



Research report

The role of personal values in Chinese consumers' food consumption decisions. A case study of healthy drinks [☆]



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ABSTRACT

Differences in culture, language, and behavior between Chinese and Western consumers make entering the Chinese market a challenge. Chinese consumers may desire similar product features (e.g. brand name, quality, and flavor) to Western consumers but the value that consumers attach to the same product may differ cross-nationally. Besides values, an understanding of desired product attributes and the consequences linking to these values is also important. To the authors' knowledge, there is no published scientific research that investigates how personal values influence Chinese consumers' food consumption decisions. The aim of this research was to identify the links among product attributes, consequences of these attributes, and personal values associated with healthy drink consumption decisions within the Chinese market. Specifically, this research employed means-end chain theory and used association pattern technique (APT) as the main data collection technique to identify these links. Focus groups ($n = 6$) were held in Hangzhou, China to identify the important attributes and consequences involved in the consumption decisions of healthy drinks. These attributes and consequences along with Schwartz's 10 basic values were used to construct the matrices included in the APT survey. A total of 600 APT surveys were administered in six different companies in Hangzhou, with 570 returned. Construction of the hierarchical value map (HVM) identified four of Schwartz's personal values influencing Chinese consumers' healthy drink consumption decisions: *security*, *hedonism*, *benevolence*, and *self-direction*. Food safety was the foremost concern for Chinese consumers when choosing healthy drinks. Chinese consumers also sought a good tasting and nutritious drink that was good value for money. Results from this study provide food marketers with an in-depth understanding of Chinese consumers' healthy drink consumption decisions. Implications and recommendations are provided that will assist food marketers to effectively enact marketing strategies in China.

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Introduction

China is currently the world's fastest growing economy and its contribution to global economic growth is expected to remain dominant in the near future (Yu, Stith, Liu, & Chen, 2012). As of 2012, China had a population of 1.35 billion inhabitants and a gross domestic product of 8.3 trillion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2013). In the past 20 years, China's retail food sales have grown by nearly 15% annually, making it the third largest food retail market globally (Hingley, Lindgreen, & Chen, 2009). The increasing standard of living in China has created a demand for products from first world countries (Gale & Huang, 2007).

While China is an emerging consumer market that creates tremendous opportunity for multinational corporations, distinct differences in behavior between Chinese and Western consumers make entering the Chinese market a challenge. Consumers' needs may be universal, but their attitudes, motivations and expressions of needs may vary (De Mooij, 2009, chap. 3). Culture and language are hurdles for foreign marketers to accurately assess the market demands and effectively enact marketing strategies targeting Chinese consumers (Hingley et al., 2009). To successfully develop and market products, it is necessary to understand which values Chinese consumers prioritize and the role these values play in the management of their food consumption decisions (e.g. how these link to underlying choices of preferred product attributes).

Personal value and food consumption decisions

Vinson, Scott, and Lamont (1977) defined personal value as "a centrally held, enduring belief which guides actions and judgments across specific situations and beyond immediate goals to more

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ultimate end-states of existence" (p. 44). A person's set of personal values are derived from, and modified through personal, social, and cultural learning (Clawson & Vinson, 1978; Rokeach, 1979, chap. 1). In addition, values are also used to explain the differences in behavior among people from different cultures (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998). A person may hold thousands of attitudes towards specific objects and situations, but these only result in a handful of values (Rokeach, 1979, chap. 1).

Values are the standards or criteria of a person's conduct that guide and drive consumers' decision making (Croissant, 2008; Schwartz, 1992). For example, women who hold strong values such as traditionalism, self-fulfillment and belonging are predicted to be less likely to consume meals away from home or purchase convenience food products (Rose, Kahle, & Shoham, 1995). Information on consumers' personal values is useful to food marketers and policy makers to form the basis of food product marketing strategies when targeting specific consumer segments.

Different classification systems have been proposed to define consumers' personal values. An early system used to investigate values was Rokeach Value System that consisted of eighteen instrumental values (ideal modes of behavior) and eighteen terminal values (ideal end states of existence) (Kahle & Kennedy, 1989). However, some of the values in the Rokeach Value System (e.g. world at peace) were found to have less impact on people's daily lives (Kahle & Kennedy, 1989). A 'List of Values' was developed as an alternative classification system to be more related to human lives and consists of nine values: *self-respect, security, warm relationships with others, sense of accomplishment, self-fulfillment, sense of belonging, being well respected, fun and enjoyment in life, and excitement* (Kahle, Beatty, & Homer, 1986). Both the Rokeach Value System and the List of Values were tailored to assess the values of Americans (Grunert, Brunson, & Bisp, 1993). Schwartz's theory of human value is a cross-culturally validated classification system of personal values that has been experimented with 200 samples in more than 60 countries, including China and the United States (Schwartz, 1992). Schwartz's classification system includes ten values: *security, hedonism, benevolence, self-direction, stimulation, universalism, tradition, conformity, achievement, and power* (Schwartz, 1992).

Chinese culture and personal values

According to Rokeach (1979, chap. 1), it is the individual's weighting of the importance of different values that motivates different actions. Certain types of values may be regarded as more important to consumers in one country than to those in another country due to differences in culture and socio-economic conditions (Kim, Forsythe, Gu, & Moon, 2002). For example, Feather (1986) carried out a Rokeach Value Survey comparing value systems between Chinese and Australia students. Australian students ranked the values *an exciting life, a world at peace, family security, happiness, inner harmony, being cheerful, being forgiving, being helpful, being honest, being loving, and being responsible*, higher in importance compared to the Chinese students. On the other hand, the Chinese students assigned higher importance to *a world of beauty, national security, pleasure, social recognition, wisdom, being ambitious, being capable, being courageous, being imaginative, being intellectual, being logical, and being self-controlled* than the Australian students (Feather, 1986). The study by Feather (1986) illustrates that the values Chinese consumers held do not mirror those of Western cultures. The study emphasizes that thorough consumer research is critical to understand consumers' values before food marketers can successfully enter the Chinese food market.

Yau's (1988) investigation on the underlying dimensions of Chinese cultural values demonstrated that Chinese culture favored

conformity (being polite, obeying the rules, accepting and behaving according to the hierarchical system). Chinese have such respect for authority that it directs them to what is right or wrong (Mok & DeFranco, 2000; Yau, 1988). Hence, advertisements tend to be more effective when opinion leaders (e.g. political leaders, scientists and experts) recommend or promote products/services to target consumers. This is contrary to Western cultures that place higher values on youthfulness and ability, with consumers more likely to be influenced by celebrities, sport heroes, and suggesting sexy images (Lowe & Corkindale, 1998).

China has long been regarded as a collectivistic society in which the linkage between individuals is close and strong with people treasuring values such as *tradition, benevolence, and conformity* (Xiao & Kim, 2009). However, recent research has revealed that middle-class urban Chinese consumers are also pursuing individual goals of *self-direction, achievement, stimulation, power, and hedonism* (Xiao & Kim, 2009). Given these changing values, a study investigating contemporary Chinese personal values and how these values influence Chinese consumers' food consumption decisions is timely. While there is a large body of literature identifying values that drive food consumption decisions for Western consumers (Bitzios, Fraser, & Haddock-Flaser, 2011; Naspetti & Zanoli, 2009; Sorenson & Henchion, 2011), the published scientific research that specifically investigates how personal values influence Chinese consumers' food consumption decisions is scarce. A study on food related lifestyle and the influence food consumption patterns on Chinese consumers also draws on a value approach (Grunert et al., 2011). However, the study does not demonstrate how behavior is directly linked to values via attributes and consequences through means-end chain (MEC) as is illustrated in the current study. MEC offers a holistic understanding of the cognitive positioning of the products and the consumers' decisions making process (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). The lack of knowledge on contemporary Chinese consumers' values, and how these values play a role in the management of their food consumption decisions, currently serves as a major barrier when marketing foreign food products in China.

The aim of this research was to fill this gap by identifying the links among product attributes, consequences of these attributes, and personal values associated with healthy drink consumption decisions within the Chinese market. The term 'food consumption' used in this study involves two processes: purchase decisions and consumption of food products. Specifically, this research employed MEC theory to identify the links among product attributes, consequences and personal values cognitively. Association pattern technique (APT) is one of the hard laddering that measures participants' subjective links between attributes, consequences and personal values quantitatively (Russell et al., 2004) and was used as the main data collection in this research. Investigation of Chinese personal values will allow food exporters to more effectively design their products and enact successful marketing strategies in China.

Theoretical and methodological background of MEC and APT theory

MEC theory has been recommended by scholars to understand how consumers perceive value (Gutman, 1982; Reynolds & Olson, 2001, chap. 1). In MEC theory, products are seen as means through which consumers obtain value ends. Consumers choose products because they believe that the specific attributes of the product can help them to fulfill desired values through the consequences or benefits of product use (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). In a MEC model, every product has attributes that lead to consequences (benefits) and values (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984).

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