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# Chinese children's understanding of commercial communications: A comparison of cognitive development and social learning models

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## Abstract

Parents and the media, especially television, have long been seen as important socializing agents that have impact on children's consumer socialization. The objective of this study conducted in China was to test the relative contribution of the cognitive developmental model and the social learning model with a focus on television and parents as socializing agents. Using a sample of 1758 children ages 6–14 and their parents living in three Mainland Chinese cities with different levels of advertising development, we examined children's understanding of television advertising by age utilizing a verbal method. Results of logistic regression analyses indicated that the cognitive developmental model made a greater contribution to predicting children's understanding of commercial communications than the social learning model. Chinese parents were not important socializing agents and television played some role in children's consumer socialization. Gender, household income and the media environment had impact on children's understanding of commercial communications. Girls and children from families with high household income had a higher understanding. Children residing in cities with the presence of public service advertising had a lower understanding of commercial communications.

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## 1. Introduction

Consumer socialization is the process by which consumers acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to operate as consumers (Ward, 1974). In the consumer socialization process, socialization agents are specific sources from which norms, attitudes, motivations, and behaviours are transmitted to young consumers. They can be people or organizations that provides influence through frequent interaction with an individual, primacy over the individual, or control over rewards and punishments given to the individual (Brim, 1966). Television, families and peers are often identified as major socializing agents among young consumers (Churchill & Moschis, 1979).

Previous research on consumer socialization has mainly adopted two theoretical models, the cognitive developmental model and the social learning model. The cognitive developmental model attempts to explain the formation of consumer knowledge, skills and behaviours as a function of qualitative changes in cognitive development stages. Children are conceptualised to have gone through different stages from infancy to adulthood, each marked with its cognitive structure. Integrating Piaget's (1970) stage theory of cognitive development and Selman's (1980) stage theory of social development, John (1999) proposed a model of consumer socialization that is particularly useful in characterising children's response to advertising. In the model, learning to be a consumer is a developmental process from the perceptual stage (3–7 years) to the analytical stage (7–11 years) to the reflective stage (11–16 years). In the perceptual stage, children can grasp concrete knowledge only. Their consumer knowledge is characterized by perceptual features and distinctions based on a single and simple dimension. They are egocentric and generally unable to take others' perspectives into account. Children in the analytical stage are able to grasp abstract knowledge. Concepts are thought of in terms of functional or underlying dimensions. They are able to analyse marketplace information in two or more dimensions and have the acknowledgment of contingencies. They have developed new perspectives that go beyond their own feelings and motives, and can assume dual perspectives of their own and that of others. Children in the reflective stage possess a multidimensional understanding of marketing concepts such as branding and pricing. They shift into more reflective ways of thinking and reasoning and focus more on the social meanings and underpinnings of the consumer marketplace.

On the other hand, the social learning model attempts to explain the formation of consumer knowledge, skills and behaviours as a function of interactions between socialization agents and individuals in different social settings (McLeod & O'Keefe, 1972). Attitudes, motivations, and values are learned through modelling, reinforcement, and social exchange. The social learning model implies that the more

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