

An Empirical Study of Retail Consumption Behavior in Rural China

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Abstract

This study is the first exploratory empirical research on retail consumption behavior in rural China. The study develops an understanding of retail consumption behavior using well-established theories and cognitive models, with a focus on lifestyle and store attributes. The results show that the factors of customer lifestyle and of store attributes contribute positively to rural people's consumption attitudes, and indirectly contribute to their intentions to shop in retail stores. The mediatory effect of consumption attitude is also strongly significant. Customer lifestyles have greater influence on attitudes and shopping intentions than store attributes, and this finding has important, practical implications for retail entrepreneurs in rural China.

Keywords: *rural China, retail consumption behavior, lifestyle, store attributes.*

1. Introduction

China, as a fast-growing developing country, has certainly witnessed the benefits of export-focused trade, but has also taken a hard downturn as export trade has suffered since the financial crisis of 2008. Some observers have questioned the economy's over-emphasis on manufacturing for export. To sustain the present economic growth rate, China has recently initiated a second wave of development, moving away from focusing on the coastal regions, which are highly dependent on export trades, and instead focusing on stimulating domestic consumption, especially in the rural areas. As of 2010, there were almost 1.37 billion people in China, approximately 49.68% of them residing in urban areas and 50.32% residing in rural areas (Bureau of the Census, 2010). Hence, it is obvious that the rural market has tremendous potential. Not only do China's rural areas hold half of the country's population, but there are other important reasons to study the economic potential of these regions.

The first reason is that social and economic reforms are leading to a rapid increase in consumer incomes and demand for products and services, as shown in Table 1. Although the numbers and growth rates in rural China are relatively small and slow compared to those of urban areas, the financial crisis has motivated the central government to initiate many policies to stimulate

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consumption in the rural market. These policies include the rural subsidy scheme, by which any farmer who purchases designated goods such as home appliances gets a direct subsidy of 13%. Such policies can serve to narrow the gap between urban and rural areas, and spur rural people to spend more on retail consumption. Therefore, it is important to know what factors influence the retail consumption behavior of rural people. A second reason to study the rural market is that the widening gap in income between urban and the rural areas has created a large difference in consumption patterns, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Disposable income & Living expenditure

year	Disposable income(Yuan)		Living expenditure(Yuan)	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
2000	6280.0	2253.4	4998.00	2652.42
2001	6859.6	2366.4	5309.01	2779.96
2002	7702.8	2475.6	6029.88	2923.60
2003	8472.2	2622.2	6510.94	3024.99
2004	9421.6	2936.4	7182.10	3430.10
2005	10493.0	3254.9	7942.88	4126.91
2006	11759.5	3587.0	8696.55	4485.44
2007	13785.8	4140.4	9997.47	5137.68
2008	15780.8	4760.6	11242.85	5915.67
2009	17174.7	5153.2	12264.55	6333.89

Data: From National Bureau of Statistics

Table 2. Composition of Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (2009)

	Urban	Rural
Consumption Expenditure	100%	100%
Food	36.52%	40.97%
Clothing	10.47%	5.82%
Residence	10.02%	20.16%
Household Facilities, Articles and Services	6.42%	5.13%
Transport and Communications	13.72%	10.09%
Education, Cultural and Recreation and Services	12.01%	8.53%
Health Care and Medical Services	6.98%	7.20%
Miscellaneous Goods and Services	3.87%	2.11%

Data: From National Bureau of Statistics[†]

In recent years there has been a growing body of literature on consumer behavior in rural China. Previous studies have focused mainly on environmental influences or issues affecting particular individuals, such as credit constraints (Li & Zhu, 2010), sources of product information (Chan & McNeal, 2006; Chan & Cai, 2009; Chen & He, 2008), cultural practices and land tenure conditions

[†] Since National Bureau of Statistics has not published the economic data of 2010, we use the economic data of 2009 here.

(Jingzhong, Yihuan & Long, 2009) or self-sufficiency (Han & Wahl, 2001). However, no research to date has considered both environmental influences and individual characteristics at the same time. How might these two aspects of rural life combine in affecting consumer behavior? What is the relationship between environmental and personal factors in the rural economy?

To answer these questions, we adopt a cognitive approach that uses the Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model (Engel & Blackwell, 1990) as the analytical model, and the theory of reasoned action, or TRA (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), as the prescriptive model (Fawcett & Downs, 1992). Both of these models are used within the theoretical framework of the cognitive model (Ribeaux & Poppleton, 1978).

“Lifestyle” is chosen as the variable to describe the rural consumers’ individual characteristics, and “store attributes” as the variable to describe the environmental influence on shoppers. The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model depicts consumer behavior as a decision process that is influenced by individual differences (internal factors) and environmental influences (external factors). This distinction enables the discussion of how both lifestyle and store attributes affect rural consumer behavior at the same time. The TRA proposes that an individual’s volitional behavior is determined by his or her intention to perform actions, and this intention determines the person’s attitude toward that behavior. Within the framework of the cognitive model, lifestyle and store attributes are used as the variables to investigate how consumers’ attitudes and intentions toward shopping affect consumption behavior. (See Figure 1).

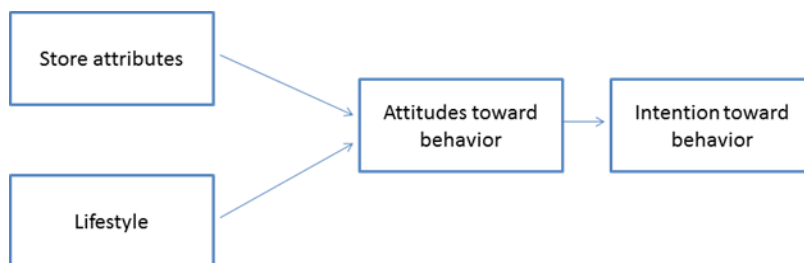


Figure 1. Variables and research model used in the study

2. Literature Review

2.1. Main models of consumer behavior

As the study of consumer behavior has evolved into a distinct discipline, new approaches have been offered to describe and explain the factors that influence consumers. The models of consumer behavior have evolved from three main orientations, namely product orientation, brand orientation and retail shopping orientation. Classical models for understanding consumer behavior include the innovations model, which focuses on products (Rogers, 1962), the Howard-Sheth

model, which focuses on brand choice behavior (Howard & Sheth, 1969), and the cognitive model, which focuses on retail shopping behavior (Ribeaux & Poppleton, 1978).

The cognitive approach ascribes observed action (behavior) to intrapersonal cognition. The individual is viewed as an “information processor.” This assumption of intrapersonal causation clearly challenges the explicative power of environmental variables as suggested by the behavioral approaches. Two major types of cognitive models can be discerned, as outlined in Figure 2 below.

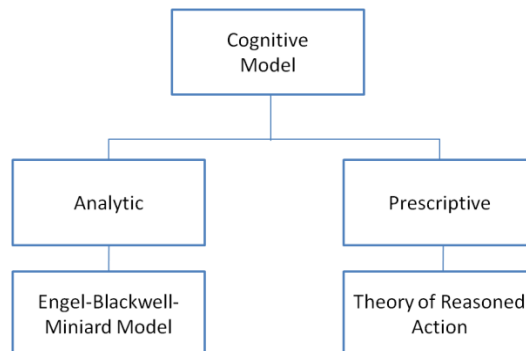


Figure 2. Cognitive Model

These various analytical models provide a framework of key elements that are purported to explain consumer behavior. The models identify a plethora of influencing factors, and indicate the broad relationships between various factors in consumer decision making. The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model (Engel & Blackwell, 1990) is one of the most widely cited analytical models in the literature. However, several other prescriptive models also provide guidelines or frameworks for organizing how consumer behavior is structured (Moital, 2007). These prescriptive models take account of the order in which elements should appear, and predict the effects that should result given certain causal factors. The most widely referenced and used prescriptive model is the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

2.2. Main Models within the Cognitive Model

2.2.1. The theory of reasoned action (TRA)

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) in Figure 3, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), has proven to be robust in explaining various human behavioral intentions and activities (Seibert & Liden, 2001). In addition, many studies have proven that the TRA is successful in predicting consumer behavior (Pookulangara, 2011; Coleman & Jane, 2011; Chao & Cheng, 2010; Omar & Owusu, 2007). TRA theorizes that an individual's volitional behavior is determined by his or her intention to perform, or not perform, a given behavior. Furthermore, this intention

is determined by the person's attitude toward that behavior. The person's attitude toward a behavior can involve a general feeling of favorableness or non-favorableness. Behavioral intention is a measure of the degree to which a person is willing to perform a specified behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).



Figure 3. Theory of Reasoned Action

2.2.2. The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model

The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model (see Figure 4) was originally developed in 1968 by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell, and it has undergone numerous revisions. The most recent major revision of the model is by Miniard (1990) in conjunction with Engel and Blackwell. This model remains one of the most popular representations of consumer behavior. The model depicts consumer behavior as a decision-making process involving five activities that occur in succession, namely problem recognition, search for information, alternative evaluation, purchase choice and post-purchase evaluation. The decision process is influenced by individual differences (internal factors) and environmental influences (external factors).

Previous studies have treated shopping variables such as locations, checklists, scenario-planning and store attributes as external factors (see Table 3). Other factors such as customer lifestyle, endogeneity and geography are often considered as internal factors (see Table 3). Among these various factors, store attributes and customer lifestyles are the most commonly emphasized variables in consumer behavior analysis.

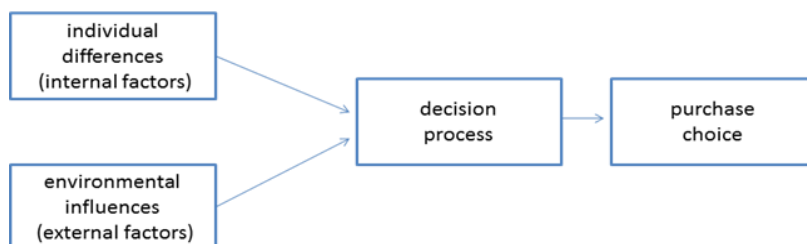


Figure 4. Engel-Blackwell-Miniard Model

Table 3: Variables used in recent studies to measure retail consumer behavior

Engel-Blackwell-Miniard Model						
Individual differences (Internal factors)			Environmental influences (External factors).			
Lifestyle	Endogeneity	Geography	Location	Scenario planning	Checklist	Store attribute

Store attributes variable

The first proponent of store attributes analysis, Lindquist (1974, 1975), explains that the primary factual elements or attributes that determine a retailer's image and form consumer perceptions include price, variety, assortment within product categories, quality, products, service (or lack thereof) and location. Lumpkin, Greenberg and Goldstucker (1985) note that attribute determinacy relates to finding the relative importance of each attribute in influencing store patronage. These authors suggest that a number of attributes influence decisions regarding store patronage. Shim and Kotsiopoulos (1992) also state that store attributes are important to consumers in deciding where to shop.

Lifestyle variable

The factor of customer lifestyle, as first discussed by Lazer (1963), is usually considered a system concept. Lifestyle is characterized by numerous psychological characteristics, and analysis of these characteristics can help marketers to better understand consumer behavior (Lazer, 1963). Consumer lifestyle involves the patterns that develop and emerge from the dynamics of living in a society. Plummer (1974) suggests that understanding lifestyles requires in-depth research into the individual details of people's lives, attitudes, and self-awareness. Hawkins (1989) claims that lifestyle refers to a people's overall manner of living, their attitudes, beliefs, opinions, expectations, fears, prejudices, and various other traits. Lifestyle also involves how people arrange and use their time or wealth. Therefore, consumers apply their unique ways of living to the ways they shop and consume, so that lifestyle affects consumer decisions. Chaney (1996) defines lifestyle as the "patterns of action that differentiate people ... Lifestyle helps to make sense of what people do, and why they do it, and what doing it means to them and others." Today, lifestyle is mostly defined as a person's way of living, the way people express the activities they undertake, the interests they have, and their ways of expressing their opinions on various topics.

In earlier studies, lifestyle was measured by asking people to rate their feelings in response to long lists of activities, interests and opinions, or AIOs (Peter & Olson, 1994). Due to the vagueness of definitions of lifestyle, AIO statements are often used in large batteries, which increase the difficulties in measurement. For example, Wells and Tigert (1971) formulate 300 AIO items. Recently, however, the value systems approach has increasingly replaced the extensive and burdensome AIO approach. Instead, values are considered as guiding principles in people's lives that direct their behavior as consumers. Instead of using the 18-value Rokeach value survey (Rokeach, 1973), Kahle

(1983) suggests a shorter and more easily implemented list of values (or LOV) instrument. This instrument measures 9 values (self-esteem, safety, harmonious social relationships, sense of accomplishment, self-satisfaction, sense of belonging, and attitudes toward respect, entertainment, and stimuli). Compared to the AIO approach, the list of values approach is more fundamental and elegant. As Kahle (1983) points out, the LOV instrument measures attitudes toward the basic necessities of life, consumption habits, and values.

However, it has been argued that the lifestyles of people today differ across various life domains, and the categories of lifestyle used in AIO lists or lists of values are arbitrary. Such categories may be inadequate to describe the many alternative lifestyles across all domains of a rapidly changing society. Therefore, the notion of domain-specific lifestyles has been introduced. One of the most widely used domain-specific models is Grunert's (1993) model for the food-related domain. This model systematically describes the relationships and interactions between values, product attributes and lifestyles as they relate to food product preferences.

According to several previous studies, there are two important conclusions concerning lifestyle research. First, lifestyle is a social factor based on the needs of integration (belonging to a group) and differentiation (individuality). Second, most lifestyle models contain a dimension of value orientation (Zoltán Szakály, 2012; Kotler & Keller, 2006; Anderson & Golden, 1984). As Grunert's food-related lifestyle model suggests (Grunert et al., 1993), lifestyle is situated between the categories of values and products; it reflects both consumer values and concrete product attributes. Most researchers argue that AIO lists are too detail-driven, and the identification of value systems is too abstracted from actual behavior. Therefore, both of these approaches are relatively ineffective. The Grunert model takes both abstract values and specific product preferences into consideration, which makes its predictions of consumer behavior more convincing. In addition, the pattern of retail consumption in rural China is mainly concerned with daily necessities, in which food-related products account for the largest proportion. To meet the demands for both conceptual model consistency and adaption to changes in the rural market over time, I propose a new retail-related lifestyle model that is based on the Grunert model. In this model, lifestyle is defined as the individual's particular inclinations in both product preferences and personal values.

2.3. Research Model

The cognitive model provides the theoretical support necessary for studying retail consumer behavior with a particular method of observation. Within the cognitive model framework, both the analytical and prescriptive models are important, and choosing either one of these is insufficient to support this study on shopping behavior in rural China.

The Engel-Blackwell-Miniard model depicts consumer behavior as a

decision process that is influenced by both individual differences (internal factors) and environmental influences (external factors). In accordance with this set of propositions, the variables used in recent studies to measure retail consumer behavior can be classified as individual differences (internal factors) or environmental influences (external factors). (See Figure 5).

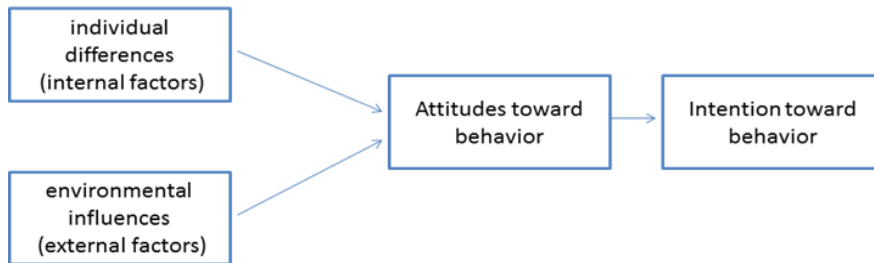


Figure 5. Model used in the study

3. The Research Model and Hypotheses

Many researchers have claimed that the decision variables used to predict any behavior should not be mutually exclusive to one another (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Bock et al., 2005). Accordingly, marketing studies have shown an increasing interest in the relationship between customer lifestyles and store attributes. In a study on the relationship between lifestyle and retail store attributes, Oates (1996) finds that family-oriented consumers differ significantly from those of other lifestyles regarding their consideration of store attributes. Huddleston, et al. (1990) also investigate the link between store attributes and consumer lifestyles, and find an important effect of lifestyle on preferred store attributes. Other studies, such as those of Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Moschis (2003), show similar findings. Mojgan, Bahrami, and Samani (2011) design a model concerning hypermarket customers to investigate the relationships between lifestyles, store attributes, consumer satisfaction, and store loyalty in the selection of hypermarkets. Following this approach, we come to the first hypothesis:

H1: The correlation between customer lifestyle and store attributes in the rural China retail market is significant.

Recently, more studies have been published that report sound research in support of lifestyle analysis. Bone (1991) concludes that examination of lifestyle, or psychographics, has emerged as a very robust technique for identifying distinct categories of buyer behavior. Varshney (2005) finds that for some people, shopping may be a very enjoyable use of time, irrespective of the kinds of goods or services they are seeking. Hoyer (2009) finds that lifestyles are real models of behavior, which are represented by consumers' activities, interests and opinions. Van der Horst and Brunner (2011) find that lifestyle can affect consumers' attitudes toward food consumption. These insights lead to my second hypothesis:

H2: Lifestyle has a significant effect on consumer attitudes toward retail shopping.

Martineau (1958) identifies store attributes as the elements by which a store is described in the consumers' minds. These attributes involve both the store's practically useful qualities and its subjective or emotional features. Goldstucker (1985) notes that attribute determinacy relates to the relative importance of each attribute for influencing store patronage. This finding suggests that a number of attributes influence decisions regarding store patronage. Shim and Kotsiopoulos (1992) state that store attributes are important criteria by which consumers decide where to shop. Store attributes are viewed as comprising an overall image of a store, and such images can drive the store selection process (Ghosh, Tripathi, & Kumar, 2010). These various findings lead to the third hypothesis:

H3: Consumer attitudes toward retail shopping are significantly correlated to store attributes.

In the consumer behavior literature, attitudes toward shopping are often analyzed in terms of the emotional (affective) or mental (cognitive) factors involved. The cognitive components are believed to be more closely related to values, and the affective components are viewed as somewhat spontaneous factors in relation to the environment. Various studies have shown that a positive attitude toward shopping increases shopping intention. Flick (2009) also finds that consumers' attitudes toward buying on the Internet are positively related to online purchase intentions. In other domains, researchers have found similar relationships between shopping attitudes and intentions. This finding leads to the fourth hypothesis:

H4: There is a positive correlation between attitudes and intentions toward retail shopping.

Amatulli and Guido (2011) investigate the latent determinants of customers' purchasing intentions for fashion luxury goods. These authors find that consumers buy such luxury goods mainly to match their lifestyles, thus satisfying their inner drives. Lorenzi (2008) finds that American consumers' lifestyles are highly correlated with their shopping intentions. Research into retail shopping has established that the intention to shop is influenced by the customers' perception of the services or products offered by retail stores. For example, Kukar-Kinney et al. (2007) suggest that shopping intention is influenced by the shoppers' perceptions concerning the fairness of price levels and of refund policies. Dhruv Grewa (1998) finds that brand names positively influence purchased intentions. Peter (1975) finds a positive relationship between self-confidence and intention to purchase goods. Kim (2005) finds that family orientation increases consumers' levels of shopping motivation. This leads to the fifth hypotheses:

H5: Lifestyle has a significant effect on the intention to shop in retail stores.

Tauber (1972) finds that the shopping environment may increase a consumer's intention to shop. Kaltcheva and Weitz (2006) find that high-arousal shopping environments increase consumer intentions to visit and make purchases in a store. Hjelmars (2011) finds that convenience will increase consumers' intention to buy organic food products. Gupta, Sumeet and Kim (2011) find that store convenience can attract customers to shopping in semi-urban retail markets in India. As store environment and convenience are two major store attributes, this leads to the sixth hypothesis:

H6: The store attributes significantly affect the intention to shop in retail stores.

The structural model representation is made according to the above-mentioned references and theories. (See Figure 6).

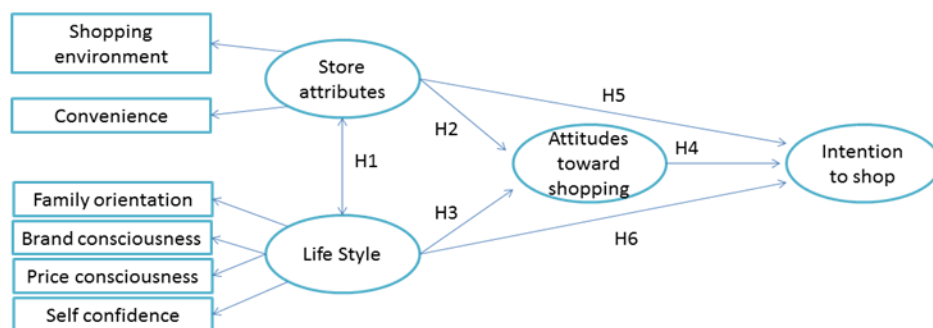


Figure 6. Structural model representation

4. Research Methodology and Analysis

In this study, we measure retail-related lifestyle, which is defined as the individual's preferences in terms of both products and values. Based on the theoretical construct and the evidence from previous research, the four most comprehensive variables are chosen to measure lifestyle. These variables are brand consciousness (Selles, 1993; Bloemer, 1995; Tai & Tam, 1996), price consciousness (Bloch et. al., 1986; Tai & Tam, 1996), self-confidence (Fornell & Lehmann, 1994; Tai, & Tam, 1996; Anderson, 1996), and family orientation (Bearden & Teel, 1983; Woodruff & Jenkins, 1987). Brand consciousness and price consciousness are variables concerning the product preference dimension, and self-confidence and family orientation are variables that measure personal values. These four variables are proven by previous studies to have a positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward retail shopping, and to reflect consumer behavior in rural China.

Store attributes are measured by shopping environment (O'Connor, 1990; Peter & Olson, 1990; Beauchamp & Ponder, 2010) and convenience (Peter & Olson, 1990; Shamdasani et al., 2001; Mu, 2006). Both of these factors are proven to have a positive effect on consumers' attitudes toward retail shopping. The shopping environment is defined as the quality of shopping conditions that a store offers, including its variety and quality of products and its service and shopping atmosphere.

Rural China has a different culture from that of urban areas, and this rural culture has a strong influence on shared social values and behavior. Considering the specific groups involved in this study, it is clear that the cultural influence on consumer behavior is very important in rural China. Therefore, I include culture as the fifth variable for the measurement of lifestyle.

4.1. Measurement and Data Collection

In the first phase of the study, a wide variety of items and constructs were chosen, as described in Table 4 below.

We conducted surveys asking respondents to evaluate the significance of measurement items using a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is "strongly agree," and 1 is "strongly disagree." The surveys were conducted in 2010 in Cili County, Hunan Province, with logistical assistance from the local government. Convenience sampling was used, and a total of 444 valid questionnaires were collected.

After processing, the scales that were not significant were removed. The results are presented in Table 5 below.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics for the Data

The number of male and female respondents is approximately equal in number. Among them, some 20% are single and 80% are married. About 56% of the respondents are from three-person families, and 39% have four to eight family members. There is a normal age distribution of respondents, with a mean value of 28% falling into the 36-40 age group. In terms of occupation, 40% are farmers, 18% students, and 11% businessmen. Around 40% of the respondents have primary or lower secondary education, and 30% have received higher secondary education. The majority of the shoppers prefer to shop either before noon or in the early evening after 17:00. In general, the respondents spend at least five minutes in a shop, and the items that they purchase are mainly either ready-made foods or daily grocery products. Although approximately 80% of the respondents earn less than RMB2500 per year, no clear statistics can be calculated regarding their monthly retail spending, as the respondents are quite reluctant in revealing this information.

Table 4. Decision variables, constructs and measurement items

Decision variables	Constructs	Measurement items
Lifestyle	Brand consciousness	I am willing to pay higher prices for famous brands
		I care for well-known brands rather than their quality
		I prefer to buy foreign brands than local brands
	Self confidence	My friends often come to me for my advice regarding which brand to buy
		I think I have more self-confidence than most people of my age
		I like to try new and different things
	Culture	I am traditional
		I always show respect for others
		Son is important in family
		I cannot control many things
		Girls should stay home
	Price consciousness	I often wait until a store has a sale to shop
		One can save a lot of money by shopping around for bargains
		I usually watch the advertisements for announcements of sales
	Family orientation	I always show respect for others
		Son is important in family
		I cannot control many things
		Girls should stay home
Store Attributes	Shopping environment	There is a large variety of merchandize
		There are high-quality products
		Always get good service
		Store atmosphere is good
	Convenience	I prefer convenient location
		I prefer large variety of merchandize
		I prefer suitable operation time

Table 5. Decision variables, constructs and measurement items

Decision variables	Constructs	Measurement items	Cited references	Mean	Factoring loading
Life Style KMO=0.775	Family orientation $\alpha = 0.656$	My family is the most important thing to me	Tai & Tam (1997)	4.57	0.813
		I listen to the advice of elders		4.11	0.782
		I am always proud to have a close-knit family		4.42	0.644
	Brand consciousness $\alpha = 0.828$	I am willing to pay higher prices for famous brands		2.94	0.875
		I care for well-known brands rather than their quality		3.10	0.871
		I prefer to buy foreign brands than local brands		2.64	0.719
	Price consciousness $\alpha = 0.663$	I often wait until a store has a sale to shop	Tai & Tam (1996)	3.33	0.836
		One can save a lot of money by shopping around for bargains		3.37	0.826
		I usually watch the advertisements for announcements of sales		3.34	-----*
	Self confidence $\alpha = 0.656$	My friends often come to me for my advice regarding which brand to buy		3.45	0.674
		I think I have more self-confidence than most people of my age		3.79	0.738
		I like to try new and different things		3.67	0.791
Store Attributes KMO=0.748	Shopping environment (4 of 7) $\alpha = 0.788$	There is a large variety of merchandize	Sullivan & Savitt (1997)	4.24	0.707
		There are high-quality products		4.26	0.784
		Always get good service		4.25	0.825
		Store atmosphere is good		4.23	0.745
	Convenience (2 of 3) $\alpha = 0.723$	I prefer convenient location		3.92	0.882
		I prefer large variety of merchandize		4.21	0.852
Attitude towards retail shoppinggy KMO=0.717	Customer satisfaction $\alpha = 0.861$	Shopping in retail stores is always enjoyable experience	Ajzen and Fishbein (1980)	3.97	0.914
		Shopping in retail stores is always beneficial		4.00	0.867
		Shopping in retail stores is always good		3.94	0.873
Intention to shop KMO=0.709	Intention to shop $\alpha = 0.797$	I intend to shop retail stores in the future	Ajzen and Fishebin (1980)	4.00	0.849
		I will try to shop retail stores in the future		4.00	0.848
		I will make an effort to shop retail stores in the future		4.18	0.833

* Removed from data analysis as factor loading is smaller than 0.5

4.3. Construct Validity and Reliability Tests

In this study, each decision variable is validated independently. The cutoff point of 0.5 is used as a guideline, and this value establishes a higher standard than that proposed by Hair et al. (1998). Table 5 shows the final results of the confirmatory factor analysis. One measurement item from the construct of price consciousness is removed, because it has a factor loading of less than 0.5. All Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values are greater than 0.5, which implies that the decision variables pass the sampling adequacy test. Cronbach's alpha test (α) is used to assess the internal consistency of the verified constructs. The α values are summarized in Table 5, and they range from 0.656 to 0.861. Although the coefficient alphas are not very high, as this research is an exploratory study, no attention is given to studying retail consumption behavior from the perspectives of lifestyle and store attributes. This study, therefore, is relatively basic and conservative. The intention of this study is to open up this line of research and to build a foundation for further studies, rather than to conduct a comprehensive and absolutely accurate survey.

4.4. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Plewa (2008) introduces structural equation modeling (SEM) as a technique for evaluating entire models and validating multi-stage, cross-sectional data (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 2000; Kline, 2005). In this study, LISREL 8.3 is used to perform the SEM analysis, as this software provides the maximum likelihood in estimating all path values simultaneously (Kelloway, 1996).

The skewness statistics test is performed to check the normality of the data. The skewness statistics, ranging from -0.174 to -0.094, show that the results all have negative values. The critical z -value is obtained by dividing the corresponding statistics by the standard errors $\sqrt{(6/n)}$, where n represents the sample size. The critical z -values of skewness range from -1.484 to -0.801. As these values do not exceed the critical value of 1.96, the collected survey data pass the data normality test (Plewa, 2008).

Next, the two-stage analytical procedures for SEM are conducted. The measurement model and the structural model are checked to ensure that the results are acceptable and consistent with the underlying conceptual model. Then the structural path model is examined to determine the relationship among the constructs and their significance.

Table 6 summarizes the results of the measurement model. These results show that all four decision variables are valid measurements of their respective constructs, which are based on the constructs' parameter estimates and their statistical significance. However, brand consciousness is shown to be an insignificant construct in the decision variable of lifestyle. This conclusion is supported by Lai (1999), who shows that Hong Kong consumers are more aware and loyal to multinational brands, and that PRC nationals and Taiwanese shoppers

have lower awareness of the brands' origin or product authenticity.

Table 6. Summary Results of the Model Constructs

Decision Variables	Constructs	Standardized Estimates	t-value
Life Style (LS)	L1: Family orientation	0.88	14.35*
	L2: Brand consciousness	0.37	1.31#
	L3: Price consciousness	0.80	11.98*
	L4: Self confidence	0.86	13.25*
Store Attributes (SA)	S1: Shopping environment	0.94	19.56**
	S2: convenience	0.79	11.60**
Attitude (ATT)	ATT: Customer satisfaction	1.00	-- @
Intention (INT)	INT: Intention to shop	1.00	-- @

insignificant, * $p \leq 0.10$, ** $p \leq 0.05$,

@ Values were not calculated, because loading was set to 1.0 to fix construct variance.

Table 7 shows the results of the hypothesis testing for structural relationships among the latent variables. Figure 6 depicts the final results of the measurements and the structural models. To assess the model fit, the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), the root mean square error residual (RMR), the incremental fit measures of the normal fit index (NFI), the adjusted goodness-of-fit-index (AGFI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) are calculated.

Table 7. Summary Results of the Structural Model

Path	Description	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	t-value	Results
LS-SA	Life Style \leftrightarrow Store Attributes	H1	0.60	9.13**	Supported
LS-ATT	Life Style \rightarrow Attitude	H2	0.17	3.09*	Marginally Supported
SA-ATT	Store Attributes \rightarrow Attitude	H3	0.15	2.59*	Marginally Supported
ATT-INT	Attitude \rightarrow Intention	H4	0.52	7.64**	Supported
LS-INT	Life Style \rightarrow Intention	H5	0.24	4.84**	Supported
SA-INT	Store Attributes \rightarrow Intention	H6	0.14	2.31*	Marginally Supported

* $p \leq 0.1$, ** $p \leq 0.05$

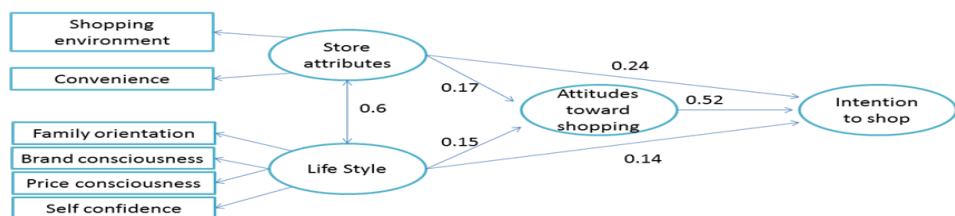


Figure 7. Results of Confirmatory Model

Table 8 shows the overall fit indexes for the proposed model. These results show that the model provides good results in relation to the $\chi^2/\text{d.f.}$, GFI, RMR and AGFI, and marginal fitness levels for the CFI and NFI. Therefore, the model results are robust enough to explain the proposed hypothesis with good confidence.

Table 8. Overall model fit indices

Fit Index		Scores	Recommended cut-off value from literature
Absolute fit measures	$\chi^2/\text{d.f.}$	2.077*	$\leq 2^{**}; \leq 3^*$
	GFI	0.92**	$\geq 0.9^{**}; \geq 0.80^*$
	RMR	0.076*	$\leq 0.05^{**}; \leq 0.08^*$
Incremental fit measures	NFI	0.79*	$\geq 0.90^{**}$
	AGFI	0.80*	$\geq 0.90^{**}; \geq 0.80^*$
	CFI	0.80*	$\geq 0.90^{**}$

Acceptability: ** acceptable * marginal.

Hypothesis H1 is supported, which shows that lifestyle and store attributes have a significant relationship among consumers in rural China. Hypotheses H2 and H3 are also supported, as the results show that lifestyle and store attributes contribute to the shopping attitudes of consumers in rural China. It is interesting to note that lifestyle has a stronger effect on shopping attitudes than the store attributes. Hypothesis H4 is also supported, which suggests that retail shoppers tend to return to retail stores when their shopping experience is a pleasant one. Hypotheses H5 and H6 are also supported. These results show that lifestyle and store attributes have positive contributions toward the intention of consumers to shop in retail stores. Again, it is interesting to note that lifestyle has a stronger effect on the intention to shop among rural Chinese consumers than the store attributes.

Table 9 shows the results of the direct, indirect, and total effects of all of the significant model constructs. These results reveal that both lifestyle and store attributes have indirect effects on the intention to shop in retail stores, through the mediating factor of attitudes toward retail shopping. This study adopts the TRA model to explain retail consumer behavior, and under this model, I assume that the lifestyle and store variables wield both direct and indirect influence on intention to shop, but only through the TRA factor of attitude. For this reason, I do not consider the indirect effects of lifestyle on store attributes, or of store attributes on lifestyle.

Table 9. Direct, Indirect and Total Effects of Significant Model Constructs

Construct	ATT			INT		
	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
LS	0.17	---	0.17	0.24	0.09	0.32
SA	0.15	---	0.15	0.14	0.08	0.22

5. Conclusions and Limitations

5.1. Conclusion

This study is one of the first to provide empirical evidence on retail consumption behavior in rural China in terms of how lifestyle and store attributes influence consumers' shopping intentions. The results indicate the following conclusions. 1) There is a relationship between lifestyle and store attributes in the rural China retail market. 2) Both the lifestyle and store attributes contribute with marginal significance to rural consumers' attitudes toward retail shopping. 3) Both lifestyle and store attributes contribute with marginal significance to the intention of rural consumers to shop in retail stores. 4) Attitudes toward retail shopping influence people's intentions to shop in retail stores. 5) Both lifestyle and store attributes have indirect effects on rural people's intentions to shop in retail stores. I regard conclusions 3) and 4) as the major findings from the study, though these findings are not highly significant statistically. Many previous studies have proved that in marketing research, marginally significant results are also important and valuable (Sawyer & Peter, 1983; Rozeboom, 1960).

Given these findings, the following insights are obtained. First, the results support the view that the volition of consumers to shop is influenced by their attitudes toward shopping in retail stores.

Second, both customer lifestyle and store attributes influence shopping behavior in rural China. These factors influence attitudes toward retail shopping, which indirectly influence people's intention to shop. Furthermore, customer lifestyle has a greater influence on attitudes toward retail shopping than store attributes. Therefore, it is important for retail entrepreneurs in rural China to understand local perceptions relating to family values, social status, and the rendering of services. The statistical data reveal that retail consumers in rural China are not brand consciousness, but they are concerned with values such as family orientation, self-confidence, and price consciousness. The success of retail businesses in rural China is highly dependent on how retail entrepreneurs apply this information in offering services or products that promote these values. Such values involve, for example, providing extraordinary items or services that all family members can share, enjoy and be proud of, and that promote consumer status. By selling such items or services at affordable prices, retailers can enhance the likelihood of increased frequency in family visits to their stores.

A third insight from the study is that in rural China, lifestyle has a greater influence on the intention to shop than store attributes. This finding implies that the willingness of consumers to make repeat visits to retail shops relies heavily on promotional events that are directly linked to customer lifestyle rather than to store attributes. Store attributes, such as location, convenience and shopping environment are also considered crucial elements by retail shoppers, but these strategic advantages can be superseded quickly and easily by new retail shops. The results of this study suggest that rural retailers should place more emphasis

on lifestyle elements, for example, by promoting products at discount prices, launching innovative products that elevate the status of consumers, and by promoting events or services that facilitate the participation of all family members in retail shopping. In the past, consumers living in rural areas had a limited choice of retail stores. Promoting events linked to the constructs of lifestyle would certainly be a good strategy to encourage rural consumers to shop more in retail stores.

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

In terms of research scope, this study is limited to the Cili County of Hunan Province. Due to the variations in lifestyle and income in the different provinces of mainland China, further research is required to see whether it is possible to generalize these conclusions and suggestions in relation to consumers in other provinces. Rather than conducting research in only one province or area, it would be helpful to understand more fully the relative factors that influence store patronage by rural consumers. This extension of the research could be achieved by using nationwide questionnaires and comparing the results from different provinces.

In addition, as this study is exploratory in nature, the research method used is not scientifically rigorous. In an effort to put a boundary to this exploratory study, the decision variables are narrowed down to lifestyle and store attributes, which have a limited scope. These limitations in the data analysis may be responsible for the marginally significant fit in SEM results. For future research, more decision variables relating to retail consumers can be included to enrich the study.

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