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Can Price Sway Children Preference? Preliminary Experiment among Malay Children

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with young Malay children's behavior concerning money. The objectives are to determine the children knowledge of money value, source of their money knowledge and whether price can sway their preference. The literature on Children Socialization and Information Processing Theory in consumer behavior suggests that most young children under 8 are not cognitively skilled about pricing and to use price in decision making. An interview has been conducted to gain the children insight about their money value and the source of money knowledge. In order to test for the effects of price, an experiment has been conducted to determine their preference. The study has found that children didn't have strong knowledge of money value and pricing of products not dependably influence their preference. In order to conclude for a better generalization, this preliminary finding could be used as a initial point for a larger scale of research in term of sample size, range of aged group and ethnicity.

Keywords: Price, Children, Preference
JEL Classifications: M31, M39

1. INTRODUCTION

Most children in primary school bring some money to spend during morning recess and lunchtime. Children view the break time as part of their socialization. They will buy food at the canteen with their peers. In most cases, that experience is their first attempt to independently purchase a food without the supervision of parents. Many factors will influence their decision making choice, such as peer pressure, existing brand promotion, knowledge of the value of money and price of the food items.

The authors have identified that school can play important roles to educate children about price knowledge. We hope with that education, children will learn and take responsibility on what they purchase. But there is a question about their ability to be influenced by price. Can price be used to influence children preference to combat obesity?

It is significant to know whether the price factor has been considered effectively in children's decision making. The findings will open up a new dimension on the possibility of influencing children to purchase healthier food as obesity among children has become a serious problem in Malaysia.

Previous studies have provided inadequate evidence that price could influence children's decision making. However, a few studies have supported the view that young children do have money knowledge, and are aware about price and its role in the decision making process.

Many relevant bodies have taken a lot of action to combat obesity problem among young children. This includes health and education departments. Despite of those efforts being taken, marketers have targeted these vulnerable children as their potential consumer. These young children were exposed to significant levels of advertisement and premiums in order to influence them to buy the marketers products. In addition, "pester power" is alleged to put parents in a dilemma. Therefore, it will be important to identify if we can use price to sway children preference towards healthier food. If it does, price can be used systematically on children to improve their purchasing behavior in many aspect of their life, especially in choosing a balanced diet in their food

intake. Hopefully, these initiatives with children will carry those attitudes and behavior through adulthood.

Not many studies have used variables, such as price, to curb childhood obesity, even though they are salient factors in adult decision making. Therefore, it is vital to use young children as our sample in determining if they can be influenced by price in their preference.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Effects of Food Marketing

Television advertising has reported to be associated with choosing low nutritional food, and increasing their probability of becoming overweight and obese (Hammond et al., 1999). Although there is some literature on how promotion can influence children's preference, there is lack of reported research on the use of price in changing young children's food preference to healthier options. In order to overcome such problems a lot of suggestions are being made by governments, educators, policy makers and health education departments.

Before reviewing the effect of price on children preference, it is necessary to cover the area of children's cognitive development and information processing. This knowledge will provide insight into when children develop their cognitive and information processing abilities. These abilities are often assumed when young children make preference and purchases by themselves.

2.2. Piaget's Theory of Children's Cognitive Development

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is one of the most cited theories that characterize changes in basic cognitive ability. Piaget (1960) conceptualized children's development as relating to a series of cognitive stages, with each successive stage being categorized by further sophisticated thinking and reasoning capabilities.

According to Roedder (1999) and Ginsburg and Opper (1988), this theory proposed four main stages of cognitive development; sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. The stages are said to possess the following characteristics:

- The stages imply distinct or qualitative differences in children's modes of thinking or of solving the same problem at different ages.
- These different modes of thought form an invariant sequence, order or succession in individual development.
- Each of these different stages and sequential modes of thought form a structural whole.

2.3. Information Processing Theory and Children

Information processing theories of childhood development provide other explanations to the cognitive development of children as they mature (John, 1999). (Roedder et al., 1983) has characterized children as belonging into one of three segments; strategic processors, cued processor, and limited processors. These segments are based on the information processing skills children possess at different ages as shown in Table 1.

2.4. Consumer Socialization Theory and Children

Consumer socialization (Ward, 1974), or its earlier label of consumer development (McNeal, 1964), is the process by which children are said to learn their consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes through their interaction with various social agents (e.g., parents, teachers) in specific social settings.

(John, 1999) has provided insight into the changes that take place as children become socialized in their roles as consumers. According to her, these changes occur as children move through the three stages of consumer socialization. These stages indicate important shifts in knowledge development, decision-making skills, and purchase influence strategies (John, 1999).

2.5. Children's Purchasing Behavior

McNeal (1992) anecdotally suggested that children start to purchase independently by the age of 4, but purchase independently regularly about the age of 8. McNeal (1992) labeled children that purchase independently as "Tweens." Their ages were between 8 and 12 years old. These children have been categorized as the "independent stage" of the children consumer behaviour development theory indicated by McNeal (1992). He did note that young children occasionally buy things on their own but are fairly naïve and trusting and understood that money can be exchanged for food.

Based on the children development theories covered earlier, these children are in the "independent" age group as described by McNeal (1992), the "concrete operational" stage described by Piaget (1960), the "analytical" stage described by Roedder (1999) and are "cued processors" described by John (1999). This below 8 years old group has significant cognitive and social change knowledge and skill. The children at this stage are able to consider several dimensions of a stimulus at a time, and can connect the dimensions in a thoughtful and meaningful manner.

Based on theories by Piaget (1960), Roedder (1999) and McNeal (1992), on children's development skill as a potential buyer, it would be expected that some young children have the cognitive abilities to purchase products by themselves. It appears to many

Table 1: Information processing development

Stage	Processing skill development
Limited processors	7 years of age and below. Skill not fully developed or utilized in learning situations. Frequently having difficulty using memory
Cued processors	Age ranges from 7 to 11 years. Able to use a similar set of strategies to improve information storage and recovery, but they usually need to be assisted by precise cues
Strategic processors	12 years and above. Use a range of strategies for storing and recovery information such as verbal labeling, practice, and use of recovery cues to guide memory exploration

Source: Roedder et al., 1983

researchers that some of the earliest experiences for children purchasing independently is for food items at their school canteen.

2.6. Price Definition

In traditional economics, price has been defined (Simon, 1989) as the cost of the good or services that the consumer willing to pay. Zeithaml (1988) defined price as being "what the consumer has given up or sacrificed to obtain a product." Assuncao and Meyer (1993) indicate that the traditional literature on pricing starts from a simple assumption that when faced with a buying decision for a product, the buyer observes a price, takes into account their current inventory position in the category, and makes the brand/quantity decision that maximizes ultimate utility.

One of the important skills that people need to function effectively as a buyer is the capability to understand money and the value of an item. It has been assumed that this information and the skill to use it are acquired during childhood. Yet, there have been only a few studies that have investigated how and when children acquire the knowledge of money and the ability to buy based on some reasonable criterion.

2.7. Assumptions of the Effects of Price

Largely based on classical economics, most buyers are assumed to have good knowledge about the price of the goods that they are going to buy (Dickson and Sawyer, 1990). Marketing science based models of choice behaviour assume that buyers are aware of, and sensitive to the item's price (Guadagni and Little, 1983, Winer, 1986). Psychology theories of consumer information processing (Monroe, 1971) assume that price information before purchase will be determined, evaluated and incorporated into their decision-making.

Piche and Garcia (2001) collected data using a self-administered seven items postcard style questionnaire. They found the top three highest rated variables affecting food choice were price, freshness and health consideration. Price was reported to be the top attribute that buyer had taken into account.

Past studies have found that at most, 50% of buyers know the correct price of the product they purchased (Allen et al., 1976; Connover, 1986; Progressive Grocer, 1964). These findings consistently show that the general knowledge of price is low among buyers. For example, Zeithaml (1988) suggested that buyers' price knowledge appears to be "considerably lower than necessary for consumers to have accurate internal reference prices for many products."

2.8. Young Children's Knowledge of Money

Marshall and MacGruder (1960) looked at the relationship between parental money education practices and children's knowledge and use of money. They used an interview methodology using six pages of questionnaires. Children were interviewed individually at school during school hours in a small room or office. Each interview took from 15 to 30 min to complete. The samples used were 64 boys and 64 girls, ages of 7, 8, 11, and 12 years old. There were a total of 512 children surveyed. They found that if children are given exposure to the use of money, they will have more knowledge of money and its use, compared with children lacking such various experience.

However, those finding contradict another study that found that both children with and without exposure to money have a similar knowledge about it (Marshall, 1964). Marshall conducted a study to test the hypothesis that no difference in money knowledge exists between children given an allowance, and those not given an allowance. The subjects were 180 children aged 10, 11 and 12 years old. 90 children were given allowances, whilst another 90 were not. There were 15 boys and 15 girls in each allowance classification at each of the ages.

Marshall used a multiple question survey, and an individual interview, to collect the data. She found no evidence that there was a difference in financial knowledge and responsibility between the two cohorts. Both allowance and non-allowance groups of children failed to significantly differ on any of the ten measures of financial knowledge and responsibility. Marshall concluded that regardless of whether children have experience with money or not, that experience does not determine their financial knowledge.

2.9. Young Children's Awareness of Price

According to McNeal and McDaniel (1981), children become familiar with product prices, looking for price information and know about the price variations among products and stores when they reach 8-9 years old. Their data appears to be primarily based on in-depth interviews.

Stephens and Moore (1975) used self-administered questionnaires that were completed by 132 students between the ages of 11 and 13 years old and 180 students between the ages of 14 and 17 years old. The relative gender proportions were almost equal in all grades, with a total of 157 males and 155 females in their samples. Respondents were provided with a list of twelve consumer products (durable and non-durable) and were asked to indicate how much each item cost, and to name the specific brand they would purchase. Items included were a half gallon of milk, a table model AM-FM radio, ten gallons of regular gas, a two-door intermediate size sedan and a 25-inch color TV.

Age was positively associated with the use of price. So that the older the child, the more they appeared to use price in their decision-making. However, it is not clear how many young children under 11 years old use, or are sensitive to price in their decisions.

2.10. How Children View the Effects of Price on Preference?

It appears that very young children often assume that the bigger the product, the more expensive the product. Berti and Bombi (1988) found that younger children perceived price as a tangible physical attribute of products. In their study, the children were asked to explain the reason for the different prices of goods. For example, when asked why the price of a plane is more than a car, a child responded, "it is because the plane is bigger than the car." It appeared that young children largely use the criterion of a goods relative size to determine the relative price of items.

A study by Fox and Kehret-Ward (1985) demonstrated how children develop their skill in reasoning about price during their experiences of buying. They used a cross sectional research design so cohort effects could not be accounted for. Respondents were interviewed individually and also probed with structured questions in a focus group format. Children aged 4, 5 and 9 years old were asked to talk about their shopping experiences, and were then asked questions, such as:

- "When you go shopping, how do you decide what to buy?" (p.80)
- "Why do we have to give money when we buy things in a store?" (p. 81)
- "Who decides what the price of something will be?" (p. 81).

This study's authors suggested there were three levels in the development of children's reasoning about price. The first is level 0 (age Four). At this level, children do not have any idea of what price means or how money is used to pay for an item.

The second level is level 1 (age five). Children at this level know that prices tend to be consistent overtime, and usually non-negotiable. This latter fact may be influenced by its US based sample. The third level is level 2 (age nine) when most children have the ability to understand that price will often be positively associated with the levels of favourable non sized based attributes for a product.

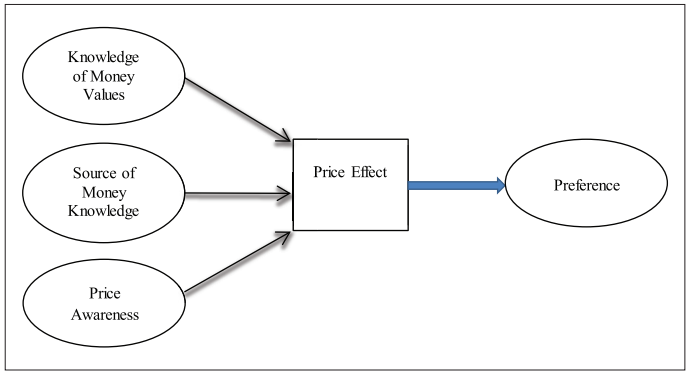
A later focus group study by Fox and Trudy (1990) studied how ideas about price and value expand from the age of four through to adulthood. The price interview began with a story about how a group of friends decided to open a bicycle shop and needed to set a price for each bicycle. Each of the friends had a different idea how to price the bicycles such as price based on physical size (larger bike should cost more), amount of labour required for manufacturing, or preference (popular bikes should cost more).

After presenting these suggestions, children and adults in the sample were asked whether each pricing scheme was a good idea, and why. They found that children from 4 to 10 years old often used a product's features, especially size, as the foundation for pricing. Children at 13 years old often cited price as an indicator of the quality of the product.

2.11. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework has been developed as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework



3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample

This study comprised of 98 respondents from one of the Montessori in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The entire respondents aged between children 5 and 6 year old.

3.2. Interview

The objectives of this study are to determine the children knowledge of money value, source of their money knowledge and whether price can sway their preference. An interview has been conducted to gain the children insight about their money value and the source of money knowledge. In order to test for the effects of price, an experiment has been conducted to determine their choice.

Children aged 4 to 6 years old at one of the Montessori in Kuala Lumpur have been chosen as the sample. Structured questions and dialogs have been designed for the interview and experiment.

The questions have been divided into three different parts. Part one is to determine the knowledge on money value of young Malay children. Part two is to determine information sources of money value among young Malay children. Part three is an experiment to determine whether price can sway young Malay children preference.

The methodologies have been divided as such due to the following reasons:

Too many number and lengthy of questions may deviate the children's focus from responding to the questions and may discourage them from giving full cooperation during the interview session. Thus, this will cause a failure to the interview session, as it will decline the interest of the children to volunteer them in giving feedback to this survey. A rational number of three parts of questions will motivate children to answer it instinctively, promptly and sincerely from their heart. As a result, it will help researcher to collect full, complete and accurate information which is needed on the spot.

Hence, based on the above reasons, the researcher felt that these three parts of questions are sufficient and most effective to support this study by using the following two methods. A random selection of 98 respondents was chosen by researcher and a brief explanation on the objective of the interview session was described before the children started answering the questions. Children were reminded that the questions needed to be answered sincerely and spontaneously. At the same time, the chosen respondents have been requested to give their full support and cooperation during the survey by completing the interview session from the beginning till the end of session.

Only children who were willing to give their full cooperation to involve in the interview session were selected. As mentioned earlier, all chosen children have been requested to give their

feedbacks immediately. Most of the children had given their full support and cooperation as small presents were given away to them as a token of appreciation. The following is the dialogues that were used in the interview session.

3.3. Interview Dialogue

The following is the dialogue used in the interview.

Interviewer: Good Morning children. How are you today?

Children: Wait for the reply.

Interviewer: My name is Miss A. I am here to ask what you know about price. Can you share your opinion with me? Is it ok?

Children: Wait for the reply.

(1st objective: To determine the knowledge of money value).

Interviewer: Have you seen this before? (Shown the 50 cent, 20 cent and 10 cent coins).

Children: Wait for the reply. Tick the answer.

Interviewer: Can you tell me what the value of this coin is? (Show the 50 cent coin).

Children: Wait the reply. Tick the answer.

Interviewer: What about this one? (Show the 20 cent coin).

Children: Wait the reply. Tick the answer.

Interviewer: And this one? (Show the 10 cent coin).

Children: Wait the reply. Tick the answer.

Interviewer: You have done a good job.

(2nd objective: To determine the source of money knowledge).

Interviewer: Who teach you about money/price?

Is it from your parents, teacher or your friends?

Children: Wait the reply. Tick the answer.

3.4. Second Method: Experiment

The experiment has been conducted by exposing the children into two different scenarios.

In this experiment, the children have given good responses and feedbacks to the researcher. The researcher has found that children need price information before they made a decision to choose. The following is the dialogue that has been used in the experiment.

(3rd objective: To determine whether price can sway Malay children preference).

3.4.1. Scenario 1 (Control group)

In scenario 1, the researcher has shown to the children two pictures of chicken nugget (Nuggets A and Nuggets B). The price of Nugget A and Nugget B is RM 1.00 dollar.

Interviewer: Can you see this picture (picture of nuggets with similar price).

Children: Yes.

Interviewer: Which one would you like to purchase? Nugget A or Nugget B?

Children: Wait for the reply. (Tick the answer).

3.4.2. Scenario 2

In Scenario 2, the researcher has given an explanation to the children on what was the different between both of the pictures (Picture Nuggets A and B). The price for Nuggets A is RM1.00 dollar and Nuggets B is 50 cent.

Interviewer: The price for Nuggets A is RM1.00 dollar and Nuggets B is 50 cent. These nuggets taste similar. Do you understand?

Children: Wait for the reply.

Interviewer: The difference is only on price. Which one you would like to buy?

Nuggets A or Nuggets B?

Children: Wait the reply. Tick the answer.

3.5. Data Analysis

Statistics Package for the Social Science has been used to analyze the data. The data has been examined using frequency analysis.

4. FINDINGS

Table 2 shown the demographics characteristics of respondents according to the age group and gender. In term of gender, about 51% were boys and 49% were girls. From the total of 98 respondents, 50% were 5 years old while another 50% were 6 years old respondents.

4.1. First Objective: To Determine the Knowledge of Money Value

Table 3 shown that about 56% of the respondents knew about money value and 44% did not know of it.

Table 4 shown the frequency knowledge of money value by gender. It has shown that boys have better knowledge of money value than the girls.

4.2. Second Objective: To Determine Source of Money Knowledge

Table 5 shown that 72% learnt about money knowledge from parents, teacher and friends. Meanwhile about 28% did not know

the source of their money knowledge. Parents have played a very important roles in educating their children on money knowledge.

Table 6 shown the source of money knowledge by gender. Parents and Teachers have been the main source of money knowledge by boys and girls. There is no significance different in term of gender.

4.3. Third Objective: To Determine Whether Price can Sway Malay Children

4.3.1. Preference

In Scenario 1, Nuggets A is priced similar with Nuggets B. The purpose is to allow the children to make decision without any other factors influencing their decision making. Table 7 result has shown that 55% children have chosen Nuggets A (RM1.00) and about 55% children have chosen Nuggets B (RM1.00).

In Scenario 2, Nuggets B has been priced cheaper than Nuggets A. The purpose is to allow the children to make decision with the price different as the factor influencing their decision. Table 8 result has shown that about 46% children have chosen Nuggets A and slightly higher of 54% have chosen Nuggets B. It seemed that cheaper price of Nuggets B has swayed the preference of children. However the impact was not strong (Table 8).

Table 2: Demographic profile of respondents

Description	Frequency n=98 (%)
Gender	
Boy	50 (51)
Girl	48 (49)
Age	
5 years	49 (50)
6 years	49 (50)

Table 3: Knowledge of money value

Description	Percent (%)
Know the money value	56
Did not know the money value	44

Table 4: Knowledge of money value by gender

Description	Boy (frequency)	Girl (frequency)
Know the money value	30	25
Not knowing the money value	20	23
Total	50	48

Table 5: Source on money knowledge

Description	Percent (%)
Sources (parents, teacher and friends)	72
Did not know	28

Table 6: Source of money knowledge by gender

Description	Boys (frequency)	Girls (frequency)
Parents	19	21
Teacher	15	15
Friends	10	8
No sources	6	4
Total	50	48

Table 7: Scenario 1 (control group)

Scenario 1	Percent (%)
Nuggets a (rm 1.00)	55
Nuggets b (rm 1.00)	44

Table 8: Scenario 2 (experiment group)

Scenario 2	Percent (%)
Nuggets a (rm 1.00)	46
Nuggets b (50 cents)	54

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the interview have shown that young children have some knowledge about money value and the source of money value knowledge mostly educated by parents and teachers. These findings shown that children as early as 5 and 6 years old are possible to be nurtured in term of money knowledge.

The results of the experiments that used price changes, showed price could swayed the young children's preference. However, price was not strongly influence the young children's decisions. The cheaper options of Nuggets would often garner more choices if they were priced cheaper than the other expensive options.

These findings are similar with Strauss (1952), Marshall and Macgruder (1960) and Marshall (1964). They found that children as young as 4 year have knowledge about money and as children grow older, they gain better understanding on the role of money.

This preliminary study found that price may be an effective device to shift food preferences, but doing that may play on their possible ignorance of the young buyers. We know very young (2 to 3 years old) children use size as an early surrogate indicator of price, and these findings suggests early (5 to 8 years old) child purchasers may use food price as an indicator of value. This issue of price reflecting quality can be seen in adult purchasing as well, and may suggest that a lack of information, not necessarily experience, is involved in their decision making.

6. LIMITATIONS

The very limited sample, in number of subjects and factors controlled, make generalizations speculative at present. As there is no significant socio economic differences in the demographics of the respondents make comparisons difficult to interpret because of the many factors that need to be controlled or accounted for in this task. Future research needs more representative samples that can account for potentially significant factors such social class.

Because the experiment was conducted in the classroom as part of the children's normal group activities, the children viewed the experiment as a group, not individually. Although personal interactions were discouraged, some interaction may have occurred.

The purpose of this study was to test the intervention on a small scale before a broader range of experiments could be done. As this

first study forms a base for such research on children, researchers may use these findings and broaden them by using different categories of products. They need to be familiar among young children, and the experiments should be conducted at different settings. For example, sample after they sample the items. Future research should recognize these young buyers and their decision-making to better understand the effects of marketing on young children.

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