

Trends and Consumer Characteristics in the Chinese Children's Picture Book Market

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Abstract: The Chinese children's picture book market has experienced rapid growth in recent years, driven by increasing parental investment in early childhood education and rising household income levels. However, empirical research examining consumer characteristics and purchasing behavior in this market remains limited. This study aims to investigate trends and consumer characteristics in the Chinese children's picture book market by examining the factors influencing parents' purchase intentions. Drawing upon the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and consumer value theory, this research proposes a conceptual model incorporating perceived educational value, emotional value, social influence, perceived affordability, attitude, and purchase intention. A quantitative research design was adopted using a cross-sectional survey method. Data were collected from 312 parents with children aged 0–8 years in China through an online questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the relationships among variables. The results indicate that perceived educational value and emotional value significantly influence parents' attitudes toward children's picture books, while attitude, social influence, and perceived affordability positively affect purchase intention. Among these factors, perceived educational value was found to be the strongest predictor. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, accounting for 61% of the variance in purchase intention. This study contributes to the literature by extending the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to the context of children's cultural consumption and provides practical implications for publishers, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote children's reading and support the development of the picture book industry in China.

Keywords: Children's picture books, Consumer Behavior; Purchase Intention, Theory of Planned Behavior, Perceived value

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In recent decades, China has experienced rapid socio-economic development accompanied by significant changes in household consumption patterns, particularly in relation to children's education and cultural products. Among various sectors of the publishing industry, children's books have become one of the most dynamic and profitable segments. Recent industry data indicate that children's books account for approximately 28% of China's total book retail market, making it the largest category within the publishing sector (Diniz, 2025). Moreover, China has a large population of children and young readers, estimated at more than 367 million, providing substantial market potential for children's cultural products (Zhang, 2025).

Within the children's book market, picture books have attracted growing attention due to their unique integration of visual storytelling and educational functions. Picture books are widely recognized as important tools for promoting children's cognitive development, language acquisition, imagination, and emotional learning during early childhood. As Chinese parents increasingly emphasize early education and holistic child development, demand for high-quality picture books has expanded significantly. The growth of the middle class, urbanization, and improved access to educational resources have further contributed to the rapid development of the children's picture book market in China (Tianle, 2022).

Additionally, parental investment in children's education has risen considerably in China over the past two decades. With improved living standards, parents are increasingly willing to spend more on educational products, including books,

to enhance their children's developmental opportunities (Zhao, 2023). This consumption upgrade reflects broader social transformations, including changing parenting values, increased educational competition, and heightened awareness of early childhood development. Consequently, the Chinese children's picture book market has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the global publishing industry.

From a consumer behavior perspective, purchasing decisions for children's picture books differ from those for general consumer goods because parents act as primary decision-makers and gatekeepers. Their attitudes, perceptions, and social influences play crucial roles in shaping purchase intentions. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding such decision-making processes, suggesting that behavioral intention is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Benny, 2021). Applying this theoretical lens to the context of children's book consumption can help explain parents' purchasing behavior and market dynamics.

1.2 Problem Statement and Significance

Despite the rapid growth of the Chinese children's picture book market, several challenges and research gaps remain. First, although market expansion has been widely acknowledged, empirical research examining consumer characteristics and purchasing behavior in this sector is still limited. Many existing studies focus primarily on industry trends or publishing strategies rather than consumer-level decision-making processes. Understanding parental consumption behavior is essential because parents are the dominant buyers in the children's book market.

Second, imported picture books have historically dominated the Chinese market due to perceived higher quality and established international reputations. However, domestic publishers are increasingly producing original picture books, creating stronger competition between local and foreign products. There is still insufficient research investigating how parents evaluate product quality, educational value, and cultural relevance when making purchase decisions.

Third, digital transformation and the rise of e-commerce platforms have significantly changed purchasing channels and consumer information sources. Online reviews, social media recommendations, and influencer marketing now play important roles in shaping parents' perceptions and choices. However, academic research has not fully explored how these social influences interact with individual perceptions to affect purchase intention.

Therefore, this study aims to examine trends and consumer characteristics in the Chinese children's picture book market by focusing on parental purchase intention and behavior. By integrating consumer behavior theory with empirical data, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge.

The significance of this study can be summarized in three aspects. Theoretically, this research extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to the context of children's cultural consumption, enriching the literature on consumer behavior in educational products. Practically, the findings provide insights for publishers, educators, and policymakers to develop more effective strategies for promoting children's reading and supporting the domestic publishing industry. Socially, understanding consumer demand can help improve the quality and accessibility of children's picture books, thereby contributing to early childhood education and literacy development in China.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Consumer Behavior in the Children's Book Market

Consumer behavior in the children's book market differs significantly from general consumer product markets because purchasing decisions are primarily made by parents rather than the end users, namely children. Parents act as gatekeepers who evaluate the educational value, content quality, and developmental benefits of books before making purchase decisions. Research indicates that parental education level, income, and parenting beliefs strongly influence children's book consumption patterns (Visconti et al., 2013).

In the Chinese context, parental investment in children's education is particularly prominent due to strong cultural emphasis on academic achievement and early development. Chinese parents often perceive educational products as long-term investments that can enhance children's future competitiveness (Huang & Gove, 2015). As a result, books that demonstrate educational value and developmental benefits are more likely to attract parental attention and purchase intention.

Moreover, studies suggest that parents increasingly view picture books not only as reading materials but also as tools for parent-child interaction and emotional bonding. Shared reading activities between parents and children have been found to promote language development, emotional communication, and cognitive growth (Mol & Bus, 2011). Therefore, emotional value and relational benefits also play important roles in parents' purchasing decisions.

2.2 Perceived Value and Purchase Intention

Perceived value is widely recognized as a key determinant of consumer behavior and purchase intention. According to consumer value theory, perceived value refers to consumers' overall evaluation of a product based on perceived benefits and costs (Zeithaml, 1988). In the context of children's picture books, perceived value may include educational value, emotional value, aesthetic value, and social value.

Educational value is particularly important in the children's book market because parents seek products that contribute to children's learning and development. Emotional value refers to the enjoyment and bonding experiences

created through shared reading. Social value may involve status signaling, such as purchasing high-quality or award-winning books to demonstrate responsible parenting.

Previous research has confirmed that perceived value positively influences purchase intention across various consumer contexts (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In the context of educational products, perceived usefulness and developmental benefits are especially influential factors shaping parents’ decisions.

2.3 Social Influence and Digital Environment

Social influence plays a critical role in shaping consumer behavior, particularly in collectivist societies such as China. Subjective norms, defined as perceived social pressure from important others, can significantly influence behavioral intentions (Benny, 2021). In the children’s book market, parents often rely on recommendations from teachers, peers, and online communities when selecting books.

The rise of digital media and e-commerce platforms has further amplified social influence. Online reviews, parenting blogs, and social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin have become major information sources for parents. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) has been found to significantly affect consumer trust and purchase intention (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Therefore, social influence within digital environments is likely to be an important determinant of parents’ purchasing decisions for children’s picture books.

2.4 Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offers a comprehensive framework widely utilized to explain human behavior in diverse settings. According to this theory, behavioral intention is shaped by three core components: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Benny, 2021). Attitude captures the individual’s favorable or unfavorable assessment of engaging in a behavior; subjective norms reflect perceived social pressures or expectations; and perceived behavioral control pertains to the perceived level of difficulty or ease associated with performing the behavior.

Researchers have successfully applied TPB in studies involving consumer choices, educational materials, and parental decision-making processes (Paul et al., 2016). In the specific context of children’s picture books, parents’ attitudes may be shaped by the perceived educational benefits of the books, subjective norms may be influenced by social recommendations or peer opinions, and perceived behavioral control may involve considerations such as cost and ease of access.

2.5 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

Based on the literature review and the Theory of Planned Behavior, this study proposes that parents’ purchase intention toward children’s picture books is influenced by perceived educational value, emotional value, social influence, and perceived affordability.

Educational value and emotional value are expected to positively influence parents’ attitudes toward picture books, which in turn enhances purchase intention. Social influence is also expected to directly affect purchase intention through subjective norms. Perceived affordability represents perceived behavioral control and is likely to influence both attitude and purchase intention.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Perceived educational value positively influences parents’ attitudes toward children’s picture books.*
- H2: Emotional value positively influences parents’ attitudes toward children’s picture books.*
- H3: Parents’ attitudes positively influence purchase intention.*
- H4: Social influence positively influences purchase intention.*
- H5: Perceived affordability positively influences purchase intention.*

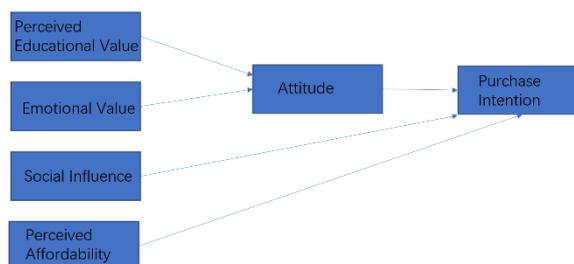


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method to examine trends and consumer characteristics in the Chinese children's picture book market. A questionnaire survey was considered appropriate because the research aims to investigate parents' perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions toward children's picture books, which can be effectively measured through structured self-report instruments.

The research model is developed based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), incorporating perceived educational value, emotional value, social influence, and perceived affordability as key determinants of parents' attitudes and purchase intentions. Quantitative analysis allows for the examination of relationships among variables and provides empirical evidence to test the proposed hypotheses. A cross-sectional design was employed because data were collected at a single point in time, enabling the analysis of current consumer characteristics and market trends within the Chinese context.

3.2 Participant and Sampling Procedure

The target demographic for this study comprised parents residing in China who have children between the ages of 0 and 8 years an age range considered the main consumer group for children's picture books. To ensure the relevance of the data, only participants with prior experience in purchasing or reading picture books for their children were included.

A convenience sampling strategy was adopted based on practical accessibility. Data collection was carried out through an online questionnaire distributed across Chinese social media platforms, parenting forums, and educational community groups. This digital approach was chosen due to the widespread use of online platforms among Chinese parents and its alignment with contemporary purchasing habits. In total, 350 questionnaires were disseminated, and after data cleaning, 312 valid responses were retained, yielding an effective response rate of approximately 89%. This sample size exceeds the minimum threshold of 200 observations generally recommended for Structural Equation Modeling (Hair et al., 2019).

All participants took part voluntarily and anonymously. Prior to participation, individuals were informed about the study's purpose, and assurances regarding the confidentiality of their data were provided, in accordance with ethical research standards.

3.3 Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections: demographic information and measurement scales for the research variables. The demographic section included questions regarding gender, age, education level, monthly household income, number of children, and children's age. These variables were collected to describe the sample characteristics and to examine potential demographic differences. The measurement scales were adapted from established studies to ensure reliability and validity. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Perceived educational value was measured based on previous research on educational product consumption (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Emotional value items assessed the extent to which picture books create enjoyment and parent-child bonding experiences. Social influence was measured using items adapted from the subjective norms construct of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Benny, 2021). Perceived affordability assessed respondents' perceptions of price reasonableness and financial accessibility. Attitude toward picture books and purchase intention were measured using commonly used consumer behavior scales (Dodds et al., 1991). A pilot test involving 30 parents was conducted before the main survey to ensure clarity and reliability of the questionnaire items. Minor wording revisions were made based on participant feedback.

3.4 Data Analysis Strategy

The analysis of collected data was carried out utilizing SPSS and AMOS software, following a multi-step analytical procedure. Initially, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the demographic profile of respondents and their picture book purchasing patterns. Subsequently, reliability testing was conducted by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients to examine the internal consistency of each measurement scale. Following this, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess construct validity, encompassing both convergent validity and discriminant validity.

To test the proposed relationships among latent variables, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was applied. This methodological approach was selected due to its capacity to simultaneously estimate multiple interrelated dependencies and provide comprehensive fit statistics for model evaluation. The overall model fit was assessed based on widely accepted indices, including the ratio of Chi-square to degrees of freedom, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR (Hair et al., 2019). All statistical tests were evaluated at the 0.05 significance level.

4. Result

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

A total of 312 valid questionnaires were collected and used for data analysis. Among the respondents, 67.9% were mothers, 29.5% were fathers, and 2.6% were other guardians. The majority of participants (72.4%) were aged between 28 and 40 years, representing the primary parenting population in China. Regarding education level, 71.2% of respondents held a bachelor’s degree or above, indicating a relatively well-educated sample.

In terms of household monthly income, 58.7% of respondents reported an income between RMB 8,000 and RMB 20,000, suggesting moderate purchasing power for children’s educational products. Most families (64.1%) had one child, while 30.8% had two children, reflecting current family structure patterns in China. Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the sample adequately represents urban Chinese parents with young children, who are the primary consumers of children’s picture books.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Role	Mother	212	67.9
	Father	92	29.5
	Other	8	2.6
Age	Below 28	45	14.4
	28–40	226	72.4
	Above 40	41	13.2
Education	Diploma or below	90	28.8
	Bachelor or above	222	71.2
Income	Below RMB 8,000	72	23.1
	RMB 8,000–20,000	183	58.7
	Above RMB 20,000	57	18.3

4.2 Reliability and Validity

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were assessed prior to hypothesis testing. Cronbach’s alpha values for all constructs ranged from 0.83 to 0.91, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Composite Reliability (CR) values ranged from 0.85 to 0.93, also above the recommended level.

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.59 to 0.76, exceeding the minimum requirement of 0.50, demonstrating adequate convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, and the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded the correlations with other constructs, indicating acceptable discriminant validity. These results confirm that the measurement model possesses adequate reliability and validity for further structural analysis.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	AVE
Perceived educational value	0.89	0.91	0.68
Emotional value	0.87	0.9	0.65
Social influence	0.85	0.88	0.59
Perceived affordability	0.83	0.85	0.6
Attitude	0.9	0.93	0.76
Purchase Intention	0.91	0.92	0.74

4.3 Structural Model and Hypotheses Testing

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The model fit indices indicated a satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.065, and SRMR = 0.052, which meet the recommended thresholds (Hair et al., 2019). The results indicate that perceived educational value significantly influences

parents' attitudes toward children's picture books ($\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Emotional value also shows a significant positive effect on attitudes ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$), supporting H2.

Furthermore, parents' attitudes significantly influence purchase intention ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Social influence has a significant positive impact on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.01$), supporting H4. Perceived affordability also positively affects purchase intention ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.05$), supporting H5. The model explains 61% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.61$), indicating strong explanatory power.

Table 3. Structural Path

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	p-value	Result
H1	Perceived Educational Value → Attitude	0.48	<0.001	Supported
H2	Emotional Value → Attitude	0.36	<0.001	Supported
H3	Attitude → Purchase Intention	0.42	<0.001	Supported
H4	Social Influence → Purchase Intention	0.29	<0.01	Supported
H5	Perceived Affordability → Purchase Intention	0.21	<0.05	Supported

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The present study aimed to examine trends and consumer characteristics in the Chinese children's picture book market by investigating the factors influencing parents' purchase intentions. The findings reveal several important insights into consumer decision-making within this context.

First, perceived educational value emerged as the strongest predictor of parents' attitudes toward children's picture books. This result indicates that Chinese parents primarily view picture books as educational tools rather than purely entertainment products. The strong emphasis on academic achievement and early childhood development within Chinese culture may explain this finding, as parents tend to prioritize resources that can enhance their children's learning readiness and cognitive development.

Second, emotional value was also found to significantly influence parental attitudes. This suggests that parents recognize the relational benefits of shared reading experiences, including emotional bonding and communication with children. Picture books are therefore valued not only for their functional benefits but also for their ability to strengthen family relationships.

Third, the results show that parents' attitudes significantly affect purchase intention, supporting the central assumption of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Benny, 2021). This finding confirms that positive perceptions of children's picture books translate into stronger purchasing willingness.

Fourth, social influence was found to have a significant impact on purchase intention. This reflects the importance of recommendations from teachers, peers, and online communities in shaping parents' purchasing decisions. In China's collectivist cultural environment, social norms often play a crucial role in guiding consumer behavior.

Finally, perceived affordability also positively influenced purchase intention, although its effect size was relatively smaller compared to other variables. This indicates that while parents are willing to invest in educational resources, financial considerations remain relevant, particularly for middle-income households.

5.2 Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are generally consistent with previous research on consumer behavior and educational product consumption. The significant influence of perceived educational value aligns with consumer value theory, which emphasizes the role of perceived benefits in shaping purchase decisions (Zeithaml, 1988; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Similar results have been reported in studies examining parental investment in children's education, where perceived usefulness and developmental outcomes strongly predict purchasing behavior.

The importance of emotional value also supports prior research highlighting the role of parent-child shared reading experiences in children's development. Previous studies have shown that interactive reading promotes language skills, emotional development, and cognitive growth (Mol & Bus, 2011). The current findings extend this perspective by demonstrating that emotional value also influences purchasing attitudes in the consumer context.

Furthermore, the significant effect of social influence is consistent with the subjective norms component of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Benny, 2021). Previous studies have demonstrated that social recommendations and electronic word-of-mouth significantly affect consumer decisions, particularly in online environments (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). The present study confirms the relevance of these factors in the Chinese children's picture book market.

However, the relatively smaller effect of affordability compared with educational and emotional value suggests that Chinese parents may prioritize developmental benefits over price considerations when purchasing educational products. This finding reflects the growing trend of consumption upgrading in China's middle-class families.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions to the literature on consumer behavior and educational product consumption. First, it extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to the context of children's cultural consumption, particularly the children's picture book market, which has received limited empirical attention.

Second, the study integrates perceived value dimensions with TPB constructs, providing a more comprehensive framework for understanding parental purchase behavior. By incorporating educational and emotional value into the attitude formation process, the research demonstrates how cognitive and affective evaluations jointly influence consumer decision-making.

Third, the findings contribute to the understanding of consumer behavior in emerging markets by highlighting the influence of cultural and social factors within the Chinese context. The strong role of educational value and social influence reflects unique characteristics of parental consumption behavior in China.

Overall, this study provides a theoretical foundation for future research on children's cultural consumption and educational product markets.

6. Implications

6.1 Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several practical implications for publishers, educators, and policymakers. For publishers, emphasizing educational benefits and developmental outcomes in marketing strategies may enhance consumer appeal. High-quality illustrations, engaging storytelling, and culturally relevant content are also critical factors for attracting parents.

For educators, integrating picture books into early childhood education programs can encourage parents to recognize their educational value. Teachers' recommendations can significantly influence parental purchase decisions, highlighting the importance of school-family collaboration.

For policymakers, supporting domestic picture book creation through funding programs and training initiatives may strengthen the competitiveness of local publishing industries. Promoting national reading campaigns and improving access to children's books in rural areas can further enhance literacy development.

6.2 Theoretical Implications

This study extends the application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to the context of children's cultural consumption. By integrating perceived value dimensions with TPB constructs, the research provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding parental purchase behavior in educational product markets.

6.3 Limitation and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ probability sampling methods to obtain more representative samples. Second, this study focused primarily on urban parents, and consumer characteristics in rural areas may differ. Third, the cross-sectional design cannot capture changes in consumer behavior over time.

Future studies could explore longitudinal research designs, qualitative interviews, or cross-cultural comparisons to gain deeper insights into consumer behavior in the children's picture book market. Additionally, examining the impact of digital reading technologies and interactive media may provide valuable directions for future research.

7. Conclusion

This study examined trends and consumer characteristics in the Chinese children's picture book market by investigating factors influencing parents' purchase intentions. The findings indicate that perceived educational value, emotional value, social influence, and perceived affordability significantly affect purchase intention, with educational value emerging as the most influential factor.

The results highlight the importance of integrating cognitive, emotional, and social perspectives when analyzing consumer behavior in educational product markets. As the Chinese children's picture book market continues to expand, understanding parental decision-making processes will be essential for promoting sustainable industry development and supporting children's literacy and early education.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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