



# Are all Chinese shoppers the same? Evidence of differences in values, decision making and shopping motivations between the Han majority and other minorities in China



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## ABSTRACT

Many retailing and marketing studies have treated China as an ethnically homogenous country and ignored the differences in consumer values and shopping behavior among its various ethnic groups. The current research takes an important first step and explores the differences between the Chinese ethnic minorities and the mainstream Han majority with respect to consumer values (materialism, ethnocentrism and cosmopolitanism) and eight consumer shopping styles. In a study of 405 Han and other minority collected from students in Yunnan Province it was found that the ethnic minorities were less materialistic but more ethnocentric than the ethnic majority Han Chinese. The two ethnic groups were similar in cosmopolitan orientation and share four out of six shopping styles. The ethnic minorities as opposed to the Han Chinese are less likely to have hedonic shopping motivations. Path analysis suggested the overall importance of materialism in driving western shopping behavior, but important differences across ethnic groups occurred with ethnocentrism for the minorities influencing a desire for in-group representations of fashion and recreational shopping, whilst for majority Han, interest in cosmopolitanism does drive a desire for quality, but less interest in fashion and recreational shopping, possibly because such styles may already be part of the Chinese way of life.

Retailers in China therefore need consider in some provinces the ethnic composition of the region and cater for differing motivations across sub-cultures. They should not assume that all Chinese are equally materialistic and ethnocentric in their decision making.

## 1. Introduction

With a two-digit GDP growth rate for nearly four decades, the People's Republic of China (China) has become the world's second largest economy and the biggest emerging consumer market (Lin, 2012). Given its market potential and its diverse cultural values compared to western countries, China has drawn much attention in marketing research since it embarked on the "open-door" policy in 1980s (Ouyang et al., 2000; Zhao and Belk, 2008). Considering the heterogeneities in socio-economic conditions, income inequality, demographics and psychographics (e.g. cultural values, mindset, and personality), a growing number of marketing researchers have started to profile China's 1.3 billion consumers and grouped them into various possible market segments. For instance, Cui and Liu (2001) used geographic locations as a grouping variable and examined Chinese urban consumers in six different regions. Hung et al. (2007) examined cultural value differences

among three Chinese generational cohorts. Wang (2004), examined shopping styles and motivations of Hong Kong shoppers in Shenzhen province.

However, all these studies so far treated China as an ethnically homogenous nation. Ethnicity, a key variable for consumer profiling in international marketing (Rossiter and Chan, 1998), has been ignored in Chinese consumer research literature.

This gap in the understanding of the Chinese market is also reflected in international marketing studies which tend to treat country as a unit of research subject and use country-level variables such as economic indicators, national cultural values as the most popular segmentation bases (Steenkamp and Hofstede, 2002; Lu and Rucker, 2006; Burt Johansson and Thelander, 2011). These studies have not paid much attention to the ethnical heterogeneities in subcultures that is one of the five characteristics in emerging markets (Sheth, 2011). Further, evidence shows that emerging markets are not homogeneous and within-

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country differences in ethnicities are even greater than across-countries variations (Au, 1999; Roth, 1995; Hofstede et al., 1999).

Whilst there are a recent number of studies in which examine Chinese shopping behaviors in some detail (Fan and Xiao, 1998; Hui et al., 2001; Wong and Dean, 2009; Qian et al., 2017; Rahaman Kwong-Kay and Yu 2016; Lin Lobo and Leckie, 2017;) none have considered how these findings might differ across ethnic segments. Indeed with the exceptions of Tai (2005) in the research of Chinese females and Wang (2004), on differences between cross-border shopping in Shenzhen by Hong Kong Shoppers and Zhou et al. (2010) on inland and coastal regions, many studies treat Chinese consumers as a homogenous group and do not consider the effect of ethnic diversity on decision making.

The current study thus aims to address these key gaps in our understanding of the world's second biggest economy by profiling the ethnic minority consumers in China and by comparing their values and shopping styles with that of the ethnic majority peers, the Han. Specifically, we try to answer the following two research questions in this research.

1. Do Chinese ethnic minority consumers differ from the mainstream ethnic consumers in their consumer values (materialism, ethnocentrism and cosmopolitanism)?
2. Do Chinese ethnic minority consumers differ from the mainstream ethnic consumers in their shopping behaviors?

The current research will contribute to marketing knowledge in several aspects. First, to our knowledge, our research is the first one that profiles Chinese minority ethnic consumers and compares their values and shopping styles with the Chinese mainstream ethnic consumers. The findings of this empirical research will yield new insights for marketers/retailers to better understand Chinese ethnic consumers. How ethnicity, as one of the important variables in international market segmentation, influences consumer behavior may aid marketers to design a marketing strategy that is more effective when tapping minority ethnic consumer markets. Secondly, few studies have explored the evolution of consumer values in relation to the cultural, economic and social transformations in a country. It is unknown whether consumers will become more or less homogeneous due to the effect of the converging forces of globalization (Ralston, 2008). The comparison of consumer values among different ethnic groups aids scholars and practitioners to track the value dynamics under the influence of other institutional faction and then guide to find a more efficient approach in consumer value creation.

## 2. Research background and conceptual development

### 2.1. Consumer values and their influences

The economic globalization has highlighted the importance of studies on shopping behaviors around the world. Previous studies show that shopping styles vary from country to country due to the influence of economic, social and/or cultural values (Bao et al., 2003; Fan and Xiao, 1998; Durvasula et al., 1993). In terms of values and how they relate to shopping behavior in China, most research has considered how Chinese consumers differ from the their western counterparts (Mazaheri et al., 2011; Lamour and De La Robertie, 2016; Shobeiri et al., 2018) or have developed models which explain the impact of Chinese values overall on purchase behavior (Chunling and Bastin, 2010; Yong Jian et al., 2010; Cai and Shannon, 2012; Ning et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2017). There are another set of studies in this context which have looked at differences in values and shopping behavior due to location in China (Wang, 2004, on cross boarder shopping of residents from Hong Kong; Zhou et al., 2010, on differences on decision making between coastal and inland regions; Davis, 2013, on the shopping experiences of the North West Chinese; Kin Meng and Chartwin, 2015 on the online decision of consumers from Macau). What is not apparent

from this last set of studies is how ethnic differences impact values and decision making in China.

Consumer values play a pivotal role in consumer behavior studies. First a value is central to a person's cognitive structure that offers a theoretic basis for attitude analysis (Ajzen, 2001; Batra et al., 2001). Second, the goal-setting nature of a value largely influences rational behavior choices in a society. Further, values shape or re-shape human cognitive schemas that fundamentally manipulate human judgments and norms (Steenkamp and Jong, 2010). Given the importance of values in shaping consumer behaviors, studies on consumer value have been central to consumer literatures for decades (Belk, 1985; Richin and Dawson, 1992; Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). In our study, we selected the three most important consumer values used worldwide for consumer profiling (Cleveland et al., 2009; Richin and Dawson, 1992), namely materialism (MAT), namely consumer ethnocentrism (CET) and cosmopolitanism (COS). While we recognize the contribution of research by Hofstede and his colleagues on cultural values (Manrai and Manrai, 2011; Hur et al., 2015; Shobeiri et al., 2018), there are measurement issues with this approach (Taras et al., 2010; Boonghee et al., 2011). The other major approach to approach to measuring cultural values, of Swartz cultural values was not considered for this study as it deals more with terminal rather than instrumental values related to market place behavior (Siew Imm et al., 2007).

#### 2.1.1. Materialism

(MAT) is probably the most influential consumer value in modern societies (Belk, 1985; Richin and Dawson, 1992; Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002; Cleveland et al., 2009). Richins (2004) defines MAT as “the importance ascribed to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals or desirable states” (p210). Previous research shows that consumers holding a high level of materialism are eager to buy luxury products (Richins, 2004; Wang and Wallendorf, 2006); view status-enhancement most important among product utilities (Eastman et al., 1997) and believe material affluence a major source of happiness (Richin and Dawson, 1992). Being a trait of economic affluence and Western postindustrial life, MAT has been used as the most relevant measure to assess consumers' response to globalization (Cleveland et al., 2009).

#### 2.1.2. Consumer ethnocentrism

(CET) is another dispositional response to globalization (Cleveland et al., 2009). CET “represents the universal proclivity for people to view their own group as the center of the universe, to interpret other social units from the perspective of their own group, and to reject persons who are culturally dissimilar while blindly accepting those who are culturally like themselves” (Shimp and Sharma, 1987 p280). Highly ethnocentric consumers may view penetration of foreign products as an economic threat or a cultural menace (Cleveland et al., 2009). Consumers, upholding a strong ethnocentric prejudice, may even make an economic sacrifice by purchasing local products. Westernization, globalization, international travel and exposure to western media will reduce ethnocentric tendencies.

#### 2.1.3. Cosmopolitanism (COS)

can find its anthropological root in the Greek word *kosmopolitēs*, meaning citizen of the world (Cleveland et al., 2011, p934). Although there is a lack of empirical studies on this relative new construct, marketers started to apply this construct in international marketing segmentation (see a review in Cleveland et al., 2011). COS refers to “a willingness to engage with the other, an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (Hannerz, 1992, p252). Despite of various interpretations about its nature, scholars tend to agree that COS may interpret as

as predisposition at birth, a personality trait, or a learnable skill (Cleveland et al., 2009, 2011). COS is the antithetic to CET and the level of COS may vary across subcultures within a country.

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