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# PARENTAL CONCERN ABOUT TELEVISION VIEWING AND CHILDREN'S ADVERTISING IN CHINA

*Kara Chan and James U. McNeal*

## ABSTRACT

A benchmark study was conducted to examine Mainland Chinese parents' attitudes toward advertising and parental mediation of television viewing. A survey of 1,665 parents of elementary school children aged six to fourteen in Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu was conducted December 2001 to March 2002. Results indicated Chinese parents hold negative attitudes toward television advertising in general and children's advertising specifically. The negative attitudes result mainly from the perception that advertising is deceptive and annoying. Parents feel strongly that advertising should be banned on children's programming. Ninety-eight percent of parents exercise some control over the contents and time of television viewing. Despite a low level of co-viewing and discussion of television commercials with children, Chinese parents perceived that they have great influence on their children's attitudes toward advertising.

Mr. and Mrs. Li live with Rong, their ten-year-old daughter in Beijing. Like most of the parents with only one child in China, Mr. and Mrs. Li hold a high aspiration for Rong's future. Mrs. Li is strict in Rong's independence training as she is afraid of 'spoiling' her only child. Mr. Li is willing to buy Rong anything that will improve her intellectual ability. He perceives parental monitoring and control as essential tools for his daughter's development of proper personality characteristics and behavior. Mr. and Mrs. Li together make most of the major family purchase decisions. But when it comes to the purchase of new consumer items like a personal computer or a DVD player, they rely on Rong's recommendations because they know she possesses up-to-date market information obtained from television commercials, magazine advertisements and her peers. Mr. Li feels a bit uneasy about this as the media seem to be undermining his authority.

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China adopted a single-child policy in 1979, and it is the current rule in urban China (Zhang & Yang, 1992). Chinese children have a substantial amount of their own money and have great influence on the daily household purchases (McNeal & Yeh, 1997). There are 290 million children under the age of 14 in China (State Statistical Bureau, 2000). It is estimated that in 1999, the approximately 60 million children, aged 4-12, in the largest cities of China spent around US\$ 6.2 billion of their own money on their own wants, and influenced the spending by parents and grandparents of over US\$ 61 billion, giving them a market potential of US\$ 67 billion (McNeal & Zhong, 2000). As a result, young consumers are the targets of many international and local advertisers.

Previous studies indicate that Chinese parents have a high level of mediation over children's television viewing (Zhao, 1996; Greenberg, Li, Ku, & Wang, 1991). Parents serve as gatekeepers and take control over children's viewing time as well as viewing content. Effective advertising campaigns targeting children need to obtain the green light of the gatekeepers before their messages can reach the children. It is therefore important that most advertisers and marketers have an understanding of how Chinese parents perceive advertising. In this benchmark study, we examine parents' attitudes toward advertising and its relationship with parental mediation of children's television viewing behavior in the People's Republic of China. We collected 1,655 survey questionnaires from parents of elementary school children aged six to fourteen in three cities in China-Beijing, Nanjing, and Chengdu-regarding the following research questions:

- What are Chinese parents' attitudes toward advertising in general and children's advertising specifically?
- How do Chinese parents mediate children's viewing of television?
- Are parents' attitudes toward advertising related to parental mediation of television viewing?
- What are the demographic variables that influence parents' attitudes toward advertising and their mediation of children's television viewing?

Social and economic reforms in China have led to a rapid increase in consumer incomes and demand for products (Batra, 1997). Mass media play a significant part in the development of the consumerist values. Frequent readings of consumer magazines and exposure to outdoor advertisements have been shown to be positive correlates of endorsement of the consumerist values (Wei & Pan, 1999).

China's advertising industry has been growing at an unprecedented pace of 40 percent per year in the past decade. According to official statistics, advertising expenditures reached a record high of 71 billion yuan (around US\$ 8.7 billion) in 2000 (*Zhongguo Guanggao*, 2001). The fast development of the advertising industry has given rise to a range of problems, such as false advertising, inferior quality, and sub-standard advertising practices (Xinhua News Agency, 1995).

Since the implementation of the Advertising Law in 1995, the State Administration of Commerce and Industry have prosecuted more than 160,000 illegal cases with fines totaling 450 million yuan, or about 58 million US dollars (Xinhua News Agency, 2000). Advertisements for fake medicine, illegal medical services, and illegal food account for the biggest share of illegal advertising activities (Xinhua News Agency, 1998).

Some advertising to children has been accused of misleading them and promoting unhealthy lifestyles (Zhou, 2001). According to the China Consumer Association, food advertisers have claimed that certain biscuits can increase children's intelligence, a certain health food can enable students to score 100 percent on examinations, and certain shoes can enhance growth. There are sales promotions encouraging children to consume excessively in order to obtain certain premiums or enter certain competitions (Luo, 2000). Some parents are concerned about commercials containing offensive scenes, violence, and scenes suggestive of pornography, like commercials for bras and breast builders (Wiseman, 1999; Wang, 2000). Others are concerned about the misleading contents and materialistic values in television commercials (Ma, 2000).

With the prevalence of irresponsible advertising in the market place, how do Chinese parents perceive advertising in general and children's advertising specifically? The study results should be of major interest to both marketers and to public policy makers. Marketers may learn the concern of parents, and policy makers may understand whether existing regulations are effective to protect the interests of the parents and their children.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### CHINESE ATTITUDES TOWARD ADVERTISING

Attitudes toward advertising in general have been studied primarily in North America and Europe (e.g. Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992; Mittal, 1994; Rossiter, 1977). Most of these studies are based on Bauer and Greyser's (1968) conceptualization of a two-dimensional measure of perceived economic and social effects of advertising. Several studies on attitudes of Chinese business executives in the late 1980s and early 1990s generally reported positive attitudes toward advertising (e.g. Kwan, Ho, & Cragin, 1983; Semenik, Zhou, & Moor, 1986). Public opinion studies of Chinese consumers, however, indicate there was a trend to increasingly negative perceptions toward advertising. In a national probability sample survey conducted by China Central Television (CCTV) in 1987, three-quarters of the 24,900 respondents perceived that television advertising was 'essential' or 'acceptable'. In a survey of 500 respondents in Beijing in 1996, consumers' overall attitude toward advertising in general was positive with about two-thirds of the sample considering advertising a good thing (Chan, 1998).

A recent survey of 583 young consumers aged 18 to 24 in 1999 reflected mixed attitudes towards advertising. Young consumers perceived that advertising is essential to the prosperity of the economy and agreed that advertising helps raise the standard of living. However, they were dissatisfied with the deception in advertising (Liu, 2002). In a national survey of consumers' attitudes toward advertising conducted by the China Consumer Association in 2000, 71 percent of the 3,358 respondents perceived that television advertisements are misleading; 71 percent urged tighter control of advertisements by legal authorities (*Xiandai Guanggao*, 2001). A survey of 2,953 consumers in 1995 found that attitudes toward advertising vary among different consumer lifestyle segments. Traditionalists and status quo consumers disapproved of advertising; modern and generation X segments viewed advertising positively, while transitioners reflected a more neutral attitude (Wei, 1997).

Advertising in all media in China is strictly governed by the Advertising Law enacted in February 1995. There is no limit on the amount of advertising per hour of program on television. However, commercials are usually scheduled before or after a television program and commercials are seldom scheduled inside programs. The national news at 7:00 p.m., one of the most popular programs in China, has attracted so many advertisers that it is common to have a commercial break of ten minutes running before it. Advertising clutter is extremely severe due to the long duration of the commercial breaks and the abundance of very short commercials. In a typical weekday from 6:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. in May 2002, CCTV-1 broadcast a total of 189 commercials, and the average duration of each commercial was 12 seconds.

## ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN IN CHINA

Compared to the United States, children's advertising in China is less regulated. There is no restriction on the amount of advertising on children's television programs, and there is a lack of regulation of television advertising targeting children specifically. China's advertising regulation standards focus more on the cultural impact of advertising to children than its misleading effects on children's consumption of products and services (Ha, 1996). According to the 'Self-regulatory Guidelines for Spiritual Civilization in Advertising' established by the China Advertising Association in 1997, children's advertising should be beneficial to children's mental and physical health, and should establish good moral standards (China Advertising Association, 2002). Article 8 of China's Advertising Law enacted in February 1995 specifies that advertisements must not be harmful to the physical and mental health of minors and disabled persons (Asia Law and Practice Limited, 1994). However, China's Advertising Law does not have a separate section dealing with advertising to children.

## PARENTAL ROLES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDREN'S COMMERCIALS

Obviously, parents play an important role in children's acquisition of consumer knowledge and skills through parent-child communication, training, and modeling (Ward, Wackman, & Wartella, 1977). Parental concern about advertising reflects both personal and cultural differences in the perceived desirability of controlling outside influences on their children such as the mass media (Rose, Bush, & Kahle, 1998). Parents can educate children about television advertising through active participation in children's viewing (Walsh, Lacznia, & Carlson, 1998) and establishing rules to guide children's viewing of television and processing of television commercials (Armstrong & Brucks, 1988).

Chinese and Western researchers have identified Confucianism as an ideology that gives Chinese parents several important characteristics including an emphasis on moralistic orientation (Ekblad, 1986), filial piety (Hsu, 1981), a high aspiration for the child's academic achievements (Ho, 1989), a high level of parental monitoring and controlling, and a stress on obedience of children (Wu, 1996). Mainland Chinese parents are unique in two ways. First, they can only have one child in the family and they therefore have high expectations of their children. Secondly, the current generation of the singletons' parents, men and women born in the late 1960s and 1970s, have been defined by severe material shortages and by political suffering (Davis & Sensenbrenner, 2000). As the new era of economic reform has instituted a reward system based on formal education and qualifications, these parents want their lost past to be compensated for by a better future for their second generation (Zhao, 1996). They were the lag-behinds in the consumer revolution in China introduced in the 1990s. A survey of 460 children in Beijing found that Chinese children consider television to be the most important information source to learn about new products, and not parents (McNeal & Ji, 1999).

In Greenberg et al.'s (1991) study of 529 grade 6 and grade 10 students in Beijing, 74 percent of young children said there were rules at home regarding how long they could watch TV. Parents of younger children were more likely to tell them not to watch certain programs and to recommend programs for them to watch. Children have reported that parents sometimes use television time as a potential reward or punishment. In a survey of 176 parents in Beijing and Jiaozhu, over 85 percent demonstrated control over viewing time as well as content. The reported purpose of parental control over viewing time was to minimize the chance of children being distracted from study by television. Most parents mentioned that they encouraged their children to watch intellectual and morally uplifting television programs while prohibiting children from viewing programs with love and sexual content. The tight parental control reflects Chinese parents' concern with the breakdown of conventional moral standards

and norms under the challenge of an increasingly commercialized mass media culture (Zhao, 1996).

To conclude, the review of literature shows that Chinese consumers harbor an increasingly negative attitude towards advertising in general. Chinese consumers demonstrate a deep concern about the influence of television on children, and a majority of the parents control their children's television viewing in various ways. There has been little study of Chinese parents' attitudes toward children's advertising in particular and its relationship with parental mediation of television viewing. The study reported here attempts to fill this gap.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The data analyzed in this study were collected from surveys conducted in three large cities in China-Beijing, Nanjing, and Chengdu-during the period December 2001 to March 2002. The three cities were selected to represent high, medium, and low levels of development of the advertising industry respectively, according to provincial advertising expenditures in 2000. The respective provincial advertising expenditures of the three cities were 14.8 percent, 8.1 percent and 2.7 percent of the national advertising expenditure. Also, the selection of these three cities, located in different parts of China, was an attempt to better represent the country, as compared to the single-city studies that are usually done, neglecting the fact that underdeveloped infrastructure has preserved relatively disparate regions in China.

A draft questionnaire was prepared based on Rose et al.'s (1998) study and on a focus-group interview of eight parents with children aged seven to eleven, conducted in Beijing in October 2001. One of the authors translated the questionnaire from English to Chinese, and a research assistant then translated it back into English to enhance translated equivalence. The questionnaire was pretested in Beijing by personally interviewing eight parents about its clarity. The questionnaire was revised and tested in Nanjing by personally interviewing another eight parents. The final questionnaires were distributed in six elementary schools (two schools in each selected city) to children in grade one to six, who were instructed to take them home to their parents for completion. Questionnaires were then returned to the schools. Altogether, 1,758 questionnaires were distributed and 1,665 questionnaires were collected (423 from Beijing, 518 from Nanjing, and 724 from Chengdu). The response rate was 94.7 percent. The sample profile is summarized in Table 1. As part of the family planning policy in China is to encourage late marriage and late bearing of children, a majority of the sampled parents with children in elementary schools fell within the age group of 30-39.

TABLE 1 Sample profile

|   | <i>N</i> | <i>Percent</i> |
|---|----------|----------------|
| <i>Sex of parents</i>                               |          |                |
| Male (Fathers)                                      | 684      | 41.8           |
| Female (Mothers)                                    | 953      | 58.2           |
| <i>Age of parents</i>                               |          |                |
| 20-29   | 30       | 1.8            |
| 30-39   | 1337     | 80.9           |
| 40-49   | 224      | 13.6           |
| 50+   | 61       | 3.7            |
| <i>Education</i>                                    |          |                |
| Junior high or below                                | 324      | 19.5           |
| High/Technical school                               | 569      | 34.2           |
| College   | 360      | 21.6           |
| University or above                                 | 412      | 24.7           |
| <i>Occupation</i>                                   |          |                |
| Government official                                 | 182      | 11.1           |
| Senior manager/Administrative                       | 120      | 7.3            |
| Professional/Technical staff                        | 217      | 13.2           |
| General clerical/sales                              | 237      | 14.4           |
| Worker  | 394      | 23.9           |
| Teacher/researcher                                  | 190      | 11.5           |
| Self-employed/Private sector/Freelance professional | 167      | 10.1           |
| Farmer/Other/Unemployed                             | 139      | 8.4            |
| <i>Monthly household income</i>                     |          |                |
| None/1000 yuan or below*                            | 489      | 30.4           |
| 1001-2500 yuan**                                    | 735      | 45.6           |
| 2501-5000 yuan***                                   | 289      | 17.9           |
| 5001 yuan or above****                              | 98       | 6.1            |
| <i>Sex of children</i>                              |          |                |
| Male  | 890      | 51.2           |
| Female  | 849      | 48.8           |
| <i>Age of children</i>                              |          |                |
| 6-7   | 298      | 17.2           |
| 8-9   | 509      | 29.3           |
| 10-11   | 637      | 36.7           |
| 12-14   | 293      | 16.9           |

Total *N*=1,665

\* (US\$ 120 or below); \*\* (US\$ 121-305); \*\*\* (US\$ 306-610); \*\*\*\* (US\$ 611 or above)

## MEASURES

The questionnaire consisted of eighteen statements about attitudes toward advertising and five questions about parental mediation of television viewing of children. The questionnaire closed by requesting various demographic information.

Attitudes toward *television advertising in general* was measured by a 7-item scale (Rossiter, 1977). The scale measured respondents' general skepticism toward television advertising (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994), and their overall beliefs and reactions regarding television advertising tactics. Respondents were asked to rate the seven items on 5-point scales (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly). Inter-item reliability (Cronbach's *alpha*) for the measure was 0.63. The mean formed the measure of attitudes toward advertising with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes toward advertising in general.

Attitudes toward *children's advertising* was measured by asking respondents to rate on similar 5-point scales seven items used by Crosby and Grossbart (1984) and an additional statement about the influence of advertising on children's ability to think independently. Inter-item reliability (Cronbach's *alpha*) for the measure was 0.53. The mean again formed the measure of attitudes toward children's advertising with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes. The two scales were expected to be similar. As expected, we found a strong positive linear correlation between the two scales ( $r=0.55$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), thus enhancing our confidence in the validity of two measures.

Four advertising-related *parental practices* were examined: (1) control of TV viewing, (2) co-viewing, (3) discussions about commercials, and (4) perceived parental influence. The concepts were selected for their theoretical relevance to advertising and comparability with previous studies. Control of TV viewing was measured by asking whether parents place restriction on TV viewing. Parents could choose 'no restriction' or 'yes, there is restriction'. Parents answering the latter were asked to choose the type of restrictions including 'no TV at all', 'restriction on which programs the child can watch', 'restriction on when the child can watch', 'how many hours each day the child can watch', and an open-ended answer of other restrictions. Parents could select more than one type of restriction. Co-viewing was measured by asking how frequently parents watched TV with their children on weekdays, and on Saturdays and Sundays. Discussion about commercials was measured by asking how frequently parents talked with their children about the contents of TV commercials. Both measures were taken on a 5-point scale (very seldom to very often). Perceived parental influence on children's attitudes was measured by asking respondents to rate on a 5-point scale (1 = disagree strongly, 5 = agree strongly) the statement 'parents have influence on children's attitudes toward television advertising'.

## RESULTS

Findings regarding Chinese parents' attitudes toward television advertising and children's advertising are summarized in Table 2. They are sorted in descending order of the mean scores.

TABLE 2 Parent's attitudes toward television advertising and children's advertising

| <i>Items</i>   | <i>Agree/strongly agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i> | <i>Disagree/strongly disagree</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>S.D.</i> |
|--|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
|  | <i>Percentages</i>          |                |                                   |             |             |
| Television commercials tell only the good things about a product, they don't tell you the bad things       | 81.5                        | 7.5            | 11.0                              | 4.0         | 1.0         |
| Television commercials tell the truth <sup>a</sup>   | 3.5                         | 22.0           | 74.5                              | 3.9         | 0.7         |
| The products advertised the most on TV are always the best products to buy <sup>a</sup>                    | 7.8                         | 27.5           | 64.7                              | 3.7         | 0.8         |
| We can believe what is said in commercials <sup>a</sup>  | 8.2                         | 36.1           | 55.7                              | 3.6         | 0.8         |
| I like most television commercials <sup>a</sup>  | 11.0                        | 35.5           | 53.5                              | 3.5         | 0.9         |
| Most television commercials are annoying.  | 51.1                        | 32.2           | 16.7                              | 3.5         | 1.0         |
| Television commercials try to make people buy things they don't really need                                | 36.8                        | 34.9           | 28.3                              | 3.1         | 1.0         |
| <b>Average negative attitude toward advertising</b>  |                             |                |                                   | <b>3.6</b>  | <b>0.5</b>  |
| Parents have the responsibility to explain the misleading contents in the advertisements to their children | 81.5                        | 13.9           | 4.6                               | 3.9         | 0.7         |
| All advertising should be banned on children's program hours   | 58.1                        | 28.3           | 18.4                              | 3.6         | 1.0         |
| There is too much sugar in the foods advertised to children  | 52.9                        | 28.7           | 18.4                              | 3.4         | 1.0         |
| Advertising teaches children bad eating habits   | 43.7                        | 33.6           | 22.7                              | 3.3         | 1.0         |
| Advertisers use gimmicks such as lucky draw and premiums to get children to buy their products             | 49.8                        | 16.2           | 34.0                              | 3.2         | 1.3         |
| There is not too much advertising directed at children <sup>a</sup>  | 26.1                        | 35.7           | 38.1                              | 3.1         | 0.9         |
| Advertising directed at children leads to family conflict  | 36.9                        | 34.4           | 28.7                              | 3.1         | 1.0         |
| Advertising makes children imitate and lose the ability to think independently                             | 26.8                        | 42.0           | 31.2                              | 2.9         | 1.0         |
| <b>Average negative attitude toward children's advertising</b>   |                             |                |                                   | <b>3.3</b>  | <b>0.5</b>  |

<sup>a</sup>Reverse coded when compiling the mean

**TABLE 3** Co-viewing, discussion about commercials and perceived parental influence

|                                   | <i>Very seldom/<br/>seldom</i>   | <i>Sometimes</i> | <i>Very often/<br/>often</i>           | <i>Mean</i> | <i>S.D.</i> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|--|-------------|-------------|
| <i>Percentages</i>                |                                  |                  |  |             |             |
| Co-viewing on weekdays            | 62.1                             | 20.0             | 17.9                                   | 2.2         | 1.2         |
| Co-viewing on weekends            | 17.6                             | 31.5             | 50.9                                   | 3.4         | 1.1         |
| Discuss commercials with children | 51.7                             | 33.6             | 14.8                                   | 2.4         | 1.1         |
|                                   | <i>Agree/<br/>strongly agree</i> | <i>Neutral</i>   | <i>Disagree/<br/>strongly disagree</i> | <i>Mean</i> | <i>S.D.</i> |
| <i>Percentages</i>                |                                  |                  |  |             |             |
| Perceived parental influence      | 49.7                             | 34.8             | 15.5                                   | 3.4         | 0.8         |

Parents generally held negative attitudes toward television advertising (mean = 3.6). Parents were skeptical about the truthfulness of television commercials. A large proportion of the parents believed that television commercials do not present a true picture of the product and do not tell the truth. They did not believe in commercials. They did not like most commercials and found them annoying. However, they did not perceive television commercials to be manipulative.

Chinese parents also held negative attitudes toward children's advertising (mean = 3.3). Parents strongly felt that they have the responsibility to protect children from misleading commercials and they supported banning of television commercials during children's program hours. They showed concern about the bad influence of food advertising on children's eating habits. They were neutral about the amount of advertising directed at children and the possible family conflict brought by children's pestering. Again, they did not think that children's advertising is manipulative.

Ninety-eight percent of parents exercised some control over children's television viewing. The most common types of control were restricting the content (58 percent of parents) and time of viewing (46 percent of parents). Twenty-eight percent of parents placed restrictions on how many hours each day their children can watch TV. Four percent of parents allowed children to watch TV on weekends while three percent allowed children to watch TV only after they finished all their homework. Three percent of parents did not allow their children to watch any TV.

The extent to which Chinese parents mediate television viewing is summarized in Table 3. Nearly two-thirds of parents reported that they seldom watch

television with children on weekdays. Co-viewing with children was more common during weekends. Parents seldom discussed with their children commercials they saw on television. Despite the low level of discussion, parents felt strongly that they have influence on their children's attitudes toward television advertising.

F-statistics tests (not shown) were conducted to examine whether parents' attitudes toward advertising depend on demographic variables of the parents and the children. Parents' attitudes toward television advertising and children's advertising varied among different demographic groups. Attitudes toward children's advertising were more negative among mothers than fathers. Parents aged 40-49 held the most negative attitudes toward television advertising while older parents aged 50-59 held the least negative attitudes. Parents with higher educational level, teachers and researchers, and parents with medium household income level were more negative toward both advertising in general and children's advertising in specific. Parents with low educational level held the least negative attitudes. Parents of boys and parents of girls did not differ in their attitudes toward advertising. However, parents of younger children were more negative toward children's advertising.

F-statistics tests were also conducted to investigate whether parents' mediation of television viewing depends on demographic variables of the parents and children. Parental control of television viewing did not differ among all demographic groups. Fathers co-viewed more frequently with children than mothers. Workers more often watched television with children than teachers, researchers and government officials. Parents with no household income 1,000 yuan or below watched television more frequently with their children. Parents with a higher educational level and parents of younger children watched television less frequently with their children. Parents engaged in professional/technical jobs discussed television commercials with their children more often than workers. Parents with higher educational level perceived that they could influence children's attitudes toward television advertising more. Teachers/researchers and parents with medium household income (2,501-5,000 yuan) also perceived themselves to be more influential.

Pearson correlation of parents' attitudes toward advertising and parental mediation of television viewing is compiled and summarized in Table 4. Results indicate that parents' attitudes toward television advertising in general and toward children's advertising specifically had no significant correlation with parental control of television viewing. Co-viewing and discussion of commercials were negatively correlated with attitudes, indicating that parents who hold more negative attitudes toward television advertising were less likely to watch television with children and were also less likely to discuss commercials with them. Parents with more negative attitudes toward television advertising and children's advertising, however, perceived that they have greater influence on their children's attitudes toward television advertising.

**TABLE 4** Pearson correlations of parents' attitudes toward advertising and parental mediation of television viewing

| <i>Parental mediation</i>      | <i>Negative attitudes toward television advertising</i> | <i>Negative attitudes toward children's advertising</i> |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Parental control of TV viewing | 0.04  | 0.02  |
| Co-viewing on weekdays         | -0.09***  | -0.04   |
| Co-viewing on weekends         | -0.07**   | 0.00  |
| Discuss TV commercials         | -0.07**   | 0.03  |
| Perceived parental influence   | 0.12***   | 0.18 <sup>a</sup> **                                    |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.0001$

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Chinese parents are dissatisfied with television advertising in general and children's advertising specifically. The dissatisfaction stems mainly from the perception that television advertising is biased and does not tell the truth. They generally do not like commercials and find them annoying. The current study confirmed the increasingly negative attitudes toward advertising among Chinese consumers, which is consistent with the new generations' attitudes obtained in Liu's (2002) study.

Parents generally perceive that food advertising to children encourages bad eating habits and they do not like promotional activities that target children. Marketers and advertisers should be aware that parents' negative attitudes toward advertising will probably have a significant impact on their advertising activities. It is possible that negative attitudes toward advertising will eventually be translated into negative attitudes toward individual commercials or even advertised brands. It suggests that advertising agencies and advertisers should be responsible in creating more socially acceptable advertising messages. To policy makers, the dissatisfaction of advertising may mean a move for government to increase its regulation of deceptive commercials. If the regulatory body does not take the parents' concerns seriously, parents may develop a mistrust of the government. It could eventually undermine the credibility of the government.

It was found that negative attitudes toward television advertising are strongest among parents with higher educational levels, and among teachers and researchers. This may be because these groups of parents are more critical and are more concerned about the deceptive content of advertising. Similarly, parents of younger children are more critical than parents of older children. This may be because parents of younger children are worried about the children's inability to identify misleading content in commercials.

Parents' strong negative attitudes toward advertising may reflect a general increase in awareness of their consumer rights to be informed responsibly. The

development of consumerism in any country is often a product of economic, social and technological evolution. In China, empowering Chinese consumers suffered from a number of problems, including the lack of active consumer participation and the incompatibility between economic and political reform (Ho, 1997). The existing political system does not have open channels for parents to air their discontent about advertising. We expect that when parents become more aware of their consumer rights, there will be increasing numbers of complaints about advertising to children. Advertisers should be prepared to negotiate with the consumers in the new market environment.

Compared to Greenberg et al.'s (1991) data and Zhao's (1996) data collected in the 1980s, the current study reported even stronger parental control of television viewing. Zhao (1996) argued that parental control over media content reflected an ever more competitive school system and the increasing commercialization of television. The current finding therefore suggests that the school system has become more competitive and/or television content more commercialized in the past ten to fifteen years. It appears that parents are stepping in to replace the party to screen the flow of undesirable ideology and values to their children. To marketers and advertisers, this is important because their commercials must be scheduled near television programs or time periods that are acceptable to parents. Otherwise, the children would never have a chance to watch these commercials. Similar to Zhao's (1996) study, parental control was found to be independent of all demographic variables, suggesting that the single child policy has defined a new relationship between parents and their only child.

As the level of parental control of television viewing of children was already very high, parents' attitudes toward television advertising and children's advertising was not positively correlated, indicating that parents did not tighten the control of watching even if they held more negative attitudes. Parents who are critical about advertising are not participating actively to mediate the effects of television advertising on children by providing on-the-spot guidance to children. From a consumer education point of view, the finding is worrying. Parents' strong feeling that advertising should be banned during children's hours seems to suggest that Chinese parents rely on the government to set and enforce the rules to control the effects of advertising on children. This may be because parents do not perceive that they possess the knowledge or the ability to mediate the effects of advertising on their children. As there is a lack of child-advocate groups in China, dissatisfied parents can hardly express their concerns about children's advertising. Parents who have more negative attitudes perceive that they could have a greater influence on their children's attitudes, despite a lower level of co-viewing and discussion. It seems to suggest that parents perceive that they could exercise their influence through coercion, rather than through communication. Further research is needed to examine whether Chinese parents are over-estimating their influence on children.

In view of the prevalence of negative attitudes toward advertising among parents, marketers and advertisers should take the initiative to reinforce self-regulation. This, in turn, will help to reestablish credibility among consumers.

As the survey was conducted in three cities in urban China, the findings cannot really be generalized for rural China, where the social and economic conditions are very different, and there are also limits to generalizing them to parents with very young children (under 6) or to the parents of adolescents (aged 13 or above).

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