures.

A qualitative methodology was used to gain insight into Chinese consumers’ in-store shopping experiences. In-depth interviews with twenty adult Chinese consumers were conducted in Mainland China in 2009. Interview questions focused on exploring key situational factors that affect participants’ in-store shopping experiences. The interviews were conducted in Chinese. They were audio-taped upon participants’ agreement, and transcribed into text later. Content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Several cycles of part-to-whole interpretive procedures were conducted to organize the raw data and to generate conceptual schemes based on the data (Spiggle, 1994). Quotas were translated into English and then back-translated into Chinese to ensure accuracy of the English translation.

The data reveal that store atmosphere, social shopping environment, and customer service quality all affect participants’ shopping experiences. For store atmosphere, participants cited different elements of atmospherics that include space, light, music, scent, air, noise, temperature,
and hygiene. Participants enjoyed a relaxing shopping environment with fresh air, pleasant scent, interesting lighting, and quite surroundings. They also discussed the importance of appealing visual displays, logic store layout that makes it easy to shop around and generates curiosity, and availability of convenient facilities such as resting areas and bathrooms. For participants, social shopping environment is a key factor. Although many of them do not like a crowded shopping environment, they do appreciate the presence of other shoppers and interaction with shoppers around them. The interaction with store personnel is especially important for participants. They explained that patient, easy-going, and honest personnel really make their shopping enjoyable.

Furthermore, participants loved to shop with family and friends. Shopping with those shopping pals makes shopping easy and fun. The data also revealed that many retailers have not caught up with consumers’ demands for pleasant shopping experiences. Some retailers still embrace the outdated selling concept with focuses on “hard sell” approach and fail to recognize consumers’ satisfaction. The local markets still lack basic retail elements such as respectful customer services and basic convenience facilities such as resting areas that western consumers take for granted.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of Chinese consumers’ shopping behavior and Chinese retail markets. The findings suggest that pleasant shopping atmosphere and comfortable shopping environment, both tangible and intangible affect Chinese consumers’ shopping experiences. Meanwhile, supportive social environment, especially that created by interaction with sales personnel and family and friends is very important for modern Chinese consumers. Retailers should adopt marketing concepts aggressively and address all the retail elements more effectively. Creating and delivering pleasant consumer shopping experiences will help retailers to develop competitive advantages.

Reference