



China's Green Shoppers: Attitudes and Beliefs

As China's living standards have improved and awareness of issues such as pollution and food safety has grown, Chinese consumers have become more environmentally conscious and more willing to buy green products. The country's 13th Five-Year Plan also supports this growth in green consumption. Consumer focus group discussions conducted by the *HKTDC Research* on the mainland [1] have provided further evidence confirming that consumer demand for green products, particularly food/drinks and household cleaning and personal care products, is on the rise. Most consumers are attracted by the personal safety and health benefits of green products.

Green Becomes a Lifestyle Attitude

In recent years, mainland middle-class consumers have become increasingly concerned about health issues. They have also become much more demanding about the quality of the products they buy. It became clear from the focus group discussions that mainland consumers directly equate green products with the health and safety issues that they care about. With a growing public outcry against problems like smog, genetically-modified food and formaldehyde content, going green has become a lifestyle. Green products associated with premium price, big brands and foreign imports are becoming trendsetters. The following views were heard during the discussions:

"Green is likely to become a lifestyle attitude. Initially not many people talked about environmental protection, but in the last couple of years even the government, public institutions and propaganda machines have been stepping up their publicity and calling upon people to go green. The development of bike sharing, in particular, has further fuelled the discussion."

"Now people are buying green products when they go shopping, thinking that these have better quality and will do less harm to the body. This is fashion. A trend is set when everybody is buying the same things."

General Perception: Safe and Healthy

As some focus group participants pointed out, mainland consumers' perception of green products is mostly focused on the products' ingredients, efficacy and labelling. Terms like "safe", "healthy", "natural", "toxin-free", "no additives", "energy-saving", "green labelling", "organic", "original ecology" and "no public hazard" were some of those most often cited. Only a few respondents from first-tier cities said attention should also be paid to the environmental costs and/or benefits involved in the production of the goods, as well as those in their consumption.

There is a difference between consumers in first-tier and second-tier cities in their perception of green products. Those in the first-tier cities not only see the health and safety benefits of the products themselves, but are also willing to consider issues like



water-saving, recycling and environmental protection. One respondent from Shanghai said:

"The green concept that people talk about may be good only to themselves but not to society. Take environmental protection, for instance. Public awareness is still quite poor. In foreign countries, people care about whether garbage is properly sorted and whether used batteries are put in the right places for recycling."

Green Spending Surges

Although very few respondents in the focus groups could say precisely how much they spent on green products, everyone said they had spent significantly more on these items in the past two years. Some estimated they had increased their spending on green products by as much as 30 to 40%. Others reported that their expenditure on green products amounted to a half, or even more, of their total spending. Most expected to spend even more on green products in future. Some respondents said that buying green products was their primary consideration. Energy-saving was also an important factor for some. A Shanghai respondent told the focus group:

"I will definitely think about eco-friendliness and energy efficiency when I go shopping or need to decorate my house. Functions are one thing, but energy-saving is an issue that needs to be taken into account."

Families with children tend to show even more concern about the environment than consumers in general. A respondent from Chengdu said: "We had no children a few years ago. Now that we have our own kid, we pay much greater attention to green concept and eco-friendliness in articles, toys and clothing for babies and children and in the things we eat."

Great Varieties

There is a wide variety of green products consumed by mainland consumers. They can be classified into the following nine categories:

- Food and drink (including organic food, green food, and pollution-free food)
- Household cleaning products (such as cleaning supplies, detergent, eco-friendly batteries and recycled paper)
- Personal care products (skincare products and cosmetics, toiletries, female hygiene products, and so on)
- Baby and child products
- Clothing and accessories (such as ramie cotton clothing, silk clothing and category A clothing)
- Electrical home appliances (like Grade 1 energy efficiency appliances, energy-saving lighting and solar energy)
- Furniture and furnishings
- Office appliances (green office equipment, reusable printer cartridges and eco-friendly paper and pens, etc)
- Means of transport (such as new-energy vehicles, electric bicycles and shared bikes)

Food and Drinks

Thanks to the efforts of the government in publicising green food, most consumers are



happy to consider choosing green food when they make purchases. Organic food has been growing in popularity in the last two years, with increased demand among consumers in first-tier cities for organic rice, noodles and miscellaneous cereals, for example. Organic milk has also become quite popular.

The reasons consumers give for buying green food are varied. Some respondents said they bought food with green labelling because it gives them peace of mind. Others said organic vegetables have a better colour and feel to them. Changes in the external environment, such as the spread of supermarkets specialising in imported products, have also boosted the consumption of green food; and ideas such as the farm-to-table concept are gaining in popularity. The following views were heard during the discussions:

“When I was small, my parents found organic vegetables expensive and organic food was not selling well at that time. When you go shopping at import supermarkets today, we see bustling sales of organic vegetable and food. We are quite willing to buy things that are organic even though they are quite expensive.”

“This millet here has China's green label and is good for cooking congee. It is a healthy food that is good for all parts of the body.”

However, it became clear from the focus group discussions that many consumers do not distinguish between green food and pollution-free food. Most respondents thought they were basically the same. Also, no one made any mention of the grading of green food. Although some high-end consumers are beginning to accept the practice of direct delivery from organic farms, in general the perception of organic food is still somewhat half-baked. It would seem that this is a market which is yet to be fully developed, perhaps because prices are too high at present.

Household Cleaning Products

The idea that household cleaning products should be phosphate-free is now becoming widely accepted. Respondents said they would buy phosphate-free washing powder or liquid, and would also check whether the products contain a “fluorescent agent” or have “residues”. Many said that when buying paper, they would not choose bleached paper that contains a fluorescent agent. Using unbleached paper has become a trend in first- and second-tier cities.

Mainland consumers' perception of the environmental qualities of household cleaning products still focuses on the benefits available to the individual. For example, most respondents agreed that phosphate-free products would protect their hands, but only a few mentioned that using phosphate-free products also benefits the environment.

Many respondents said that their main reason for buying eco-friendly cleaning products was that they do no harm to the hands and feel soft to the skin. Others said that they tend to produce less foam, which makes cleaning easier and gives users the impression that they produce fewer chemical residues. One of the participants at the focus groups commented:

“The washing liquid and powder we use at home is phosphate-free and eco-friendly. The dish-washing detergent we use has little foam and will not pollute the water.”

Personal Care Products



While it is mostly women who buy personal care products, the number of male consumers is also on the rise in first-tier cities. Consumers of green personal care products tend to be influenced by how effective they are. Products based on plant extracts are becoming increasingly popular. A few respondents mentioned facial masks as an example of a green personal care product they would consider buying.

Some respondents said they choose pure plant-based shampoos because they are silicone-free and have a good effect on hair, making it smoother. They buy plant-based skin-care products because they do not irritate the skin so much – in fact, some consumers buy these products because they have sensitive skin. Some reported that skin-care products for children work better for them than do ordinary skin care products. One comment heard at the focus groups was this:

"I bought skin-care products with no additives for my child and use them a little myself. At least I do not have pimples now. I find that products with no additives and are closer to nature are best although they are more expensive."

Baby and Child Products

Virtually all the respondents with babies or children said they were inclined to buy green baby/child products, especially those with eco-labels. Consumers tend to think that purchasing products with labels indicating that they are eco-friendly, organic, purely natural, plant-based and BPA-free, is a way of giving their children the best and keeps them safe and healthy. Respondents said this gives them greater peace of mind.

Parents generally think that they must buy products for their children which give them the greatest peace of mind – irrespective of price. When choosing what to buy, they give some weight to word-of-mouth recommendations but are also liable to follow the crowd. Buying baby and child products through haitao (shopping directly from overseas e-commerce sites) seems to have become a growing trend in first-tier cities. Consumers also tend to favour international brands. As people at the focus groups said:

"I will only buy products made of corn fibre and are tasteless. They look like rubber but are not rubber and can stand high temperatures. Things for children must be eco-friendly and carry (certification) marks."

"I buy nothing but pollution-free, organic and purely natural daily-use items and skin-care and body wash products for my child. Even the clothes are organic because my child is still small and I am afraid chemical fibre would irritate his skin."

Clothing and Accessories

Environmental concerns and rising incomes have seen consumers increasingly shun clothing made from cheap chemical fibres in favour of items made from pure cotton. Consumers generally tend to regard all cotton/pure cotton, ramie cotton and pure silk clothing and accessories as eco-friendly. Some respondents said they would check the description of the material on the label and where possible would choose Category A/B [2] clothing made of 100% cotton. Pure cotton clothing is more absorbent and breathable and causes less irritation to the skin. Respondents said that clothing with direct skin contact should be as healthy as possible because items made of chemical fibres may have harmful effects on the body.



Consumers appear to be less concerned about recycling clothing items, however, and seldom talk about the environmental aspect of clothing production processes and techniques. This was one view heard at the focus groups:

"As a mother, I would exercise greater care when choosing clothing for my child. Clothing is divided into categories A and B and category A clothing is generally better for children. For example, I would choose category A for pyjamas. For outdoors, I would choose clothing that is more absorbent and less heat-retaining. It should be convenient to wear."

Electrical Home Appliances

Many consumers buying electrical appliances are concerned with energy efficiency. The "Energy Conservation Certification" and "China Energy Label" for the electrical appliances industry are now widely recognised on the mainland. In the last couple of years, it has become clear that most consumers will only choose Grade 1 or Grade 2 energy efficiency products when buying large appliances like refrigerators, washing machines and air-conditioners. Many have bought air and water purifiers to improve their living environment in the past two years.

Respondents said they preferred energy-efficient appliances because, as well as using less electricity, they have better price-performance ratios and are less noisy. Some said they choose appliances with multiple functions, such as smart TVs, because they make the purchase of many other pieces of equipment unnecessary, thus making them eco-friendly. However, only a few respondents raised the question of whether the materials used in the production process are eco-friendly. This was one view heard at the focus groups:

"The appliances I bought these past few years are all eco-friendly. There was no such thing as Grade 1 energy efficiency for refrigerators and air-conditioners in the past. Now they all have Grade 1 energy efficiency label, including washing machines and kitchen and bathroom items."

Furniture and Furnishings

Pollution resulting from home furnishing and decorating has become a controversial issue on the mainland in the wake of the property boom in recent years. Furniture, as a durable consumer good with a long life cycle, can have a long-term effect on people living in a house. With consumers becoming more aware of the importance of their living environment, the concept of green consumption is gaining ground in the furniture and furnishings sector. People are willing to choose eco-friendly furniture and furnishings that cost more, because they have concerns over health and safety.

Some respondents said they would choose eco-friendly materials that are formaldehyde-free and odourless for decoration and would pay more for products that are not harmful to health. Some reported that they would buy solid timber or bamboo furniture rather than plywood items because natural materials are more eco-friendly and do not have adverse effects on health. Among the views heard at the focus groups was this one:

"We will soon be decorating our house. We will definitely choose eco-friendly and pollution-free products for furnishings. Products with formaldehyde content will definitely not be used. We will pay attention to the labelling and may take word-of-mouth recommendations into account when making purchase. Perhaps we will also ask our



friends for advice.”

Appendix

Background

Environmental pollution and food safety issues have been prevalent on the mainland for some time. As educational and income levels go up and living standards improve, Chinese consumers’ environmental awareness and demand for green products are also on the rise. Meanwhile, the country’s 13th Five-Year Plan also supports green consumption. In order to help Hong Kong companies tap the mainland market, *HKTDC Research* commissioned a series of consumer focus group discussions to gauge the attitudes and preferences of mainland consumers about green products.

Methodology

The study was conducted in Shanghai and Guangzhou (first-tier cities) and in Wuhan and Chengdu (second-tier cities) in March 2017. A total of eight consumer focus group discussions were held in these cities (two in each city). The aim of the discussions was to achieve a deeper understanding of the attitudes of mainland consumers towards green products.

Focus Group Design

Surveyed cities	Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu
Number of groups	64 participants divided into eight groups. Two for each city.
Grouping division	Group 1 (eight people, aged 25-35) Group 2 (eight people, aged 36-45)
Profile of participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has lived in the city for at least one year - Has bought green products in at least two categories in the past six months - Principal member of the family in buying green products - Has higher awareness and better understanding of green products - Monthly household income: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -- Shanghai and Guangzhou: RMB15,000 or above -- Chengdu and Wuhan: RMB9,000 or above
Other demographics	Among the 64 participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women (58%); men (42%) - 50% have children aged 0-6 - 69% have university education - 38% have monthly household income of RMB15,000-20,000: 33% have monthly household income of RMB20,001-30,000



[1] See Appendix for details of the survey.

[2] Clothing items are divided into three categories, A, B and C, on the mainland based on the different levels of safety they are required to meet. Category A covers knitwear items for babies and children. Category B covers textiles items that come into direct contact with the skin. Category C covers textiles items that do not come into direct contact with the skin.

Find this page at

<http://economists-pick-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/Research-Articles/China-s-Green-Shoppers-Attitudes-and-Beliefs/rp/en/1/1X000000/1X0ACIH1.htm>

Copyright©2017 Hong Kong Trade Development Council. Reproduction in whole or in part without prior permission is prohibited. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council is not responsible for any errors. Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.