





5

CHILDREN AS CONSUMERS: CONSUMPTION OF CARBONATED DRINKS AT SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Interest in the relationship between children and the marketing system is a relatively new development especially in Malaysia. In Malaysia, the population for age group below 14 years old was about 8.2 million (Statistic Department: Malaysia, 2005). The powerful presence of this age group population has made it important to understand children's consumption behaviour in Malaysia. Although children may not be the actual decision maker in deciding the need for goods or services and may not be the one who really purchase the goods or services, but since they may be the ultimate users to consume the goods and services, their influence on the purchasing process should not be undermined. According to Henthorne, La Tour and Hudson (1997), children are becoming frequent and active shoppers in the rest of the world and they will continue to have influence on certain unique product categories such as fast foods and breakfast cereals. In developed countries such as the USA, children play an important part in the household's consumption pattern. For instant, American children under 12 years old and younger spend over USD14 billion of their own money each year and influence over USD160 billion in household purchases (Azoulay, 1998 and Woft, 1998). In addition, they indirectly impacted on USD300 billion of parental expenditures



(Brennan, 2000) and this trend is growing at a steady 15 percent per annum over the past decade (Angrisani, 2001).

In the US, Darian (1998) found that parents and their children are engaged in a joint process where the relative influence of each party may shift while in the store. In most cases, the involvement of the parent is high and there is collaboration between the parent and the child in the shopping process. Some studies in the UK suggested that lower class youth have differences in consumption patterns and consumer skills from upper class children (Page and Ridgway, 2001). A study in Fiji, Tonga and Cook Islands, found that the child initiates the purchase decision process more than 65 percent of the time (Wimalasiri 2004). In China, Chinese children's overall index of influence on family spending on 25 items is around 68 percent (McNeal and Yeh, 1997). However, the impact of children's influence on the day-to-day family decision-making process is still limited and unknown especially to the Malaysian market.

Although family patterns of communication was found to play an important role in shaping children's skill and attitudes towards the marketplace (Caruana and Vassalo 2003), US marketers has long argued that children can be influenced by marketing strategies since their preferences are still not well-developed (Magee, 1989). For instance, the easily accessible carbonated drink has made it popular worldwide not only with adults but kids as well. This has made the cola kings such as Coke and Pepsi market leaders in the world. In the UK, children are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their soft drinks consumption, with a growing awareness of, and attraction towards brands, and a high level of experimentation in products and packaging (Duff, 1999). In another example, it was also revealed that food products were the most highly recognised brand name products with children in India (Misra, 1990). Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the behaviour of children in the consumption of soft drinks among specific population subgroups of children in Malaysia.

FRAME OF STUDY

Marketing literature indicates that most children learn consumer roles by observing the behaviour of multiple socialization agents such as their parents, peers, and mass media. Chandler and Heinzerling (1998) suggested that children, after the ages three or four, are capable of fulfilling any part of the consumer role – the decision maker, the purchaser or the ultimate consumer – and have become a sizable consumer market worldwide. McNeal and Yeh (1997) found that some Chinese children, as young as four, enter the marketplace and make purchases for themselves with their own money that has been provided to them by their parents and relatives. Another study done in Taiwan by McNeal and Chyon-Hwa (1990), found out that the Taiwanese children are mature consumers compared to their age because the parents permit the children to make independent purchases at a very early age and increase their children's allowances throughout childhood. In Great Britain, the secondary schools are more likely to have a "cash cafeteria" system where the children select and purchase what they want to eat. This system is likely to increase their choice in branding and the price of the products. These findings also show that consumer freedom is being granted to children due to the fact that most parents today are working and have much less time to supervise their children's spending and consumption of certain products.

Many studies on children's consumer behaviour are focused on age and gender issues. (McNeal and Yeh, 2003). Furthermore, in their study, McNeal and Yeh (2003) found that children have a heavy spending pattern and this is common to children of all socioeconomic background, both gender and of all ages. Ling (2000) found out that there is a significant relationship between age and the adolescent's ability to loan a mobile telephone. In another study done by McNeal and Yeh (1990), it was concluded that the average number of stores visited by children with their parents is 1.0 at ages

four through to five, and increases to around 1.3 for the remaining years. Furthermore, the same study found that some of the children at age five make independent purchases without their parents' supervision and by the age of seven, two-thirds of the children are shopping on their own (McNeal and Yeh, 1990). In addition, Mintel (2003) who conducted a study on children's school meal, found that soft drinks are consumed mainly by those aged 11 and above, reflecting the diminishing parental control. It seems that there is a continuing pattern of change, with a shift in the emphasis of product types, and a change in brand of carbonated drink as they grow (Duff, 1999). Could the same consumer behavioural patterns mentioned above, be applied to Malaysian school children, especially towards the consumption of carbonated drinks? Therefore, the first hypothesis of this study is:

H1: Older kids consider brand name to be more important than price while purchasing carbonated drinks.

According to Chandler and Heinzerling (1998), gender influenced knowledge level, materialistic attitudes, and social motivations for consumption. In terms of compulsive buying, evidence suggests that the vast majority are female (Roberts, 1998). McNeal and Ji (1999) also found that gender has some effect on consumption behaviour. They found that in the case of buying shoes and computers, boys are more likely to rely on TV and friends, than girls. However, a longitudinal study on consumer education knowledge by Kluckman and Bell (1994) revealed that female students scored better than their male counterparts, making them more prepared to become effective consumers. In a study on children's food advertisements, gender preference was significantly present in four of the six measures examined (Childs and Maher, 2003). Neale and Langnase (1998) found that, in intention towards buying labeled high fat foods, girls are less likely to buy than boys. On top of that, a study by Mintel (2003) found that boys are likely to

purchase soft drinks compared to the girls. Thus, we hypothesised that:

H2: There is a difference between genders in purchasing carbonated drinks in terms of packaging.

Previous research suggests that brand knowledge, and saving and spending value differ between lower and upper income group children, and that such differences contribute to their consumer pattern disparities (Page and Ridgway, 2001). Similarly, positive relationships have also been found between a child's social economic status (SES) and his or her experience with money and allowance received (Chin, 1997). Moschis (1987) argued that the lower income children are less likely to be effective consumer than the upper income children as a result of their inadequate learning of some consumer behaviour aspects. However, some studies have found a weak relationship or negative association between socioeconomic status and other variables (Roberts 1998 and Vignali, Gomez, Vignali and Vranesevic, 2001). Specifically, we expect that:

H3: There is a difference between children who came from high income groups and lower income groups in purchasing carbonated drinks.

METHODOLOGY

The population of the students in the selected school is about 1,400 students which consists of all the main races, however only about 10% from the population were selected because of limited time, cost and budget. Unfortunately in Malaysia, there is no detailed database about school children and it is very difficult to get the data from the Education Ministry. Therefore, the sampling plan was designed by using judgment and snow ball sampling. The major

advantage of these samplings is that it substantially increases the likelihood of locating the desired characteristics in the population (Malhotra 1999). All students who became the respondents of this study attended the same school and the response rate was sufficient to provide the required database. Although the school itself is located in a middle-to-upper income neighbourhood, approximately half of the students who attended the school came from lower income groups.

Interviews were conducted at the school's premises between late January to middle of February 2004 with permission granted by the school headmaster,. The students were approached by explaining to them the nature of the study and asked if they were willing to be interviewed. During the interviews, discussions were allowed to develop naturally with the interviewer to ensure that the areas under discussion were covered. A total of 224 responses were obtained in the following two months using trained undergraduate students. A total of 24 of the responses were not useable due to insufficiency and incomplete date.. As the response rate is 89.3 per cent, it is considered to be satisfactory for subsequent analysis, which will be presented in the next chapter.

RESULTS

One of the purposes of an exploration study was to establish a basis for future rigorous hypotheses testing. The testing was determined by examining cross-tabulations. Hypothesis 1 states that older kids considered brand name to be more important than price while purchasing carbonated drinks. From Table 1, it can be seen that the results indicate that both junior and senior students consider brand name to be important while purchasing carbonated drinks. This finding is supported by work done by Duff's (1999) finding that brands play an important role in the decision to purchase soft drinks, where children were found to return regularly to established

favourites, one that is not a brand that can be faulted by their peers. However, when the effect of the price is controlled as shown in Table 2, hypotheses 1 is rejected because both age groups consider price and not brand to be important while purchasing the carbonated drinks. The finding of this study supported a study done by Dotson and Hyatt (2005) but contradict the results of the study done by Taylor and Cosenza (2002) who found that label and brand are considered more important attributes assessed when shopping.

Level	Junior High School	Senior High School	Total
Brand Important	88	71	159
Brand not Important	29	11	40
Total	117*	82*	199

Note: Chi-square value = 3.882 * Significance at 0.05 level

Table 1 Level of Schooling (age groups) and Brand

Hypothesis 2 proposes that there is a difference between genders in purchasing carbonated drinks in terms of packaging. As seen in Table 3, the results indicate that there is a different between the genders in purchasing carbonated drinks in terms of packaging with the value of chi-square is 8.69 and significance level is 0.002 (Below than 0.10), thus, hypotheses 2 is accepted. This supports the finding of Duff (1999) who found that girls are more likely to prefer re-sealable packs while boys are more likely to prefer cans. According to Childs and Maher (2003), there is a gender preference in the food sample which is significantly greater than the gender preference displayed in non-food advertisements to children.

Level	Junior High School	Senior High School	Total
High price –good brand	71	59	130
High price- low brand	17	9	26
Low price –good brand	17	12	29*
Low price – low brand	11	2	13*

Note: Chi-square value = 2.729 * significance at 0.10 level

Table 2 Level of Schooling (age groups) by Brand and Price

Packaging	Packaging important	Packaging not important	Total
Male students	72	30	102
Female students	47	47	94
Total	119**	77	196

Note: Chi-square value = 8.693* * significance at 0.05 level

Table 3 Gender by Packaging

Hypothesis 3 tries to determine whether there is a difference between children who came from high income groups and lower income groups in purchasing carbonated drinks. The results in Table 4 indicate that there is a difference between children in different income levels in term of purchasing carbonated drinks,

with the value of chi-square is 5.21 and significance level is 0.074 (below than 0.10). Hence, hypothesis 3 is accepted. As noted by Page and Ridgway (2001), differences in consumption patterns between children living in dissimilar socioeconomic areas exist, and potentially persist throughout the consumer’s adult life. According to Moschis (1987) the diminished awareness of brands, prices and socially desirable consumer behaviour suggests that lower income youth possess less consumer knowledge than the upper income youth.

Purchase	More Purchase	Less Purchase	Total
More Than RM1500	56**	34	90
Between RM500- RM1500	37	45	82
Less Than RM500	10	7	17

Note: Chi-square value = 5.21* * significance at 0.10 level

Table 4 Family’s Income In Purchasing Carbonated Drinks

5. CONCLUSION

This study, as far as we know, is the first to have reported on children’s consumption behaviour of carbonated drinks in Malaysian schools. As mentioned by Duff (1999), soft drinks are an area of enjoyment and experimentation for children. The main findings (see Table 2) showed that price played an important part in choosing carbonated drinks in school. Cheap brands are sufficient for thirst quenching, but many children, especially boys, are reluctant to be seen with

products of this kind when they are hoping to make an impression or convey an image. Table 4 supported the finding in Table 2, which reveals that the more income the family has, the more the children will consume carbonated drinks. This finding is consistent with the findings of Page and Ridgway (2001) who found that upper income children patronize departments and specialty stores more frequently and socioeconomic status was found to influence the types of goods children would purchase.

In Malaysian society, where women have continued to gain equality and greater representation in many fields, it seems inappropriate to promote male preference, especially to school children, in a gender-neutral category such as carbonated drinks. In terms of gender, significance difference was found in terms of preferences on brand and packaging of carbonated drinks. However, boys are more likely to buy a good brand name and preferred more convenience packs such as cans. Cans are now almost universally available, and offer perceived value for money for the boys. Boys also appreciate occasion-specific products such as energy drinks since they may be more involved in sports and training compared to girls. According to Duff (1999), at this age, children's eating and drinking habits become more leisure-related, have less adult control over purchases and consumption allows greater scope for diversity.

The pattern of consumption in carbonated drinks is also influenced by their parents. Although in this research no effort was made to analyse the relationship, many other studies found that parents have strict control over what kinds of products children can or cannot buy while at the same time allowing children some freedom in choice of brands of the permissible products (see for example Mintel, 2003, Chan and McNeal, 2002; McNeal and Ji, 1999; McNeal and Chyon-Hwa, 1990).

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