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Let us go shopping: exploring Northwest Chinese consumers' shopping experiences

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Abstract

With economic development and improvement of living standards, China has become an important and competitive consumer market. It becomes critical to understand Chinese consumers' shopping behaviour, especially that of largely neglected Northwest Chinese consumers. This study explores Northwest Chinese consumers' shopping experiences. The in-depth interview revealed key retail factors that affect local consumers' shopping experiences, including atmospherics, store design, social environment, customer services and merchandise elements. The findings suggest that Northwest Chinese consumers have become more westernized, and the shopping experience has become important for local consumers. The study contributes to the literature by providing valuable insights for retailers aiming to expand to the large retail market in Northwest China.

Keywords

Chinese consumer, Northwest China, shopping experiences, retail store.

Introduction

Since China's economic reform beginning in the late 1970s, government deregulation has helped a central-planned economy to become more market-oriented, which dramatically transformed the Chinese retail industry. Before the 1980s, the major retail stores in urban China were state-owned department stores and grocery stores. Soon after China opened its retail market to foreign retailers in 1992, international retailers such as Carrefour and Wal-Mart quickly entered the Chinese market (Wong and Yu, 2002). Different stores and outlets such as supermarkets and warehouse clubs came into being. The co-existence of different stores and foreign retailers significantly changed China's modern retail landscape (Powers, 2000). Meanwhile, China has become an important international consumer market with its emerging middle classes. The annual per capita disposable income of urban residents increased by about 250% from 2000 to 2008 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2009). With an increase in purchasing power and abundant choices of products and retail stores, Chinese consumers become more demanding (Wang et al., 2008). The economic value of merchandise, store image, shopping conditions inside the store and service quality, all affect their satisfaction (Wang et al., 2008). Recreational shopping, which is shopping as a leisure activity to satisfy social and personal needs (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980), may have become important in China. Therefore, Chinese consumers may seek and emphasize shopping experiences rather than pure acquisition of goods and services in the marketplace.

However, Chinese consumer characteristics are not the same as those of their Western counterparts. Chinese consumers' unique shopping behaviour and attitudes constrain the success of some foreign investors (Mai and Zhao, 2004). Furthermore, China is composed of a number of regional markets (Tsang et al., 2003). Because of such factors as unbalanced economic development between coastal and inland regions and changes in personal values as part of a changing social environment (Zhang et al., 2008), Chinese consumers from different regional markets have very distinct shopping and purchasing behaviours (Tse et al., 1989; Cui, 1997; Cui and Liu, 2000). So, the Chinese retail market is very dynamic and challenging for international retailers and researchers as well.

Although more studies have focused on understanding Chinese consumers, the majority of them used samples from more developed southern and eastern regions and important coastal cities such as Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou (e.g. Tang et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2004; Tai, 2005). After the West China Development project was initiated in early 2000, the relatively understudied western China has drawn more attention because of its rich resources and large market scope. So, it is important to understand consumers from this region. Furthermore, although shopping may have become important for today's Chinese consumers, few studies focus on understanding

their shopping experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore factors affecting Northwest Chinese consumers' shopping experiences. The study contributes to the literature on understanding Northwest Chinese consumers better. The findings not only provide insights into international retailers and marketers for entering this relatively underdeveloped retail market but also help domestic retailers better strategize to compete effectively with incoming international retailers.

Literature review

Chinese retail industry and its markets

Before the open-door policy was implemented in 1978, the retail industry in China was heavily regulated. State-owned stores purchased merchandise from state-owned manufacturers (Sternquist and Zhou, 1995). Heavy government control on production, distribution and prices resulted in almost identical merchandise varieties and prices in the same region. As demand exceeded supply to a large degree, there was virtually no competition among retailers (Sternquist et al., 2010). After the late 1970s, the retail industry in China went through three phases (Wang et al., 2008). The first phase was from 1981 to 1990, during which time the state-owned stores were still dominant, and there was limited supply and choices in the marketplace. The second phase was from 1991 to 2000. Modern retail formats and merchandising strategies came into being with the entrance of international retailers. Different stores, including 'supermarkets, warehouse clubs, large-scale specialized stores, convenience stores, modern department stores and shopping malls' became available (Wang et al., 2008, p. 156). Phase three began in 2001, when hypermarkets and supermarkets became important retail outlets (Lin and Chang, 2003). With China's joining the World Trade Organization in 2001, an increasing number of international retailers entered the Chinese market (Liu, 2007). By the end of 2004, the retail market became totally open, and foreign retailers were permitted to have 100% ownership, which further pushed the transition of the Chinese retail industry (Liu, 2007). The retail industry in China grew tremendously in the past decade. Retail sales of consumer goods increased 325% from 1998 to 2008 and reached 10.8 trillion RMB in 2008 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2009). With fast growth comes competition, and the retail market in China has become a competitive battlefield for both domestic and international retailers (Wang et al., 2008).

Based on economic development and consumer purchasing power, China can be segmented into seven regional markets, namely South, East, North, Central, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast (Cui and Liu, 2000). The South and East are the most developed 'growth markets' and the Northeast and Northwest are the least developed 'untapped markets' (Cui and Liu, 2000).

Northwest China is the largest regional market by physical size. It accounts for about 59% of the national geographic area and 12% of the national population (China Statistical Yearbook, 2009). This region has become more attractive to international investors since the late 1990s, when they were given the same investment privileges previously available only in coastal areas (Liu, 2007). Since the end of 2004, a number of leading Chinese retailers such as Beijing Hualian have extended to inland China including the northwest region. New retail formats such as supermarkets have become more common in even less developed provinces. However, international retailers have not aggressively entered into this vast market. Facing the competitive and highly developed retail environment in the coastal area, both domestic and international retailers have and will continue to expand geographically to inland China, further changing the local retail environment (Liu, 2007).

Consumption experiences

Experience-oriented consumption perspective has become important in understanding consumer behaviour since the 1980s. Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) defined consumption experience as 'an emergent property that results from a complex system of mutually overlapping interrelationships in constant reciprocal interaction with personal, environmental, and situational inputs' (p. 219). In this definition, personal inputs are viewed from the perspective of personal motivation, and the environmental input is defined by its capacity as a potential source of information (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986). Compared with the traditional buying-oriented consumption perspective, experience-oriented consumption perspective emphasizes subjectivity and symbolism. Researchers now argue hedonic and utilitarian distinctions in consumer behaviour. Hedonic consumption is about experiential events, sensory or imaginary stimulation, while utilitarian consumption is the state of planning, decision making and achieving goals (Lofman, 1991). In other words, hedonic consumption views consumption as an end in itself, while

utilitarian consumption treats consumption as a means towards an end (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). Meanwhile, consumers can be both hedonic-oriented and utilitarian-oriented. A hedonic consumer seeks experience and enjoyment, while a utilitarian consumer follows decision-making strategy (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980).

Shopping experiences

From consumers' perspective, the natural interface with the marketplace is the shopping experience. Consumers go shopping to satisfy unfulfilled needs that go far beyond acquiring goods and services (Tauber, 1972; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Shopping can be more product-oriented or experience-oriented (Westbrook and Black, 1985; Babin et al., 1994). Product-oriented shopping, also termed as utilitarian or functional shopping, focuses on rational thinking and having the job done efficiently (Babin et al., 1994). Experience-oriented shopping, also called hedonic or recreational shopping, focuses on fun and sensory excitement (Babin et al., 1994), and the fulfilment of such needs as gaining ideas, improving personal well-being and socializing with others (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Modern consumers have become increasingly sophisticated and demanding with the availability of abundant products, services, information, technology, as well as retail stores and channels (Terblanche and Boshoff, 2004). The shopping experience becomes a central element of consumers' lives, and hedonic shopping value becomes essential (Babin et al., 1994).

Existing literature identified and conceptualized several key retail factors affecting consumers' shopping experiences, including atmospherics (Kotler, 1973; Bitner, 1992), store design (Bitner, 1992; Hoffman and Turley, 2002), social environment (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002), customer services (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Terblanche and Boshoff, 2004) and merchandise elements (Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006). Atmospherics, or ambient environment, refers to the intangible elements of store atmosphere such as colours, music, temperature, air quality, noise, scents, store space and store decor (Markin et al., 1976; Bellizzi and Hite, 1992). Atmospherics affect consumers' five senses. Positive atmospherics improve consumers' mood, which is crucial for delivering pleasant shopping experiences and creating consumers' approach shopping behaviour (Spies et al., 1997). Store design refers to tangible elements of store atmosphere and mainly concerns store layout and display (Hoffman and Turley, 2002). Positive experiences arise if the layout is logical and facilitates consumers' shopping movement (Bitner, 1992; Jones, 1999). Display, the way the merchandise and other articles such as mannequins and fixtures are organized and presented, is essential for stimulating consumers' shopping interest and creating hedonic shopping value (Babin et al., 1994).

Social environment is created by interactions consumers have with other shoppers and store personnel (Sullivan and Adcock, 2002). However, while some scholars found that socializing with family and friends as well as other shoppers contributes to enjoyable shopping experiences (McGrath and Otnes, 1995; Jones, 1999), others argue that socialization has become much less important for shopping enjoyment (Cox et al., 2005). Meanwhile, store personnel and sales associates are critical in creating entertaining shopping experiences. Store personnel's mood (Kelley and Hoffman, 1997), product knowledge (Jones, 1999) and credibility (Swinyard, 1995), all affect customer services, which can either make shopping fun and exciting or really miserable. While some aspects of customer services are related to store personnel, others are mainly related to service systems and solutions (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006). Such elements as opening and closing times, offering fresh water or coffee, parking facilities, accepting credit cards, as well as handling of returns, exchanges and complaints (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006), all affect consumers' shopping experiences. When it comes to merchandise elements, merchandise quality, price, assortment and variety are all identified (Jones, 1999; Terblanche and Boshoff, 2004). The trade-off between product quality and price is often defined as merchandise value. Getting money's worth is important for some consumers' satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1994). Entertaining shopping experiences often happen with good variety and unique merchandise and when consumers feel they get a good deal (Jones, 1999).

Chinese consumers' shopping behavior

Existing studies present Chinese consumers as largely functional shoppers. For example, Li et al. (2004) concluded that compared with their American counterparts, Chinese consumers' mall visits were mainly motivated by a purchase purpose or for browsing. Few studies on Chinese consumers' shopping experiences only explored the effects of physical environment. Zhou and Wong (2004) found that the in-store stimuli, specifically the promotional and atmospheric effects of point of purchase (POP) posters, can influence Chinese consumers' impulse buying

behaviour. Tang et al. (2001) argued that perceived physical environment does affect Chinese consumers' emotions, patronage intention and expenditures. Hedonic shopping orientation has become evident in other emerging markets such as Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2007) and India (Kaur and Singh, 2007). Shopping has also become an important social occasion in major Chinese cities where families and friends stroll around marketplaces window-shopping (Sternquist and Zhou, 1995). Therefore, Chinese consumers may become more hedonic-oriented as consumers in other emerging markets.

Overall, literature indicates that shopping experiences are very important for modern consumers and many factors contribute to positive shopping experiences. However, the main body of literature has focused on Western consumers and markets. It is unclear if Chinese consumers, especially those in less developed regions of China, value similar shopping experiences as Western consumers. Neither do we know if the same market elements identified in the main body of literature are equally important to Chinese consumers, nor do we know how shopping experiences affect their patronage behaviour. Therefore, limited studies fail to provide a holistic view on shopping environment and experiences in the Chinese market.

Methodology

In order to explore Northwest Chinese consumers' shopping experiences, a qualitative study with in-depth interviews was conducted in Lanzhou City, the capital of Gansu province with a population of 3.3 million in the Summer 2009. Lanzhou is attractive for its lower relative costs and government efforts to curb pollution and attract commerce (US-China Business Council, 2002). Its retail landscape has changed dramatically since 2000, with the opening of the first supermarket – Lanzhou Hualian. Modern supermarkets, department stores, convenience stores and fashion boutiques have become common retail outlets. International brands such as Calvin Klein and Louis Vuitton also have all entered the local market. Therefore, local consumers now enjoy a large variety of retail stores as well as products and services. The changing retail landscape of Lanzhou and its importance in the western region makes it an ideal place to explore consumer shopping behaviour.

A qualitative research methodology was necessary because it is useful in gaining insights from consumers' own perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, because of the lack of relevant research in the field and the exploratory nature of the study, in-depth interviews proved to be very effective (Thompson et al., 1989). Eighteen adult Chinese consumers from different age groups, education levels, occupations and income levels participated in the study, ensuring a variety of views and opinions. The diversity among the participants can be clearly shown through their employment status, which included office personnel, researchers, homemakers, small store owners, retired factory workers and doctors. Ten of the participants were in their 20s and 30s, six in their 40s and 50s, and two were 60 or older. The majority of the participants were females (14), and four participants were males. All participants were regular consumers that engaged in frequent shopping for their daily lives. Participants were recruited using the snowball technique. Five initial participants from different demographical background recruited the rest of the participants. This sampling approach helped to ensure that the results would be in accordance with the subject of investigation (Ruyter and Scholl, 1998).

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the interviews were lightly structured, that is, the interviews used focused, open-ended and non-directive questions in which discussion followed participants' responses and issues (Mariampolski, 2001). Based on the shopping literature, the first group of interview questions was designed to learn participants' shopping motives and shopping orientation. Then they were asked to share where they like to shop and explain why. The last group of questions asked participants to discuss their most pleasant and unpleasant shopping trips and probed major factors that affected their shopping experiences. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted 30–60 min each. Interviews took place in a number of locations that were convenient for participants including their homes, offices and shops. The interviews were audio-taped with participants' agreement and transcribed into text later. Content analysis method was used to analyse the data. Several cycles of part-to-whole interpretive procedures were conducted to organize the raw data and to generate conceptual schemes based on the data (Spiggle, 1994). Quotations were translated into English and then back-translated into Chinese to ensure accuracy of the English translation (Malhotra, 2009).

There were two goals during the data analysis process: to identify text that is related to retail elements identified in the shopping experience literature and to investigate possible themes that lie outside existing aspects. In line with an exploratory approach, the purpose was to identify all the common themes from consumers' perspectives (Spiggle,

1994). The conceptual schemes are organized into atmospherics, store design, social environment, services and merchandise factors as identified in the literature. Sub-themes are discussed within each theme.

Findings

Empirical findings from data are presented in the following sections. The discussion focuses on how different elements affected participants' shopping experiences and behaviour.

Atmospherics

Participants cited many elements of atmospherics, and the most frequently discussed one is the store space. Participants claimed enjoying roomy and spacious shopping environment without too much hustle and bustle, such as busy stocking activities or big crowd. Too many other shoppers make some participants very uncomfortable and feel 'being squeezed' or 'nervous'. Meanwhile, large crowd makes shopping difficult because it becomes harder to find and pick up what they want, and then beat the crowd to check out.

If there are too many people around, you will become so nervous because you have to hurry up and get in the checkout line quickly. That is difficult. (#7)

Participants also discussed light, music, scent, air, noise, temperature and hygiene. They expressed the desire for fresh air, absence of strong smell such as fried food odours, low levels of noises and bright lights. Soft music, pleasant scent, interesting lighting and proper temperature, all contribute to pleasant shopping experiences. Some participants even try to avoid traditional free markets and street vendors, and choose to shop at modern supermarkets and department stores because of those concerns.

I like Jiashijie [a local supermarket] because of its shopping environment. Once you get inside the store, the bright light makes you happy. It also makes the store look very clean. We like to shop in a clean environment. (#15)

Store design

The data reveal three major sub-themes of store design: visual display, store layout and convenient facilities. Some participants choose to shop at stores that have appealing visual display. Appreciating unique displays is enjoyable for participants.

Apparel of 'Feng Mang' brand is always folded neatly. One time folded garments were displayed in large plates with knife and fork beside it. That was neat. It makes me happy seeing beautiful displays. (#8)

Good layout can help participants find items easier. Meanwhile, interesting layout can inspire their shopping interest.

The interior design of some department stores is very unique and interesting. Sometimes the products you see around the entrance are so-so, but the further you go inside, the better the styles become. That simulates shoppers to walk further into the store. (#12)

The sub-theme that is rarely discussed in the literature is the unavailability of convenient facilities such as resting areas or bathrooms. The lack of those facilities makes some participants avoid spending too much time in stores and sometimes leads to unpleasant shopping experiences.

Many stores don't have bathrooms or resting areas at all. Some stores have a couple of chairs, but you never can get a turn to sit there. After shopping for a while, you become so tired and want to leave right away. (#6)

Social environment

The data reveal that social environment created by interacting with others is very important for having a pleasant shopping experience. Although many participants do not enjoy a crowded shopping environment, they do appreciate the presence of other shoppers and interaction with others while shopping. Some participants claim that seeing other

'happy' shoppers makes them happy, and others explained how interacting with other shoppers made their shopping trip interesting.

Although I don't like big crowds, having other consumers around makes shopping more enjoyable. It would be very boring if there are only few shoppers in a big store, as if there were more associates than shoppers. (#12)

The interaction with store personnel is especially important for participants. They explained that patient, easy-going and honest personnel really make their shopping enjoyable, and personnel with bad attitude can ruin their pleasant mood completely. They also claimed that aggressive selling is very common.

Shopping should be a pleasant experience. But usually it is very unpleasant because of harsh sale representatives who have bad attitudes and poor choices of language. (#10)

The creditability of personnel is critical. Participants complained a lot about dishonest store personnel. Some personnel exaggerated the features and functions of their merchandise. Participants not only felt being cheated, but also disrespected.

When you ask about a product, they will not say anything bad about it. They only talk about good things. Sometimes they don't know the product at all. That's kind of annoying. (#3)

Some store personnel were rude towards customers. They treated participants poorly or ignored them when they thought they could not afford the merchandise. They even verbally abused some participants when they decided not to make a purchase.

Because of poor attitudes from store personnel, some participants try to avoid conflicts by shopping at supermarkets for the self-service format. For them, it is more enjoyable to have limited interaction with store personnel. Some participants even try not to bargain any more when they go shopping, despite bargaining being a typical shopping behaviour for Chinese consumers.

It is fun shopping at supermarkets. They are so different from old-fashioned stores because as long as you have not checked out, you can exchange as many times as you want to without talking to a sale clerk! (#17)

The last key element for social environment is companionship. The majority of the participants claim that they like shopping with family, friends and colleagues. Participants explained that shopping with others can help them judge the quality and style of merchandise, as well as bargain and negotiate a better deal. Some participants shop to hang out and socialize with each other. Some shop with others for companionship, making shopping easier while sharing a good time.

I like shopping with others. I feel very lonely when I shop by myself. What is more important is that when you buy something you really need other people's opinion. (#9)

Services

Participants also cited services related to service systems, store policies and complaint handling, as suggested by the literature (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Terblanche and Boshoff, 2004). Participants discussed the length of checkout lines, the ease of exchanging or returning unsatisfactory merchandise, the availability of store personnel when needed and the possibility of getting proper service when requested. Long checkout lines are revealed to be a common problem in supermarkets. Some participants found it was very frustrating and even discarded chosen merchandise to avoid that unpleasant situation. Because of the lack of a return policy and customer retention strategy, it is very hard for participants to return or exchange unsatisfactory merchandise, even in big department stores and supermarkets.

If you find something wrong with the product you just bought and want to return it, the customer service personnel will give you a very hard time, which makes you pretty upset. (#5)

However, participants did not mention other service elements such as convenient operation hours and parking

space, as the literature suggested. Overall, the data reveal that bad customer services are common in the local marketplace, which dramatically impacts participants' shopping experiences.

I feel that the biggest problem in the market is the bad customer service. Not just in retail stores, even in places like banks, the services are very bad. It makes me angry. (#18)

Merchandise factors

Participants also evaluated their shopping experiences based on product quality when they use the product. Poor product quality usually leads to poor evaluations of their shopping experiences.

Some retailers don't think about consumers at all. Innocent people will be cheated. For example, the shoes we bought for Taiji performance broke soon after we started the performance. We were very upset about it. (#4)

Product price is another important merchandise element. Some participants claimed that 'reasonable price' makes their shopping experiences pleasant. More often, price is evaluated with quality, so participants used such terms as 'deal', 'value' and 'money's worth'. Sometimes value is more important for participants rather than low prices.

I feel the best thing about that shopping trip is that the quality of all the merchandise was very good. Compared with prices, they were good deals. So, it was a very pleasant shopping experience. (#10)

Discussion and implications

This study investigated Northwest Chinese consumers' shopping behaviour by exploring shopping experiences. Findings indicate that like Western consumers, participants' shopping experiences are affected by many factors. Besides commonly discussed elements of atmospherics and store design in the literature (e.g. Jones, 1999; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006), participants emphasized the importance of spacious store environment and availability of convenient retail facilities. Meanwhile, social environment created by interacting with others appears to be a key factor. Participants sought a supportive social environment, especially the one created by interacting with sales personnel. Participants revealed a number of sales personnel elements discussed in the literature, including personality, attitude, credibility, people skills and selling skills. Those personnel elements contributed not only to shopping enjoyment but also to customer service quality (Swinyard, 1995; Kelley and Hoffman, 1997). Furthermore, supported by the literature (e.g. Jones, 1999; Bäckström and Johansson, 2006), product prices and quality played a significant role in creating a positive shopping experience for participants.

Contrary to existing literature, the findings of this study suggest that Chinese consumers are very hedonic-oriented. Participants desire and seek positive shopping experiences. Having a pleasant shopping experience becomes a key store choice criterion, as some participants revealed that they chose to avoid traditional retail outlets and shop at supermarkets because of it. Supermarkets provide not only a pleasant shopping environment and appealing atmospherics but also the convenience of self-service retail format. Their focus on shopping experiences and enjoyment goes beyond pure acquisition of goods and services. Therefore, emphasizing experiential consumption can help retailers become more competitive in the Chinese retail market.

Overall, local consumers' shopping behaviour is becoming more like Western consumers'. Participants desired quality goods, reasonable prices, excellent customer service, respectful and professional store personnel, pleasant atmospherics, logical store layout and considerate store design with convenient facilities. However, there still exist some differences between Chinese and Western consumers. Although shopping with others becomes less important for creating pleasant shopping experiences (Cox et al., 2005), the findings reveal that shopping with others is very important for participants. It supports the literature that shopping has become an important social event in China (Sternquist and Zhou, 1995).

Although local consumers become more demanding and hedonic-oriented, some retailers fail to recognize the importance of consumer experiences and satisfaction. Many stores still lack basic retail elements such as authentic product, respectful customer service and convenient facilities. Store personnel lack customer service training, desirable people skills and selling techniques. Those retailers should adopt the marketing concept aggressively, addressing different market elements to avoid being left behind, or even create competitive advantages. Given the

importance of socialization for local consumers, retailers may want to emphasize a shopping environment that makes shopping with others easier and enjoyable. Spacious store layout and facilities such as a lounge area or snack bar can be very appealing. Meanwhile, better trained sales personnel will not only improve customer service quality but also meet some shoppers' social needs. Retailers may also want to focus on supplier quality and provide authentic merchandise to turn casual shoppers into loyal customers.

Special care should also be given to implementing other customer service components that are not directly related to store personnel. Store policy on handling returns, exchanges and complaints is essential for creating positive consumer experiences and forming customer loyalty (Dabholkar et al., 1996; Terblanche and Boshoff, 2004). Although participants did not cite other service elements such as parking facilities and acceptance of credit cards, retailers may want to pay attention to those aspects because of the lifestyle changes in China. In conclusion, to be successful in the local market, retailers should understand their target consumers and apply modern business strategies such as a loyalty programme and value delivery to improve customer retention and satisfaction.

Conclusion and future studies

Although many researchers have studied Chinese consumers' shopping behaviour, few focused on Chinese consumers' shopping experiences, especially those of consumers in less developed regions. This study contributes to the literature by shedding light on the shopping behaviour of Northwest Chinese consumers. The study not only revealed important retail factors affecting local consumers' shopping experiences but also identified some key issues in the market. The findings suggest that understanding the role of experiences in local consumers' patronage behaviour is critical for retailers to be successful in increasingly competitive Chinese retail markets. Therefore, the study provides valuable insights into international retailers aiming to expand to this regional market. It further confirms that it is critical to understand local Chinese consumers before entering regional markets as the findings indicate that although Northwest Chinese consumers are becoming similar to their Western counterparts, there still exist some major differences. Therefore, it would be problematic to apply Western marketing and merchandising strategies directly in Chinese markets.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample size, caution must be exercised in interpreting the data to ensure that it is not applied beyond its inherent scope. So, findings should not be generalized to the whole Northwest Chinese population. Qualitative studies with larger sample sizes and quantitative studies that validate and evaluate the findings of this study are much needed. Future studies may also want to explore the difference among shoppers from different regional markets. Given the importance of hedonic shopping for Chinese consumers, future studies may investigate the role of hedonic and utilitarian shopping value in consumers' patronage behaviour. Additional research can provide more valuable information and insights for both Chinese and international retailers in order to better serve Chinese consumers and compete in the increasingly challenging retail markets of China.

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