

## Chinese migrant workers' adoption of urban consumer habits

Rongwei Chu · James M. Leonhardt ·  
Matthew Tingchi Liu

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**Abstract** The present research conducted semi-structured interviews with over 1,000 Chinese migrant workers to identify factors influencing their adoption of urban consumer habits. Research on habit formation finds the process to be effortful and resource depleting. Likewise, we predicted that migrant workers with greater resources would be more likely to adopt urban consumer habits. Resources were categorized as either internal (biological and cognitive) or external (social and economic) to the consumer. Using a structural equation model, cognitive and economic resources were found to have positive direct effects on habit adoption, while biological and social resources were found to have positive indirect effects on habit adoption, through cognitive and economic resources, respectively.

**Keywords** Migrant workers · Bottom of the pyramid · Habit adoption · Subsistence

Few forces have influenced the modern world economy as much as Chinese migration...rural Chinese working away from home is now almost 160 million or 12 % of the country's population... (The Economist 2012)

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Rongwei Chu and James M. Leonhardt contributed equally to this article.

R. Chu (✉)  
Fudan University, Shanghai, China  
e-mail: rongweic@fudan.edu.cn

J. M. Leonhardt  
New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM, USA  
e-mail: jleonhar@nmsu.edu

M. T. Liu  
University of Macau, Taipa, Macau, China  
e-mail: matthewl@umac.mo

## 1 Introduction

In developing countries, such as China, the demand for products and services is increasingly coming from consumers at the base of the pyramid (BoP). These 3–4 billion consumers—roughly three fourths of the world’s population—are underserved and often marginalized by traditional marketing strategies (Anderson and Billou 2007; Hammond and Prahalad 2004; Viswanathan and Sridharan 2012). The present research focuses on a subset of BoP consumers—Chinese migrant workers. There are over 250 million migrant workers in China, resulting in an estimated annual spending power of US\$312 billion (Chu and Zhang 2011). Chinese migrant workers are defined as those who hold peasant *Hukou* (Chinese household registration system) but have migrated from rural agricultural areas to urban areas where they work and live (Chan and Zhang 1999). Compared to other BoP consumers (c.f. Martin and Hill 2012), Chinese migrant workers have slightly more education (due to China’s 9-year compulsory education policy) and earn higher wages (on average US\$8/day; Cai 2011). However, BoP consumer criteria is market specific (Pitta et al. 2008) and, in the urban Chinese marketplace, migrant workers are at the bottom of the urban hierarchy—in Shanghai, their income is 40 % less than the average urban worker who are twice as likely to have completed university-level coursework.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, we know little about how Chinese migrant workers acculturate into urban Chinese society (Zhao 1999). Similar to other minority consumers (O’Guinn and Faber 1986; Penolozza 1994), Chinese migrant workers experience the competing pulls of two cultures—rural and urban China. In urban China (e.g., Shanghai), migrant workers experience novel consumer habits, such as the use of credit cards and transportation cards. For urban Chinese consumers, using a credit card to pay for a meal or using a transportation (debit) card to pay for a bus across town is habitual—it happens automatically without the need for deliberation (Ouellette and Wood 1998). However, such habits are foreign to Chinese migrant workers and what drives their adoption of these habits is currently unknown. To meet this need, the present research draws from work in habit adoption (for a review, see Wood and Neal 2009) to better understand the process by which Chinese migrant workers adopt urban consumer habits.

## 2 Background

Consumer habits are defined as automatic behavioral responses to stable and familiar consumption environments (Verplanken and Aarts 1999). Recurring stimuli within a consumer’s environment often trigger habitual consumption (Ji and Wood 2007; Ouellette and Wood 1998). Habits allow for efficient consumption and conserve a consumer’s finite resources. However, the formation of new habits requires the consumer to expend resources, causing consumers to be generally averse to habit adoption (Sheth 1981; Wood and Neal 2009). Consumers are most likely to adopt new consumer habits when in novel consumption environments (Verplanken and

<sup>1</sup> China’s Sixth Nationwide Population Census at Shanghai: <http://218.242.177.53/rkpc/moban.asp?id=4291>

Wood 2006; Wood et al. 2005) and when they have the necessary resources for habit adoption (Quinn et al. 2010). In this way, the extent that Chinese migrant workers adopt urban consumer habits could depend, at least in part, on their level of available resources.

Building on past research (Bourdieu 1984; Üstüner and Holt 2007), the resources needed for habit adoption can be categorized as internal or external to the consumer. Internal resources include the consumer's biological and cognitive resources. Biological resources may affect habit adoption since consumers high in biological resources (e.g., younger vs. older consumers) more often search for additional product information and consider alternative brands (Lambert-Pandraud et al. 2005). Such behavior may be the result of biological resources increasing one's supply of cognitive resources (Johnson 1990). Indeed, biological resources facilitate information processing (Salthouse 1996), working memory, (Hedden and Yoon 2006), and decision making (Shivapour et al. 2012; Yoon et al. 2009). In turn, consumers with higher cognitive resources have a greater tolerance for ambiguity (Yoon et al. 2009) and more often experiment with novel products and brands (Foxall 1989). Thus, rather than affecting habit adoption directly, biological resources are expected to affect migrant workers' supply of cognitive resources, which in turn are expected to directly affect habit adoption. Specifically, we predict the following:

- H1 Cognitive resources will have a positive direct effect on Chinese migrant workers' adoption of urban consumer habits.
- H2 Biological resources will have a positive indirect effect on Chinese migrant workers' adoption of urban consumer habits through cognitive resources.

External resources, including social and economic resources, may also affect habit adoption. Since Chinese migrant workers hold *Hukuo* status, their occupation largely determines their level of social resources (Zhao 1999). In addition, their occupational status largely affects their level of economic resources. For example, Chinese migrant workers with low social resources often work as factory laborers and have lower incomes than those with relatively higher social resources and work as managers (Cai 2011; Chang 2009; Pun 2005). In this way, a Chinese migrant worker's social resources are expected to directly affect their level of economic resources, which, in turn, is expected to directly affect their adoption of urban habits. Economic resources are known to affect consumer behaviors associated with habit adoption—consumers' with higher economic resources are more price sensitive, have a greater interest in cost savings, and incur less financial risk when purchasing novel products and services (Mulhern et al. 1998; Urbany et al. 1996). Specifically, we predict the following:

- H3 Economic resources will have a positive and direct effect on Chinese migrant workers' adoption of urban consumer habits.
- H4 Social resources will have a positive indirect effect on Chinese migrant workers' adoption of urban consumer habits through economic resources.

In addition to these hypotheses, we must also consider alternative scenarios. Most notably, these hypotheses assume that the availability of resources will influence habit adoption. This assumption is well grounded in consumer research; however, such research has yet to target Chinese migrant workers, and it is possible that the

availability of resources will not significantly affect their adoption of urban consumer habits. Other factors associated with acculturation, such as values, beliefs, and customs, may overshadow the role of resources in determining Chinese migrant workers adoption of urban consumer habits. If so, then we would not expect to see a significant difference in habit adoption amongst Chinese migrant workers with varied levels of internal and external resources. To test our hypotheses, we conducted the following survey and subsequent analysis.

### 3 Method

#### 3.1 Sampling

A survey was constructed by The Center for Chinese Marketing Research at Fudan University and administered by The Shanghai Survey Corps of The National Bureau of Statistics. Shanghai, China was chosen as the location for the data collection, since Shanghai is home to 23 million permanent residents and serves as China's leading commercial and financial hub. In addition, Shanghai has one of the largest in-flows of migrant workers in China. There are an estimated 9 million Chinese migrant workers and their children living in Shanghai<sup>2</sup>. A stratified sampling method was used to select firms at which migrant workers were known to be employed. Once the firms were selected, a total of 1,230 migrant workers were recruited to participate in our survey using the method of equal intervals with a randomly determined initial selection. Because of generally low education levels, the survey was administered to the migrant workers by trained survey assistants. The assistants explained the survey questions to the respondents which helped to ensure that the migrant workers understood the questions and provided comprehensible answers. Overall, a total of 966 migrant workers completed the survey (an effective response rate of 78.5 %).

#### 3.2 Participants

On average, participants had lived in Shanghai for 6.5 years and had maintained their current employment for 4 years (Table 1). The majority were male (64.3 %) and married (66.5 %). The participants had come to Shanghai from 27 different provinces in China. Most came from the Anhui province (29.5 %) and its neighboring provinces such as Jiangsu (19.1 %), Henan (9.1 %), Zhejiang (8.0 %), and Sichuan (7.5 %). The top three motivations for moving to Shanghai were greater personal development (28.6 %), higher income (24.2 %), and a better occupation (22.7 %).

#### 3.3 Independent measures

The cognitive resources measure was created by measuring migrant workers level of education using a 6-point scale (1 = low-literate, 2 = elementary school, 3 = middle school, 4 = high school, 5 = vocational school, 6 = college, and above). Education is

<sup>2</sup> The Shanghai Survey Corps of the National Bureau of Statistics, China. <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/fxbg/201109/232633.html>

**Table 1** Participant characteristics including migration motivation and their time spent in Shanghai and at their current company

Participant characteristics ( <i>N</i> =966)	
Gender (%)	
Male	64.3
Female	35.7
Marital status (%)	
Unmarried	32.1
Married	66.5
Divorced	1.3
Widowed	0.1
Physical health	
Good	77.5
Neutral	23.9
Bad	0.5
Original province	
Anhui	29.5
Jiangsu	19.1
Henan	9.1
Zhejiang	8.0
Sichuan	7.5
Other (22 provinces)	26.8
Migration motivation	
Personal development	28.6
Higher income	24.2
More favorable occupation	22.7
Learn new occupational skills	7.8
Better education for children	7.2
Other	9.5
Duration in Shanghai (years): Mean (SD)	6.5 (5.1)
Duration at current company (years): mean (SD)	4.0 (4.3)

positively correlated with general cognitive abilities including information processing (Heckman and Vytlačil 2001). The biological resources measure was created by measuring migrant worker's self-reported age in whole years, which was reverse-scored since younger migrant workers are generally healthier and less afflicted by chronic illnesses (Hesketh et al. 2008; Zhao 1999). The economic resources measure was created by measuring migrant worker's self-reported personal monthly income in RMB. Migrant workers are not likely to have investments or possessions that are high in value and thus personal income best indicates their level of economic resources (Li and Li 2007). The social resources measure was created by measuring migrant worker's occupational status using a 4-point scale (1 = factory worker, 2 = service staff, 3 = administrative staff, 4 = manager). Occupational status is a key factor in the construction of a migrant worker's identity, with greater occupational status generally resulting in greater social status amongst their peers and the general public (Chan and Pun 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2010).

### 3.4 Dependent measure

The dependent measure, migrant worker's adoption of urban consumer habits, was operationalized as migrant worker's self-reported frequency of using transportation cards and credit cards. Participants rated how frequently they used credit and transportation cards using two 5-point scales with the following endpoints: 1 = never to 5 = very much. Credit card and transportation card usage represents two challenges known to affect BoP consumers—access to banking and transportation services (Andreasen 1993). Transportation cards are readily available for purchase without discrimination throughout Shanghai and offer consumers a convenient form of payment and discounted fares when transferring between buses and trains. Credit cards are a lifestyle-facilitating technology and the average monthly salary of most Chinese migrant workers meets the requirements for many of the credit cards offered by Chinese banks. Usage frequency served as the dependent measure rather than usage intention since product usage intentions are often poor predictors of actual adoption behavior (Arts et al. 2011; Morwitz et al. 2007). In addition, subjective frequency estimates are thought to be the best measure of habit strength (Holland et al. 2006; Ouellette and Wood 1998).

## 4 Results

Participants ranged in age from 17 to 63 years (Table 2), and their personal monthly income ranged from RMB 200 to 12,000 (approximately US\$30 to 1,800) with a mean average monthly income of RMB 2,366 (about US\$364). A small number of participants were low-literates (1.4 %) and many (41.9 %) had completed the equivalent of middle school in the US. The majority (59.1 %) worked in factories and some were managers (12.2 %).

**Table 2** Participants age, education, occupational status, and income

Independent variables ( <i>N</i> =966)	
Mean age (SD)	32.0 (8.8)
Education (%)	
Low-literate	1.4
Elementary school	9.2
Middle school	41.9
High school	20.4
Vocational school	14.2
College and above	12.9
Occupational status (%)	
Factory worker	59.1
Service staff	16.6
Administrative staff	12.1
Manager	12.2
Personal monthly income (RMB): mean (SD)	2,366 (1,067)

**Table 3** Participant resources and their adoption of urban consumer habits

SEM results				
		Standardized coefficients (SE)	Squared multiple correlations (R <sup>2</sup> )	Test of hypotheses
Direct effects				
Habit adoption			0.33	
	Economic resources	0.21 (0.045***)		H3 supported
	Cognitive resources	0.44 (0.05)***		H1 supported
	Biological resources	0.06 (0.05)		
	Social resources	0.06(0.04)		
Indirect effects				
Economic resources			0.06	
	Social resources	0.24 (0.03)***		
Cognitive resources			0.15	
	Biological resources	0.38 (0.03)***		
Social resources			0.11	
	Cognitive resources	0.01 (0.09)		
Fit statistics				
chi2(5)=15.82***				
CFI=0.98				
TLI=0.92				
RMSEA=0.06				
SRMR=0.02				
CD (coefficient of determination)=0.17				

Standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*\* Significant at  $p < 0.01$

A structural equation model was used to test the direct and indirect effects of internal (biological and cognitive) and external (social and economic) resources on Chinese migrant workers’ adoption of urban consumer habits. Coefficients of the confirmatory measurement model and the structural model were estimated simultaneously. Multiple fit indices (CFI=0.98, TLI=0.92) were greater than 0.9 indicating an acceptable fit of the model despite the significant chi-square ( $\chi^2(4)=15.82, p < 0.01$ ). Overall, the relatively high squared multiple correlations for habit adoption (SMC=0.33) revealed that a substantial amount of the variance in habit adoption amongst Chinese migrant workers was explained by the variables in the model. When all internal and external resources measures were included in the model simultaneously (Table 3), the measures for cognitive and economic resources had

significant direct-effects on habit adoption, whereas the measures for social and biological resources did not have significant direct effects on habit adoption. Supporting H1 and H3, respectively, the direct path from cognitive resources to habit adoption ( $\gamma=0.44, p<0.01$ ) and the direct path from economic resources to habit adoption ( $\gamma=0.21, p<0.01$ ) were significant and positive. However, neither the direct path from social resources ( $\gamma=0.06, p=0.33$ ) to habit adoption nor the direct path from biological resources ( $\gamma=0.06, p=0.11$ ) to habit adoption reached significance. The signs of the estimated coefficients within the structural equation model indicated that higher cognitive and higher economic resources resulted in increased habit adoption. Social resources had a significant and positive indirect effect on economic resources ( $\gamma=0.24, p<0.01$ ), and biological resources had a significant and positive indirect effect on cognitive resources ( $\gamma=0.38, p<0.01$ ).

Following Preacher and Hayes (2004), the indirect effect of biological resources on habit adoption through cognitive resources was tested using a Sobel test (Baron and Kenny 1986; Zhao et al. 2010). Included in the model was the effect of biological resources on cognitive resources ( $\gamma=0.38, SE=0.03$ ) and the effect of cognitive resources on habit adoption ( $\gamma=0.44, SE=0.05$ ). Supporting H2, the model revealed a significant indirect effect (Sobel=7.23,  $SE=0.023$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that an increase in biological resources led to a significant increase in habit adoption, through an increase in cognitive resources. Similarly, the indirect effect of social resources on habit adoption through economic resources was tested. Included in the model was the effect of social resources on economic resources ( $\gamma=0.24, SE=0.03$ ) and the effect of economic resources on habit adoption ( $\gamma=0.21, SE=0.045$ ). Supporting H4, the model revealed a significant indirect effect (Sobel=4.03,  $SE=0.013$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), indicating that an increase in social resources resulted in a significant increase in habit adoption through an increase in economic resources.

## 5 Conclusion

Our results come from a previously understudied segment of BoP consumers—Chinese migrant workers—and suggest that both internal and external resources affect their adoption of urban consumer habits. Specifically, amongst Chinese migrant workers, we find that higher levels of both internal (cognitive and biological) and external (economic and social) resources are associated with more frequent credit and transportation card usage. These results offer important implications for both future research and for tailoring marketing strategies to BoP consumers. To begin, they inform past research on habit adoption (e.g., Wood and Neal 2009) and acculturation (e.g., Penolozza 1994; Üstüner and Holt 2007) by offering a finer categorization of the types of resources affecting habit adoption amongst BoP consumers. Next, coupled with other recent BoP research (e.g., Martin and Hill 2012; Viswanathan and Sridharan 2012), this research has several implications for marketing strategies targeting BoP consumers. First, demand on external resources may be lessened by offering trial offers and/or shorter contract periods. Alternatively, if the demand on external resources cannot be lessened, potential lead users should be targeted (Viswanathan and Sridharan 2012). Amongst Chinese migrant workers, younger managers may be those with the imagination and creativity required to be lead users. Second, demand on internal resources may be lessened by using pictorial



representations of brands (e.g., brand signatures; Viswanathan et al. 2009), enhancing perceived familiarity through the use of easily recognized symbols and phrases, facilitating perceptual fluency (e.g., high resolution and easy to read fonts; Alter and Oppenheimer 2009), and by describing product attributes as solutions to practical and current problems (Viswanathan et al. 2005). Overall, this research suggests that when targeting BoP consumers—specifically, Chinese migrant workers—marketing strategies should work towards minimizing the resources needed to adopt novel products and services and/or help BoP consumers use their limited resources most effectively.

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