

## **Social Influence and Trial Willingness of Pecan in China**

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*In view of the recent trade war and the ongoing adversarial relationship between the US and China, it is critical to understand more about China's rising pecan market. The purpose of this research was to investigate factors influencing purchase intentions of pecans in the Chinese collective culture. The proposed research model was based on social influence theory and Hofstede's culture definition and was evaluated using regression analysis based on 441 respondents from an urban center in China. Study results suggest that perceived authority trust and social influence are the two most important variables affecting peoples' intentions to purchase pecans in China. Study results also provide an applied understanding of the typical person that is most likely to purchase pecans in China.*

*Keywords: social influence, trial willingness, authority trust, pecan consumption*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the twenty years leading up to the current US versus China trade war, the importance of agricultural trade cannot be overstated. During this time the United States Department of Agriculture reported that China (including Hong Kong and Macau) was the largest single market for agricultural products produced in the US. In 2017, US agricultural exports to China reached \$19.6 billion and accounted for roughly 14 percent of US agricultural exports (Melton and Cooke, 2018). More specifically, US in-shell pecan exports to China ranged between 60% and 70% of the total pecan imports from 2015 to 2018 (Carter Pecan, 2018).

Increased Chinese pecan imports and consumption have in turn led to a growing interest in the Chinese pecan market. Zhang et al. (2015) is one of few studies that examined the development of pecan production

in China. Interestingly, and similar to the US, the preponderance of agri-product research in China has focused on propagation, planting and tissue cultures (Fu et al., 2004; Nadler et al., 2017; Wang, 2012; Zhu, 2018). However, very few studies on Chinese consumption patterns have been published in English language journals and to the authors' knowledge, no studies related to the adoption of new agricultural products in China have been published. This omission is striking when considering the scale of imported agricultural products such as pecans and their consumption in China.

This study attempts to address this largely unexplored area of research. It specifically addresses the social influences, the source of those influences and their impact on respondents' willingness to adopt pecan consumption while controlling for various demographic characteristics.

Social influence theory and the Hofstede dimensions provide theoretical foundations necessary for the development of research hypotheses. The authors then provide a discussion of the survey development, analysis, study results and conclusions. This study makes an important contribution to the extant literature because it is the first of its type to study a newly adopted largely imported agricultural product in China.

### **Social Influence Theory, Culture and Trial Willingness**

The theoretical foundation employed to explore Chinese respondents' willingness to adopt pecans was based on an extensive review of the literature. Past research suggests that social influence (Kelman, 1958, 1961) and culture (Hofstede, 2001; Leung et al. 2005; Srnka, 2004; Triandis, 1995) would affect purchase intention. This research also suggested that three variables influence intentions to purchase pecans: authority trust, reference groups, and social influence.

The impact of social influences cannot be overstated as they take many forms. These include but are not limited to compliance with authority and peer pressure or socialization. Social influence acts as a means of persuading, influencing or changing an individual's or group's behavior to conform to gender or cultural expectations (Hofstede, 2001).

A further review of the social influence literature demonstrates that people mimic the behavior of others through deliberative processes. They conform to the actions of others believing that doing so provides the diagnostic information necessary to satisfy their need to be right (i.e., informational social influence). Informational influence (or social proof) also affects behavior through one's acceptance of that information as being trustworthy and real. Informational influence comes into play when people are uncertain because of the stimuli being intrinsically ambiguous or because of social disagreement (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Campbell and Fairey, 1989; Childers and Rao, 1992; Cialdini, 2001; Deutsch and Gerard, 1955).

People also conform because of their desire to associate with a group or to be liked (Huh et al., 2014). This normative influence involves the expectations or influence of respected others that lead an individual to conform to expectations to receive positive feedback (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). In terms of Kelman's (1958) typology, normative influence leads to public compliance, whereas informational influence leads to private acceptance. In short, the central theme of social influence theory is that one's attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions or behaviors are influenced by referent others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers, bosses and society) through three processes: identification, compliance and internalization (Kelman, 1958).

Culture ultimately affects attitudes, cognitive processes, and lifestyle (Xu-Priour et al. 2014), and the link between social influences and Hofstede's cultural dimensions is well supported in the literature. Culture has been variously defined by many authors. However, the most widely and generally accepted definition is provided by Hofstede (2001, p. 9) who defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Hofstede also notes (p. 10): "culture in this sense includes values; systems of values are a core element of culture". Cultures may be identified at multiple levels, from narrow micro-cultures such as family and organization to broad supra-cultures such as nations with similar economic systems, ethnicities, religions, and so forth (Srnka, 2004). For comparisons across countries, national culture may be "broadly defined as values, beliefs, norms, and behavioral patterns of a national group" (Leung, et al. 2005, p. 357). Earlier work by Hofstede (1980) suggested that cultures could be viewed in terms of the following dimensions: individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and masculinity and femininity.

*Individualistic* cultures stress personal responsibility and achievement, and individuals are self-oriented rather than group-oriented. In *collectivistic* societies, individuals are integrated from birth into cohesive in-groups, and group goals and norms outweigh personal goals and attributes in guiding behavior (e.g., Triandis, 1995). *Uncertainty avoidance* reflects intolerance of ambiguity about the future. People in high uncertainty avoidance cultures frequently rely on technology, law, religion, rules and inputs from authority figures or trusted others as a means of dealing with ambiguity (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). *Power distance* is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). In high power distance countries, people are generally unwilling to question authority and do expect to be consulted by superiors. The *masculinity/femininity dimension* of culture refers to the degree of overlap between social gender roles. In both masculine and feminine societies, “women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life”, whereas in masculine societies, “men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 297).

As a collectivistic country Chinese citizens are expected to conform to cultural and hierarchal expectations. Those that fail in this regard risk losing “face” and their social position. Consequently, power distances tend to be rather large and individuals look toward authority figures and their social networks in order to comply with social expectations. Based on these linkages the following four hypotheses are developed.

## **Hypotheses Development**

### *Authority Trust and Trial Willingness*

Trust has been researched extensively in various disciplines such as social psychology, sociology, and economics, as well as in more applied areas like management and marketing (see Doney et al., 1998 for a review). Trust is often described in terms of perceived vulnerability or risk emanating from uncertainty about the actions of other parties (Kramer, 1999; Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Schlenker et al., 1973). Another aspect of trust is that it requires one party to have confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Consumer trust is not necessarily limited to buyer-seller relationships as past research has found that trust can extend beyond the organization and its representatives to a broader context in which exchange takes place. This broader context involves consumer confidence in third parties that monitor exchange partners and protect trust relationships (Shapiro, 1987). Research in this area involves a general or overall trust in people or a particular social system, regardless of sector or context (Grayson et al. 2008).

Numerous studies have identified trust as an important predictor of customer attitudes and future behavior (e.g., Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Angulo et al. (2005) demonstrated the importance of consumer trust in food labels affecting purchase willingness. Among food shoppers, Teng and Wang (2015) found that trust in organizations that sell, label and certify organic foods resulted in greater willingness to buy organic foods. Among online users, trust in online stores reduced the perceived risk associated with a purchase. Perceptions of reduced risk then serves to create a more positive attitude towards online purchasing and increases purchase intentions in general (Heijden et al. 2003). Similarly, trust in online consumer reviews and purchase intentions were found to be positively related (Lee et al., 2011). Among Facebook users, Hajli et al. (2017) found that user trust in a social networking site increased information-seeking, familiarity with the platform and the sense of social presence, which in turn led to increased purchase intentions.

Trust is one of the most effective methods of reducing consumer uncertainty (Hart and Saunders, 1997). It is important for foods like pecans given that some uncertainty and risk is inherent in food purchases that are considered “new” by consumers. In addition to trust in organizations and their representatives that market pecans, consumers must also trust the institutions or third parties that monitor the sellers and inform the public about the health benefits associated with pecan consumption.

In collectivistic cultures, one’s commitment to his/her respective social group takes precedence over commitments to self. There is a much stronger expectation for people to comply with directives from group leaders than in individualistic cultures. Furthermore, China’s cultural traditions have a long history of high

power distance, which emphasizes strict hierarchy where individuals are more conscious of their position in the social system and are more inclined to look toward authority figures and their social networks in order to comply with social expectations (Casimir et al., 2006).

In this study, Authority Trust captures consumer trust in entities involved in pecan consumption including government pecan regulations, companies that market pecans, health care professionals' comments about pecans and media ads about pecans. It should be noted however, that each of these entities is government controlled.

Based on previous research the following is proposed:

***H1: Authority Trust is positively related to pecan Trial Willingness***

#### *Reference Group and Trial Willingness*

As noted earlier, the central theme of social influence theory is that an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions or behaviors are influenced by referent others such as friends, family, coworkers, bosses and society (Kelman, 1958). Research examining the influence of the different types of referents (or reference groups) on purchase decisions is quite extensive (Bearden and Etzel 1982; Childers and Rao 1992).

For example, Cocanogher and Bruce (1971) distinguish between socially proximal referents who operate in their immediate social network vs. socially distant referents who operate on the boundaries of their normal social circles. Socially proximate referents provide substantial social interaction whereas socially distant referents offer limited social interaction. Previous studies have found socially proximate referents to have greater impact on purchase decisions (Shin 1999), intentions to exercise (Yun and Silk 2011) and innovative behavior (Subramanian and Subramanian 1995).

Reference groups in this study include the respondent's family and friends who share a close relationship network. This would be the high socially proximal group that we label Inside Social Source. Socially distant groups including coworkers, superiors, health professionals, social media and mass media are identified as Outside Social Source. We hypothesize that both Inside Social Source and Outside Social Source will be positively related to trial willingness of pecan. Thus:

***H2: Inside Social Source is positively related to pecan Trial Willingness.***

***H3: Outside Social Source is positively related to pecan Trial Willingness.***

#### *Social Influence and Trial Willingness*

Social Influence is defined as a practice of influencing peoples' intentions by bringing social pressure to bear on their behavior (Weber, 1947). Social influence is extremely similar to normative influence discussed in reference group literature. Normative influence is reflected in instances where individuals seek identification with the group and may involve adherence to group norms in order to avoid punishment, to receive rewards associated with group compliance or simply to be affiliated with said group (Bearden et al. 1989; Deutsch and Gerard 1955).

These group norms are clearly evident in collectivist cultures like China as people tend to lean towards interdependence and sociability. They are more likely to make decisions based on group members' opinions (Doney et al., 1998; Yoon, et al., 2011). More importantly, in these collectivist cultures, the failure to conform to cultural and hierarchal expectations can result in one losing "face" and his/her social position which cannot be regained.

***H4: Social Influence is positively related to pecan Trial Willingness.***

#### **Survey Development and Results**

The total sample includes 441 respondents that were collected from urban China. Respondents were selected based on a convenience sample and were asked to fill out the online survey which was hosted on

Qualtrics. The constructs and scales used in the survey were developed from previous research. All the scales in the survey have adequate reliability and validity given their use in other published studies. The data was analyzed with SPSS software.

The individual items were translated from English to Chinese by native speaking professional researchers and professors. The results of this study were confirmed by several Chinese researchers who teach and conduct research in China. This process resulted in only minor revisions prior to pretesting the survey instrument.

The survey instrument consisted of questions related to the variables under study: Authority Trust, Social Source, Social Influence and Trial Willingness. The survey also contained questions related to the respondents' demographics (e.g. age, gender, education, employment and income information). The survey utilized a Likert type scale for each variable that ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

*Authority Trust* consisted of four items. These items measured the degree of trust in 1) government pecan regulations, 2) companies that sell pecans, 3) health care professionals' comments regarding pecans and 4) public media advertisements about pecans. *Inside Social Source* consisted of two items measuring the influence of 1) family and 2) friends. *Outside Social Source* consisted of five items measuring the influence of 1) coworkers, 2) superiors, 3) health professionals, 4) social media and 5) mass media. *Social Influence* consisted of six items. These items measured the importance of knowing the following before deciding to purchase: 1) what someone I trust thinks of pecans, 2) what someone I respect thinks of pecans, 3) what someone close to me thinks of pecans, 4) what someone I have frequent contact with thinks of pecans, 5) what kinds of people buy pecans, and 6) what others think of people who buy pecans. *Trial Willingness* consisted of four items that measured the likelihood that the respondent would consume pecans in the future. The items included the likelihood that 1) pecans will be eaten if available, 2) intention to eat more pecans in the future, 3) intention to use pecans in cooking, and 4) intentions to eat pecans as a snack.

Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of the survey respondents. This portion of the analysis indicates that respondents in the 26 – 30 age group were the most likely to consume pecans (26.3%). Using the mid-value for each age group resulted in mean value of 31 with a standard deviation of 10.2. The split between female and male respondents was 210 to 217 with an additional 14 missing responses. In terms of education levels, most of the respondents had completed an undergraduate degree (38.8%) followed by those who with an associate degree (24.5%) or high school (24.5%). The majority of respondents were employed full-time (60.8%) while 20.9% were employed part-time. The majority of the respondents were in the \$3,001 – \$5,000 RMB monthly income group (35.6%). This encompasses the average monthly income (4,892.20 RMB). In short, the typical consumer of pecans in China is between the age of 26-30, has a college degree and is employed full-time with average income.

**TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY**

Variables	Frequency	Percent	Mean (Std. Dev.)
Age			31.03 (10.202)*
18-20	67	15.2	
21-25	71	16.1	
26-30	116	26.3	
31-35	68	15.4	
36-40	43	9.8	
41-45	22	5.0	
46-50	17	3.9	
51-55	23	5.2	
56-60	8	1.8	
61-70	4	.9	
Over 71	0	0	

Subtotal	439	99.5	
Not Reported	2	.5	
Gender			
Female	210	47.6	
Male	217	49.2	
Subtotal	427	96.8	
Not Reported	14	3.2	
Education			
Under High School	27	6.1	
High School	108	24.5	
Associate Degree	108	24.5	
Undergraduate	171	38.8	
Graduate or other	25	5.7	
Subtotal	439	99.5	
Not Reported	2	.5	
Employment			
Not Work	71	16.1	
Part-Time	92	20.9	
Full-Time	268	60.8	
Retired	9	2.0	
Subtotal	440	99.8	
Not Reported	1	.2	
Income			4,892.20 (5349.064)**
Under 1,000	63	14.3	
1,001-3,000	91	20.6	
3,001-5,000	157	35.6	
5,001-8,000	81	18.4	
8,001-15,000	30	6.8	
Over 15,000	14	3.2	
Subtotal	436	98.9	
Not Reported	5	1.1	

\* Based on the middle values of age ranges.

\*\* Based on the middle values of income ranges. (1 RMB = .14 USD)

Table 2 provides a summary of factor analysis and Cronbach alphas that were run to assure reliability. The Cronbach alphas for each construct were as follows: Authority Trust (.830), Inside Social Source (.828), Outside Social Source (.894), Social Influence (.895) and Trial Willingness (.833). The alpha values were higher than 0.7 exceeding the minimum recommended cutoff for internal consistency (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Hair et. al., 2009).

**TABLE 2**  
**ALPHAS, MEANS, AND STD. DEVIATIONS OF VARIABLES**

Variables	# of Items	Alpha	Mean	Std. Dev.
Authority Trust	4	.830	3.7851	.93004
Inside Social Source	2	.828	3.7845	.99611
Outside Social Source	5	.894	3.5863	.94477
Social Influence	6	.895	3.7291	.91750
Trial Willingness	4	.833	3.6589	.96236

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients and significant levels for the demographic variables and major constructs. Among demographic variables, Education ( $p < .01$ ), Employment ( $p < .05$ ), and Income ( $p < .01$ ) were significantly correlated with Trial Willingness. All four major constructs, Authority Trust ( $p < .01$ ), Inside Social Source ( $p < .01$ ), Outside Social Source ( $p < .01$ ), and Social Influence ( $p < .01$ ) were significantly correlated with Trial Willingness.

**TABLE 3**  
**PEARSON CORRELATION ANALYSIS**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Age	1									
2 Gender	-.048	1								
3 Education	.207*	-.137**	1							
4 Employment	.332*	.036	.422**	1						
5 Income	.369*	-.160**	.485**	.507**	1					
6 Authority Trust		.017	-.051	.235**	.122*	.147**	1			
7 Inside Social Source	-.023	-.102*	.269**	.092	.163**	.617**	1			
8 Outside Social Source	-.049	-.057	.168**	.037	.089	.702**	.735**	1		
9 Social Influence	-.082	-.098*	.248**	.097*	.144**	.687**	.760**	.770**	1	
10 Trial Willingness	-.013	-.048	.244**	.110*	.146**	.725**	.654**	.714**	.822**	1

\*Significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 provides a summary of the regression analysis. Since four of the major constructs have high correlations among themselves, regression analysis was run to assess the predictive power of the four constructs. Regression analysis was conducted by three different models: the demographic model, the major constructs model, and the complete model.

Regression diagnostics reveal that in the demographic model, only Education has significant influence on Trial Willingness ( $t$ -value = 4.405,  $p < .05$ ). That is, when all demographic variables together are taken into account, only Education has significant impact on Trial Willingness.

In the major constructs model, both Authority Trust ( $t$ -value = 7.048,  $p < .05$ ) and Social Influence ( $t$ -value = 12.667,  $p < .05$ ) significantly affect Trial Willingness. That is, when all the major constructs together are taken into account, only Authority Trust and Social Influence impact Trial Willingness.

In the complete model, Authority Trust ( $t$ -value = 6.497,  $p < .05$ ) and Social Influence ( $t$ -value = 12.366,  $p < .05$ ) are significant in influencing respondents' Trial Willingness.

**TABLE 4**  
**REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR DIFFERENT MODELS**

	Demographic Model		Major Constructs Model		Complete Model	
	Unstandardized	B (t-value)	Unstandardized	B (t-value)	Unstandardized	B (t-value)
Age	-.048	(-1.826)			.006	(.418)
Gender	-.032	(-.335)			.024	(.441)
Education	.212	(4.405)*			.006	(.190)
Employment	.065	(.788)			.110	(1.247)
Income	.031	(.622)			-.010	(-.344)
Authority Trust			.280	(7.048)*	.269	(6.497)*
Inside Social Source			-.012	(-.273)	-.027	(-.604)

Outside Social Source		.074 (1.580)	.091 (1.826)
Social Influence		.641 (12.667)*	.646 (12.366)*
F-Value	6.197*	271.975*	115.085*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.059	.736	.734

\*Significant at 0.05

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study yielded results that were both expected and unexpected. For example, in the first section of the analysis the demographic study suggested that the typical consumer of pecans in China is between the age of 26-30, has a college degree and is employed full-time with average income. This finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence suggesting that young Chinese consumers engage in conspicuous consumption of higher priced products similar to their counterparts in other countries (Barrera and Ponce, 2021).

The Pearson Correlation analysis provided interesting results in that all four of the hypotheses were supported at the .01 level. Specifically, Authority Trust, Inside Social Source, Outside Social Source, and Social Influence showed significant and positive correlation with Trial Willingness consistent with previous research. Among demographic variables, significant correlation was found for Education, Income, and Employment. There was significant collinearity between each of the major constructs indicating the need for additional analysis.

In the final portion of the analysis the demographic model, the major construct model and the complete model were tested using regression analysis. Results from the demographic model indicate that of the three social status variables (Education, Employment, and Income) only Education was significantly associated with Trial Willingness. This finding provides greater clarity given earlier analysis showing the younger, more educated, and fully employed as most likely to consume pecans.

The major constructs model and complete model yielded nearly identical results. Both indicated that Authority Trust and Social Influence significantly influence Trial Willingness whereas Inside and Outside Social Sources do not. Although these findings at first seem contrary to expectation, they may nonetheless reflect the general attitudes borne of strong cultural compliance in a collectivist and strict government regulated society. The impact of Outside Social Source was marginal suggesting that messages from sources such as doctors, dietary professionals and the media may have minimal impact on consumer purchase decisions. Interestingly, none of the demographic variables was significant despite China's standing as the second largest importer of pecans in the world. In sum, hypotheses 1 and 4 were fully supported while hypothesis 3 was only marginally supported.

This study makes three important contributions from a managerial perspective. First, firms that seek to enter or expand their agri-product in China should first work to become recognized as a credible authority or gain recognition from the central government. Second, firms in this area must recognize the importance of social influence and that the standard promotional campaigns may not be an effective means of developing market demand. Finally, these firms may want to consider developing marketing campaigns for use in other collectivist societies. From a research perspective, this study further establishes the importance of social influence theory in addressing high context cultures. This study supports the continued use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions to help understand consumption attitudes in different cultures. That said, further research needs is needed to better validate both this study's findings and those of past research.

This study like the majority of past research suffers from a number of limitations. First, the data was collected from a single area of China, and thus may not be fully representative of the country as a whole. Second, findings were based on single data collection and therefore does not address how pecan demand and the constructs of interest change over time. Finally, the study's findings may not be generalizable outside of China. These limitations notwithstanding this study does make a number of important contributions which were noted above.



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