

A Study on Parents' Childrenswear Consumption Mechanisms from the Perspective of Interactive Ritual

Chenfei Ma^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Leeds, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK*

a. 1753131048@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Consumption is often influenced by the intermediary role of parents; however, the mechanism behind this influence remains unclear. Therefore, this study aims to explore the decision-making model of children's wear consumption based on the interactive ritual theory. Grounded research was conducted using data from semi-structured interviews with 24 parents. The findings of this study indicate that the decision-making process of parents regarding children's wear consumption can be considered an interactive ritual. The key elements that initiate this ritual include the characteristics of decision makers and users, the inherent attributes of the product, and social factors. Moreover, the interplay between perceived value and brand identity emerges as the central dynamic of this ritual, while the outcomes of the ritual manifest as purchase intention, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Finally, the analysis of the dynamic process of children's apparel consumption is discussed, providing suggestions for the future focus of kids' garment enterprises, and outlining directions for future research.

Keywords: interactive ritual, childrenswear consumption mechanisms, perceived value

1. Introduction

China's childrenswear business is continuing to undergo tremendous expansion, in contrast to the adult wear and sportswear industries, both of which are moving closer and closer to realizing their full potential. According to the "2023 TMALL CHILDREN'S FASHION TREND INSIGHT WHITE PAPER," the retail market size of children's apparel and shoes in China surpassed 360 billion yuan in 2022. This figure was reported in the paper's title. The fact that China's birth rate is continuing to fall on an annual basis despite the implementation of the government's policy that limits families to having three children, with the number of births in 2022 already slipping below 10 million, is a hidden issue for the children's clothing business. The most well-known childrenswear firms have switched their attention toward more specific market niches in order to boost the overall worth of their products and encourage the growth of the market for children's clothes. As a result, in order to satisfy the requirements of management practices, an investigation into the many scenarios in which children's apparel is consumed must be made more extensive.

Childrenswear consumption behavior exhibits distinctive characteristics, particularly with regards to the discrepancy between consumption decision-makers and product users for most children's products. Previous studies have examined the influencing factors of kidswear consumption behavior, and some have also explored the distinct roles played by parents and

children in the consumption process. However, the majority of these articles primarily focus on the influence of a single or a few major factors on consumption behavior, adopting a structural perspective that lacks clarity in terms of the process. Given that children's clothing consumption decisions encompass a multitude of complex factors and few studies have thoroughly investigated the entire children's clothing consumption behavior chain, there is a need for in-depth exploration.

The interactive ritual theory and the customer perceived value theory have both been incorporated into this study. It entails utilizing grounded theory research technique, doing offline interviews with 24 new generation mothers as research subjects, assessing parents' consumption behavior and decision-making processes when purchasing children's apparel, and performing offline interviews with 24 new generation moms as research subjects. In addition to this, it provides an analysis of, and a discussion on, the elements that influence the purchasing behavior of children's apparel within the framework of children's occasions. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the process of purchasing children's clothing from the vantage point of an interactive ritual and to offer theoretical insights for the field of marketing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Review and Critique of Research on Childrenswear Consumption

As a result of the fact that the major function of the family is to fulfill the clothing requirements of children, decisions on the purchase of children's clothing represent a large component of overall household consumption [1]. Studies that have already been conducted can be arranged into three categories: those that investigate the elements that influence the consumption behavior of children's apparel, the decision-making behavior of households, and the motivations behind consumption decisions. Jeanne indicates that the most important considerations when picking children's clothes are a child's body type, the preferences of the parents, and the cost of the clothing [1]. This is in reference to the elements that influence the purchasing behavior of children's clothing. On the other hand, Darian [2] discovered that parents place a higher importance on quality, pricing, and practicality than children do, who are more concerned with price, style, and color.

In addition, the literature investigates the influence of different family roles on consumption decisions made by families from the point of view of the relationships between parents and children. According to Bao et al. parents have a significant impact on the types of clothing their children buy because of the power that their parenting decisions give them over their children's decision-making process [3]. According to Jayantha S., it appears that youngsters are increasingly taking an active role in the shopping decisions that their families make [4]. Not only can children choose how to spend their own "money" in a variety of ways, but they also have a considerable impact on the products that their parents choose to buy for themselves and for the rest of the family.

Moreover, a number of studies have looked into the mental predispositions that parents have when it comes to shopping for their children's apparel. According to Belk [5], the purchasing decisions that mothers make in regard to the things that are intended for their children can serve as an illustration of how consumers develop self-expanding conceptions. According to Darian [2], one might claim that children's clothes can be seen as a status symbol that displays parental income, which leads parents to choose indirect consumption through their children. This is because children's clothing can be expensive. McNeill and Graham provide further evidence that the consumption habits of parents link identity building to clothing, demonstrating that children serve as an extension of their parents' selves and a presentation of their self-identity [6].

However, there is a dearth of in-depth examination about the perceived value of parental consumption in the available literature, and there is only a limited amount of debate on the process of children's clothing consumption. However, when it comes to the process of buying childrenswear,

parents have the most significant effect in determining which garments to purchase [7]. This is true despite the fact that children can influence their parents through the expression of their emotions. As a result, it would be beneficial to conduct further research into the purchasing patterns of parents who buy children's clothing. In addition, Darian [2] discovered that moms make up 92% of parents who buy children's apparel. This statistic suggests that mothers are the primary drivers of this consumer activity, as it indicates that mothers are the primary decision-makers. As a result, female parents, specifically moms, were chosen to participate as the major research subjects in this investigation.

2.2. Theoretical Foundation: Integration of Perceived Value Theory and Interactive Ritual Theory

Research on consumer perceived value has been undertaken by a large number of academics since the 1990s; nevertheless, the classification of perceived value is still unclear [8]. According to Zeithaml [9] definition, "perceived value" is an overall appraisal of the utility of a product based on the perceived benefits and sacrifices associated with using the product. According to one set of researchers, the value that is offered by a good or service may be broken down into five categories: functional, social, emotional, cognitive, and situational. According to Chang, the functional and affective dimensions are the ones that are most frequently stated as being associated with value [8,10]. The functional dimension refers to price/monetary worth, and the affective dimension refers to sentiments or emotional traits. Holbrook [11] was the first person to link value theory to marketing. He did so in the context of researching how customers perceive the worth of a product or service. He argued that value theory is relevant to marketing and consumer behavior research.

However, the vast majority of the research on perceived value theory tends to take a structural point of view in its examination. The purpose of this article is to investigate the concept of perceived value as it relates to the purchase of children's apparel as well as the manner in which consumers construct identities of value based on a process view of overall decision making.

According to the interactive ritual chain hypothesis, which was put forth by Randall Collins in 2003, interaction (i.e., ritual) is the source of social dynamics, and individuals' social images are gradually formed through social interaction with other people. This theory is based on the premise that individuals' social images are shaped by their interactions with other people. According to Schroeder [12], the Interactive Ritual Theory (IRT) can be of assistance in providing a deeper understanding of the interaction that occurs between consumers and companies. In the context of the consumption of childrenswear, there are interactions between parents and children, between consumers and brands, and also the interaction of real consumption itself, all of which generate aspects in the area. In addition to this, there is a two-way interaction between the impacts of one's emotional experiences. The presence of these elements satisfies the prerequisites for the performance of interactive rituals. As a result, the purpose of this study is to develop, on the basis of the theory of the interactive ritual chain, a decision model of consumer behavior that can be applied to the scenario of purchasing children's clothing. Using Chang's classification of perceived value as a guide, we will investigate the consumption mechanism of children's clothing within the context of interactive rituals from the perspectives of both the practical and the psychological elements [8].

3. Research Design: Data Collection and Analysis

Grounded theory, as proposed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, involves decomposing the collected data, identifying phenomena, conceptualizing them, and then distilling categories and core categories in a suitable manner. Goulding asserts that this theory helps researchers understand the nature of consumer experiences that are not easily quantifiable [13]. Given the complex and

difficult-to-quantify factors influencing consumers' childrenswear purchasing behavior, this paper will employ in-depth interviews and grounded theory to analyze the information.

For this study, purposive sampling was utilized under the principle of theoretical sampling, and the interviewees were selected from the age range of 28-40 years old mothers. The chosen interviewees are all college-educated or above, expressive, and possess rich association skills. This selection criteria aims to delve deep into the complete decision-making process and the underlying consumer psychology of individuals when buying children's clothing. The respondents are located in first and second-tier cities in China, as these consumers generally have a broader perception of brands, services, and other factors that provide more emotional value. The final sample size was determined to be 24 individuals, with each group consisting of 6 people categorized based on the city level and the price range of the children's clothing brands they frequently purchase, resulting in a total of 4 groups. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions designed around the interviewees' lifestyle, purchasing considerations, and clothing preferences in different scenarios (refer to Table 1). Throughout the actual interview process, questions were adjusted based on the interviewees' responses, and in-depth follow-up questions were conducted as necessary. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees prior to the discussions, and the collected contents were solely used for this research. The information obtained was subsequently organized into four interview transcripts after the completion of the interviews.

Table 1: Interview outline.

No.	Subject	Questions
1	Lifestyle	What is the state of your life?
		What do you pay attention to when you buy clothes for your children?
2	Brand awareness and purchase consideration	Which brands do you usually choose? Why?
		Tell us about your whole buying process. How did you make your consumer choice?
3	Needs and preferences in different scenarios	How would you choose clothes to match your child on different occasions? What are the specific considerations?

4. Research Findings: The Interactive Ritual Process of Parents' Childrenswear Consumption Decision

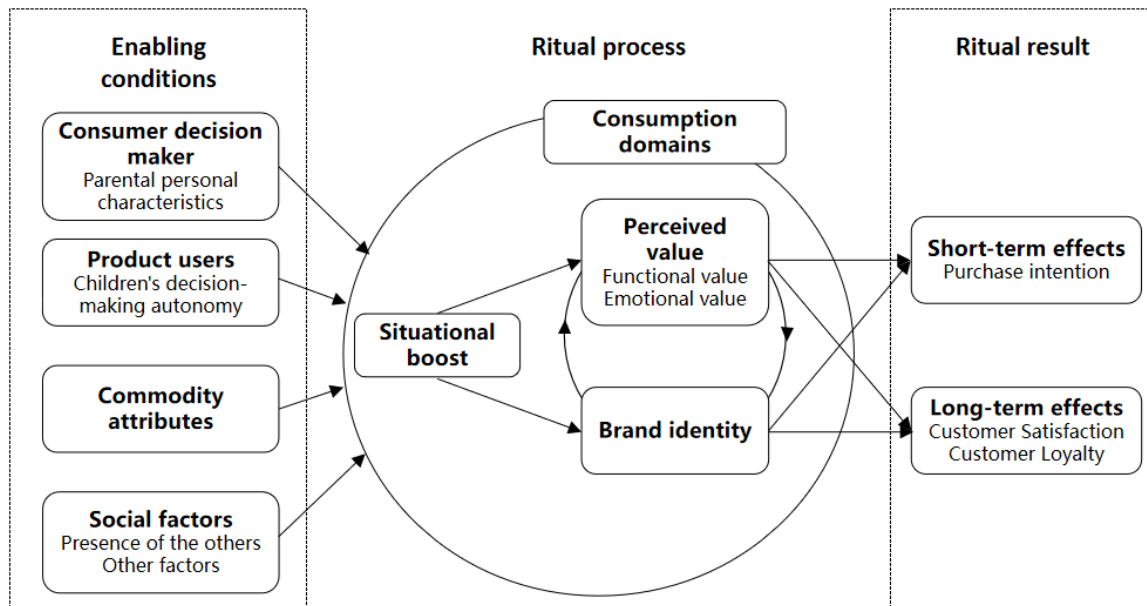


Figure 1: Childrenswear consumption decision model.

4.1. Enabling Conditions of Childrenswear Consumption Interactive Ritual

Interactions among individuals involving the exchange of capital and emotions in social life can be referred to as interactive rituals. In the context of children's clothing consumption, the enabling conditions for interactive rituals consist of consumer decision-makers, commodity users, commodity attributes, and social factors.

Firstly, from the consumer's perspective, as the ultimate decision-maker, parents' personal characteristics play a crucial role. The construction of an ideal future for their child varies among parents, leading to different degrees of involvement in childrenswear consumption decisions. For instance, some parents consciously or unconsciously project their own preferences onto their child, using children's clothing as a means of expressing their taste and signaling their preferences: "The baby's dressing style reflects the mother's dressing style...including taste. (G1-4)" In the actual consumption ritual, parents' expectations can significantly impact the emotional perceived value. Parents who are more interested in shaping their child into an ideal image are more actively involved in the child's decision-making process. They tend to project their personal preferences onto their child, resulting in a high level of participation and decision-making power during the consumption ritual. On the other hand, parents who respect their child's individual desires usually offer their child more choices: "If he doesn't like it, he can choose not to wear it...(G1-5)." This group of parents exhibits lower involvement in the consumer ritual.

Secondly, as actual users of goods and consumers, children's decision-making autonomy is an important factor that influences the consumption ritual and is influenced by various factors including their own preferences, family influence, and societal factors. Infants have minimal influence on the ritual, but as children grow and enter early childhood, they start developing decision-making autonomy as they are exposed to socializing factors such as family, peers, and mass media. Children with higher autonomy actively participate in the consumption ritual and have a greater influence on their parents' purchasing decisions, as expressed by one participant: "Now

children have their own opinions...I have to ask his opinion when buying clothes (G1-3)." Conversely, children with lower autonomy tend to passively accept their parents' choices, as one participant mentioned, "They don't have their own ideas, you carry which one to him and wear which one (G1-4)."

Furthermore, commodity attributes play a crucial role in initiating the consumer ritual. The inherent attributes of goods, such as image, quality, and function, cater to consumers' needs in different situations. For instance, when a child needs to participate in important activities, parents express their intention to purchase nice clothes: "Definitely buy her nice clothes (G4-5)." This highlights how commodity attributes influence the functional perceived value of consumers during the consumption ritual.

Finally, social factors also contribute to the formation of the ritual. During the consumption process, the presence of others is common. These others may include family members, friends, fellow shoppers, or other customers, all of whom can impact the consumer's emotions and perceptions. Beyond the immediate consumption scenario, consumers are also influenced by broader social factors such as societal views and media advertising. For example, some parents mentioned their tendency to purchase clothes worn by celebrity children. These social factors shape consumer behavior and perceptions both within and outside the consumption ritual.

4.2. Perceived Value and Brand Identity in the Consumption Ritual

The interactive field of childrenswear consumption is established when the aforementioned conditions converge, initiating the interactive ritual. Within this ritual, perceived value exerts an influence on consumers' brand identity and purchase decisions, while brand identity, in turn, impacts perceived value. The reciprocal relationship between these two factors serves as a key driver in sustaining the ritual.

Perceived value in the childrenswear consumption ritual manifests in two dimensions: functional and emotional, both of which cater to parents' cognitive attributes regarding children's clothing. Functional value forms the foundation of consumer perceived value, as parents prioritize aspects such as safety and quality when making purchases. In terms of emotional value, it encompasses the emotions experienced by consumers during the purchase process and the desired social image they wish to project. Beyond daily activities, some parents proactively engage their children in pursuits like piano, dance, and modeling. On such occasions, children seek to present a specific image to the outside world, while parents yearn for their children's attire to be admired by others, reflecting the family's or parents' status and taste. When a product effectively fulfills consumers' fundamental functional needs, enhances the shopping experience, and aligns with their desired social image, consumers' personal identification with the brand and the degree of congruence between themselves and the brand's image also increases. For instance, one participant expressed, "We don't buy ordinary brands; the father said his daughter must buy a good one... He wants his child to stand out (G3-6)." Social identity entails consumers expressing their identity through the brand and emphasizing a sense of belonging to a particular group. Mothers who have a strong preference for a specific brand tend to choose the same brand for their children, and their social circle also influences their identification with the brand: "I have some close friends who are also moms... These brands are quite popular in our circle (G2-2)." Thus, it is evident that the brand choices made by the parent group around them also influence their own brand preferences.

Brand identity, in turn, can influence consumers' perceived value. Over the course of consumption, consumers gradually form an inherent impression of the brand. When consumers possess a strong brand identity, they tend to perceive higher value in the brand's products. As one participant stated, "we feel (this brand) is different...because it's expensive (G3-5)." During this phase, parents are more inclined to choose this particular brand. Conversely, when consumers have

a low brand identity, it becomes challenging to enhance perceived value, and the established brand impression is not easily reversed.

Furthermore, situational factors such as the store environment and service quality also impact consumers' perceived value. When consumers experience high-end service quality, their perceived value related to status is satisfied, leading to an enhanced brand identity. On the other hand, if the store environment is cluttered and crowded, it can negatively affect perceived value and diminish brand identity.

4.3. Results of a Consumption Ritual

The interactive ritual examined in this study has both short-term and long-term effects. The short-term impact is manifested as purchase intention, which represents the likelihood of consumers being willing to engage in a specific purchase behavior. When consumers' perceived value and brand identity are heightened during the ritual, their willingness to purchase children's clothing also increases.

On the other hand, the long-term influence pertains to consumers' behavioral intentions beyond the shopping scene, encompassing customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction serves as immediate feedback regarding the consumption experience during the ritual, as well as feedback on the product or service process received by parents following the completion of their children's clothing consumption. This includes feedback from children regarding their wearing experience. When customer satisfaction is high, consumers are more inclined to recommend the brand or product to others.

The level of customer loyalty reflects the likelihood of consumers making repeat purchases. Parents' long-term consumption behavior for a particular brand or product following the childrenswear consumption ritual demonstrates their loyalty. Notably, a majority of respondents have identified a preferred childrenswear brand that they would purchase again. This can be attributed to the considerations of functional values, such as safety and fit, which are crucial factors when it comes to children's clothing.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper undertakes a grounded theory study on the childrenswear purchasing behavior of consumers in Chinese first and second-tier cities, constructing a comprehensive purchase decision chain using the interactive ritual chain theory. The central component of this chain is the children's clothing consumption ritual, wherein the personal characteristics of consumer decision-makers and product users, along with commodity attributes and social factors, serve as the enabling conditions for initiating the ritual. Within the ritual, perceived value and brand identity mutually influence each other, resulting in immediate effects on consumers' willingness to purchase and long-term impacts on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

5.1. Research Contributions and Practical Implications

Firstly, previous studies on childrenswear consumption have primarily focused on consumer purchase motivation and the interplay between parents and children in decision-making. However, this paper highlights that childrenswear purchasing behavior is a means for consumers to expand their self-concepts. Unfortunately, existing studies often lack a comprehensive depiction of the dynamic process of consumption behavior. Thus, this paper introduces the interactive ritual chain theory to explore childrenswear consumption, providing a research perspective that offers a dynamic mechanism and constructs a model of the consumption decision process.

Secondly, consumer involvement is widely recognized as an influential factor in consumer

behavior. Parental involvement, on the other hand, has predominantly been studied in areas such as children's education and development. In this study, the interviewees were not only involved in their children's growth as parents but also engaged in the consumption of children's clothing as consumers. Therefore, this paper introduces the concept of parental involvement when exploring the antecedents of the ritual. By considering parents' ideal construction of their children and the degree of involvement in the interaction, the constructed childrenswear consumption decision model in this paper encompasses a detailed antecedent process and its outcomes.

Lastly, from the perspective of enterprises and the market, the factors driving consumer purchases have gradually shifted from brand and price to scenario-based experiences and the pursuit of parent-child emotional connection. Childrenswear is not merely clothing; it also serves as a conduit for parents' emotions toward their children. Recognizing brand values will motivate parents to purchase branded products that align with their aesthetic needs and fulfill their emotional value. In the development and marketing of children's clothing products, companies need to prioritize consumers' value orientation and emotional needs, catering to target consumer groups and potential segments in a more nuanced manner. This approach will encourage consumers to invest in the brand's core values, resonate with their own emotions, and embrace a compatible lifestyle.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research conditions imposed constraints on the sampling method, resulting in a sample comprised solely of female children's clothing consumers from Chinese first and second-tier cities. While the complete decision chain was explored, it is important to note that the characteristics of different consumer groups can influence the study's findings. In future research, it would be beneficial to expand the sample size and conduct multi-level and multi-sample experiments to delve deeper into the mechanisms of consumption and compare the responses of different consumer groups to factors such as perceived value.

From a theoretical perspective, the model constructed in this paper is based on the interactive ritual chain theory, with the focus on the childrenswear consumption domain as the ritual component. During the interviews conducted for this study, respondents frequently emphasized the need to purchase clothing for specific occasions. From this standpoint, the activities of children in different occasions can also be viewed as constituting rituals. Therefore, in future research, it would be worthwhile to further break down the occasion-specific needs and explore the value perceptions and consumer behavior of children's clothing consumers in greater depth.

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