

Chinese College Students' Understanding of the Pink Tax: Analyzing Awareness Levels and Contributing Factors

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Abstract: This study investigates Chinese college students' awareness of the "pink tax", a gender-based pricing phenomenon where female-oriented products cost more despite having similar functions as male-oriented counterparts. Drawing on attribution theory, the research examines both internal factors (such as gender, personal values, and consumption habits) and external influences (such as media exposure and cultural norms) that shape students' awareness. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study integrates a large-scale questionnaire with semi-structured interviews across five awareness levels. Quantitative data reveal varying levels of pink tax awareness, while qualitative interviews explore the deeper reasons behind these perceptions. The study highlights a general lack of in-depth understanding and legal literacy about the pink tax, calling for enhanced consumer education and legislative efforts. The study concludes that increased awareness is essential for promoting fair pricing and gender equality in the Chinese consumer market.

Keywords: Pink tax; Gender-based pricing; Chinese college students; Attribution theory; Consumer awareness

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1. Introduction

In 2015, a study by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs found that women's products cost about 7% more than men's products. This phenomenon, known as the "pink tax", refers to the higher pricing of products for women without a real difference in value ^[1]. In China, the pink tax is also prevalent due to gender stereotypes that position women as high consumers, leading to more expensive female versions of products to increase profits ^[2]. This perpetuates market disorder and reinforces gender inequality. Therefore, it is crucial to explore Chinese university students' awareness of the pink tax and the factors influencing this awareness, which can also propose solutions to address the pink tax and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature review

Studies show that university students are aware of the pink tax. Still, they are only limited to the definitions and levels of practice observed in various products, and most of them see the application of the pink tax in different hygiene or personal care products^[3]. Many see the pink tax as unfair and discriminatory, worsening gender bias in pricing. The influencing factors are divided into internal (personal experiences with gender-based products) and external (media influence calling attention to the pink tax)^[4-5]. However, there are research gaps, particularly a lack of studies on the pink tax in China focused on college students. Few studies use mixed methods to explore awareness levels and influencing factors. But for college students, who are trend-conscious and have more requirements for the appearance of products, they will always be impacted by the pink tax more^[6-7]. Furthermore, gender-based pricing undermines consumer equality and reinforces stereotypes, and public awareness needs to be studied^[3-4]. So learning the awareness levels of Chinese university students and the influencing factors is also crucial.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Considering research objectives and combining with the literature review, Attribution theory, which explores how people explain the causes of cognition through internal and external factors, can guide this research in understanding what influences college students' awareness levels of the pink tax^[5].

2.2. Methodology

This research uses a hybrid approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods, as they complement each other^[8]. Quantitative research, based on positivism, collects large-scale data to understand the intuitive reflection of consumer cognitive level and gender ratio differences. Qualitative research, based on interpretivism, delves into the perspectives, motivations, and emotions of individuals to explore what factors lead to the existence of corresponding levels of consciousness.

2.3. Quantitative research

As the research aims to explore a relatively new topic in depth, a semi-open questionnaire survey is chosen as the exploratory survey and is expected to last for three months. The research focuses first on college students from universities in Zhuhai, where the researchers are located, before further radiation. A sample size of 2000 people will be selected, and the questionnaire will be published online on campus walls and forums that require real name authentication.

Based on a study of pink tax perception among young Filipino consumers and the Likert Five Point Scale, a basic questionnaire was developed (**Figure 1**). Responses are categorized into five levels of awareness: “very clear”, “relatively clear”, “vague”, “not very clear”, and “completely unaware.” Descriptive statistical analysis will be used to determine the number of respondents and their gender ratios at each awareness level.

Survey on Chinese college students' awareness of pink tax

Hello! We are the research team of Beijing Normal University and Hong Kong Baptist University United International College. We are now collecting data on your "degree of awareness of pink tax". It is estimated to take 3-5 minutes. We sincerely ask for your assistance!

This survey is conducted anonymously and on a voluntary basis. If you feel uncomfortable, you can choose to withdraw at any time.

I solemnly promise that this survey is only for academic research and will not bring you any adverse effects or inconvenience. There is no right or wrong answer, and this study will keep your answer strictly confidential!

*3. Have you ever noticed that there are price differences between men and women when purchasing similar types of goods or services?

☐ yes

☐ No

*4. Are you aware of a phenomenon called "pink tax" that refers to the fact that female consumers may have to pay higher prices for the same conditions?

☐ very clear about its definition

☐ relatively knowledgeable

☐ vague

☐ Don't know much

☐ I don't know at all (never heard of it)

*5. Which of the following commodities have you noticed the "pink tax" phenomenon? [Multiple choice]

☐ Personal care products (such as skin care products, shampoo, etc.)

☐ Beauty products (cosmetics, hair products, etc.)

☐ Clothing and accessories (clothes, shoes, etc.)

☐ Health care products (vitamins, supplements, etc.)

☐ Service industry (barber shop, gym, etc.)

☐ other

*1. Gender

☐ male

☐ female

☐ other _____

*2. Grade

☐ Freshman year

☐ Sophomore year

☐ Junior year

☐ Senior year

6. If you have any opinions on the "pink tax" phenomenon, you can use the space below to express your views

7. We will conduct more in-depth research in the future. If you are interested in our research, please leave your contact information (phone number)

Figure 1. Online questionnaire for college students in Zhuhai

2.4. Qualitative research

A semi-structured interview method will be used, employing Homogeneous Sampling. In terms of sample size selection, six individuals from each of the five awareness levels identified in the quantitative research will be selected, maintaining the gender ratio (e.g., 2 males and 4 females). A total of 30 individuals will be interviewed.

Research recruitment (**Figure 2**) is provided, and the interview guideline (**Figure 3**) where some questions are provided from the perspectives of internal and external factors to guide the interviewees' thinking. Data analysis will use theoretical analysis based on inductive reasoning and tools such as NVivo to analyze the specific responses and reactions of five groups with different awareness levels, which can be extended to some common awareness situations in today's society.

The poster is titled "Research Recruitment" in large, bold, black font. Below the title, it lists the following details: Subject: College students, Language: Mandarin, Duration: Estimated 60 minutes, Method: Online interview, and Tool: Tencent Conference. The research topic is "Exploring the degree of Chinese college students' cognition of pink tax and its influencing factors". The introduction states that the research team from Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College is conducting a study on college students' awareness of the pink tax. The confidentiality principle states that personal information will be kept strictly confidential, recordings will be kept confidential and used for academic research purposes only, and the study is voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. Participants will be paid 100 yuan per hour. The contact information is provided at the bottom: If you are interested in this study, please send an email to [s230032009@mail.uic.edu.cn] with "Pink Tax Study recruitment" in the subject line and we will arrange an interview with you as soon as possible.

Research Recruitment

Subject: College students Language: Mandarin
Duration: Estimated 60 minutes Method: Online interview
Tool: Tencent Conference

Research Topic:
Exploring the degree of Chinese college students' cognition of pink tax and its influencing factors

Introduction

- ▶ We are a research team from the Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College and are conducting a study on college students' awareness of the pink tax. Through in-depth interviews and case studies, we hope to reveal deeper insights and provide deeper understanding and coping strategies for underlying sexism.

Confidentiality principle

- ▶ Your personal information will be kept strictly confidential;
- ▶ Recordings of the interviews will be kept confidential and used for academic research purposes only;
- ▶ The study is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time if you feel any discomfort.

Participants will be paid 100 yuan per hour

If you are interested in this study, please send an email to [s230032009@mail.uic.edu.cn] with "Pink Tax Study recruitment" in the subject line and we will arrange an interview with you as soon as possible.

Figure 2. Research recruitment for semi-structured interviews

Interview guidelines for semi-structured interview

Hello, thank you for participating in our research. The purpose of this interview is to understand your understanding and opinion on the pink tax (where female products are priced higher without actual value differences). Your answer will help us gain a deeper understanding of the understanding and influencing factors of this phenomenon among Chinese university students. Please answer based on your true thoughts and experiences. Thank you.

Internal factors

Personal values and experiences:

How important do you think gender equality is in society? Why?

How do you view the phenomenon of price differences caused by gender differences?

Have you ever purchased women's products that are significantly more expensive than men's products? Please provide a detailed description of your experience.

Have your family or friends had similar experiences? Have these experiences influenced your perspective?

Gender and product requirements:

What factors do you usually prioritize when purchasing products, such as brand, appearance, functionality, etc?

Do you think women are priced higher in certain product categories? What category? Why?

Economic situation and consumption capacity:

How does your financial situation affect your consumption choices?

How sensitive are you to product prices? Will the pink tax affect your purchasing decision?

External factors

Gender roles in social and cultural positioning:

What do you think are the different expectations of society for the consumption needs and behaviors of men and women?

How do you think these socio-cultural expectations affect product pricing?

Policies and regulations:

Do you know that there are relevant laws or policies in China to regulate the phenomenon of the pink tax?

What measures do you think the government should take to reduce or cancel the pink tax?

Marketing and media coverage:

Have you noticed pricing strategies with gender differences in marketing? Please provide an example for an explanation.

Have you seen any media coverage of the pink tax phenomenon? Have these reports changed your perspective or behavior?

Summary

What do you think is the most effective way to raise public awareness of the pink tax phenomenon?

Do you want to share any other thoughts or suggestions about the pink tax with us?

Thank you again for your participation! Your answer will provide valuable insights for our research.

Figure 3. Interview guidelines for semi-structured interview

3. Expected results

The expected results will also be analyzed based on attribution theory from both external and internal factors. Internal factors such as personal values, gender, consumption habits, and economic conditions determine an individual's sensitivity to gender-based pricing. External factors such as social and cultural norms, government policies, marketing, and media coverage can influence the broader context in which these concepts are formed.

4. Limitation

Gender was restricted initially, and the results may not equally apply to individuals with different gender identities. As a big-scale study, specific policies in different regions may affect the prediction results. Moreover, the sample size of qualitative research cannot include college students from all economic, cultural, and social backgrounds, which affects the universality of the result.

5. Further discussion

Research on the pink tax is still in its early stages ^[5]. There are many areas to explore in the fight for gender equality in the consumer market. And promoting awareness of the pink tax is crucial for fair pricing and gender equality ^[3].

Consumers, often, they are unaware of the pink tax and accept higher prices without questioning them ^[9]. This leads to ingrained purchasing habits and unnoticed consumption traps. It is important to educate consumers about this discrimination so they can advocate for their rights and help others.

For legislators, as the phenomenon of the pink tax is only a value judgment and not a legal basis, it is hard to link the pink tax and price discrimination based on gender differences in the law ^[10–11]. Therefore, increased awareness can drive policy formulation, review, and improvement of existing laws ^[5].

For businesses, understanding the impact of the pink tax on consumers is essential. Small price differences add up to significant costs ^[12]. When consumers recognize this discrimination, they may choose alternative products, which ultimately harms the businesses using these pricing strategies ^[3].

6. Conclusion

The development of pink tax awareness in the Chinese market still requires joint efforts from multiple aspects to achieve gender equality in the consumer market and more just and sustainable social development.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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