



Article

Price leverage and consumer acceptance under the background of the "New Plastic Restriction Order"

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Citation:

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Abstract: To strengthen the control of plastic pollution and maintain ecological balance, in early 2020, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment issued the "Opinions on Further Strengthening Plastic Pollution Control", commonly known as the "new plastic restriction order." Against this background, there is a contradiction between consumers and the plastic bag charging system, which is one of the core measures of the new "plastic restriction order". This study adopts the scenario questionnaire survey method to conduct a questionnaire survey on 312 respondents and uses variance analysis to conduct hypothesis testing. Results indicate that the price level of plastic bags has a significant negative impact on consumers' public perception. Specifically, the perception of fairness in the CNY 2 price group is significantly lower than that of the CNY 0.5 price group. In contrast, no significant difference in fairness perception was found between the CNY 1 and CNY 0.5 price groups. The study shows that the price level of plastic bags will affect consumers' perception of fairness, which provides a reference for policy promotion.

Keywords: Plastic Restriction Order; Price Leverage; Perceived Fairness; Consumer Acceptance

1. Introduction

As plastic pollution has become a global environmental challenge, governments have introduced policies to deal with the crisis. Against this background, charging, taxing and legislating the use of plastic shopping bags has become the main means for countries to rectify plastic pollution. In 2020, China issued the new "plastic restriction order," which prohibits and restricts the use of non-degradable plastic bags, and at the same time promotes alternatives. In addition to strict supervision, the new policy also uses price leverage as a mechanism to guide consumer behaviour. Imposing higher costs on plastic products will motivate consumers to reduce their dependence on plastics and foster the adoption of environmentally friendly alternatives.

Perceived fairness constitutes a basic dimension for the public to evaluate the legality and acceptability of policies. When policies are perceived as unfair, consumers' willingness to implement them will be significantly reduced. Thus, whether and how to adjust the price level affects consumers' perceived fairness, which is essential for alleviating conflicts between consumers and pricing policies. This study aims to address the following questions: Against the backdrop of the increasingly strict plastic restriction policy, will different price levels of plastic bags significantly influence consumers' fairness perceptions? What is the mechanism through which this impact occurs? And what measures can be taken to moderate such effects?

2. Current State of Research

2.1. Theoretical Status

Countries have realised the importance of plastic pollution control. It has become the consensus of countries around the world to solve the global plastic pollution problem. Researchers from all over the world have analysed the plastic control policies promulgated by countries. At present, most studies are concentrated on changes in people's behaviour after the implementation of policies. The observed phenomena include the decrease in consumption of paid plastic bags, the increase in the use of free inner bags, and consumers' shift from plastic to reusable substitutes, such as cloth bags, and the spillover effect of such policies (Ari & Yilmaz, 2017). Empirical results from a Chinese study reveal that the policy intervention of pricing shopping plastic bags at an average of CNY0.2 after 2008 led to a reduction of 0.7 bags per shopping behaviour (He, 2012).

The study also investigated consumers' attitudes towards plastic materials. The survey results show that although consumers generally believe that plastic is a serious environmental threat, they also think it is a very convenient material. Moreover, consumers predominantly assign the primary responsibility for addressing plastic pollution to businesses and governments (Dilkes-Hoffman et al., 2019). Moreover, the perceived convenience of plastic significantly undermines consumers' intentions to reduce their plastic consumption (Shahrabani, 2025). Related research mostly uses the theory of planned behaviour to explain. The theory of planned behaviour is a mature framework in the study of environmental behaviour. It believes that personal attitudes constitute the key determinants of behavioural intentions, especially in plastic consumption patterns (Gu & Ali, 2023). Enhancing consumers' awareness of the imperative to

reduce plastic bag usage cultivates unfavorable perceptions toward their consumption(Sun et al., 2017).

The current literature mainly involves the macro-level policy dimension or the isolated study of consumer attitudes, leaving a gap in the subtle research and empirical evidence of consumer psychology at the micro level. In order to reduce this gap, this study adopts a situation-based questionnaire survey to explore the specific price thresholds that trigger consumers' psychological sense of injustice. The research results are conducive to defining the boundaries of policy effectiveness, while providing operational insights for enterprises to help them formulate plastic bag pricing strategies that are both profitable and maintain public reputation.

2.2. Current Practice Status

As a developing country that actively responds to ecological governance, China has introduced a series of landmark policies in recent years, building one of the strictest plastic pollution control regulatory systems in the world. In 2008, China introduced a national plastic ban, prohibiting the production, sale, and use of plastic shopping bags with a thickness below 0.025 millimeters effective June 1, 2008. All supermarkets, shopping malls, trade markets and other commodity retail places are not allowed to provide plastic shopping bags free of charge. One year after the promulgation of the "plastic restriction order", a study shows that the reduction in plastic bags in Chinese shopping malls and supermarkets has reached about 75%, and the reuse rate of plastic bags has increased by 0.6 times to 1.3 times. In 2020, China issued the Opinions on Further Strengthening Plastic Pollution Control, that is the "New Plastic Restriction Order". This policy introduced differentiated plastic management measures based on bag type, region, and venue. Non-degradable disposable plastic products have been gradually banned, and plastic shopping bags in supermarkets, shopping malls and other retail places still follow the 2008 policy and implement a paid use system. By the end of 2020, the use of non-degradable plastic bags will be prohibited in shopping malls, supermarkets, pharmacies, bookstores and other places in key areas such as municipalities directly under the Central Government and provincial capital cities. The ban also includes take-out packaging and various activities. By the end of 2025, the policy aims to achieve effective control of plastic pollution and promote alternative products. In 2021, the "'14th Five-Year Plan' Plastic Pollution Control Action Plan" was released, emphasizing the management of the source of plastic production and extending the scope of management to the whole life cycle, which shows that China's plastic management has entered a new stage of overcoming difficulties. Under the overall framework of the country, Shanghai will implement: the Decision on Deeply Promoting the Construction of Ecological Civilization to Create a Model of a Beautiful Chinese Shanghai "from September 1, 2025, which is known as the "strictest Plastic Restriction Order in History".

These policies reflect China's firm belief in building a "beautiful China". The fundamental goal of the formulation of basic environmental policies is to convert sustainable habits into consumers' daily lives and transform personal behaviour into the cornerstone of ecological construction. Consumers' voluntary environmental protection actions can not only directly reduce plastic pollution, but also put pressure on enterprises and manufacturers to reduce plastic

production by reducing demand and public supervision. Under the background of the new "plastic restriction order", the active cooperation of consumers and the active implementation of local governments and enterprises will revitalise the plastic management work. This approach will fundamentally solve a key challenge facing China's plastic restriction policy: compared with large chain stores, it is difficult for small retail enterprises to comply with the regulations.

Previously, data from several countries showed that although the use of plastic bags would decline in the early stages of the implementation of government regulations, it may rebound over time. This phenomenon may be due to consumers' lack of understanding of the meaning of limiting plastic (Sun et al., 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to determine the limits of consumer policy acceptance and strengthen the public's positive view of environmental regulations.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 "Plastic Restriction Order" and Price Leverage

Price leverage is an important policy tool within the framework of the Plastic Restriction Order, which mainly affects consumer behaviour and decision-making process by adjusting the consumption cost of plastic bags. After the implementation of the policy in 2008, the government implemented a mandatory charging system for shopping bags, requiring consumers to bear the environmental cost of using shopping bags. According to economic principles, when commodity prices rise, consumers' demand for them will decrease accordingly. The plastic bag charging policy makes consumers need to consider the economic cost when using plastic bags. Consumers reduce the use of plastic bags and look for other alternatives, such as bringing their own environmentally friendly shopping bags or reusing shopping bags. In addition to promoting environmentally friendly shopping behaviour, this policy mechanism has also effectively stimulated consumers' broader awareness of environmental protection. Consumers gradually develop sustainable consumption habits and extend this awareness of environmental protection to other lifestyle areas, so as to promote the comprehensive improvement of social ecological awareness.

From the perspective of enterprises, the price mechanism drives a decrease in demand for plastic bags, which forces manufacturers to reduce the production of non-degradable plastic products. Encouraging enterprises to turn to the production of degradable alternatives and other environmentally sustainable alternatives is conducive to solving the problem of plastic pollution from the source. Based on the background, the price leverage in this article is specifically reflected in the consumption level of plastic bags.

3.2 Equity Theory

Within the theoretical framework of social macro, perceived equity is defined as an individual's subjective assessment of the existing state of social equity (Tyler et al., 1985). A large number of studies have confirmed that perceived fairness is a key determinant of the public's acceptance of the policy. (Selmoune et al., 2022). Enhancing the public's perception of social equity promotes public trust in the system, thus promoting effective policy implementation and long-term social stability (Ma, 2024). In terms of the impact of citizens' acceptance and implementation of policies, perceived fairness is greater than objective fairness

(Huang & Zuo, 2023). Therefore, systematically examining consumers' psychological perception of the fairness of the paid plastic bag policy under the "plastic restriction order" is conducive to improving consumers' acceptance and compliance with the policy. This study defines perceived fairness as consumers' subjective evaluation of the fairness of the plastic bag charging policy under the "plastic restriction order". Fair perception includes two different dimensions: distribution fairness and procedural fairness. Distribution fairness is based on Adams' theory of equity and focuses on the individual's perceived fairness of results and resource allocation. Procedural fairness emphasizes the perceived fairness of decision-making processes, methods and mechanisms adopted in resource allocation (Greenberg, 1990). Based on this conceptual foundation, the analysis of perceived fairness in this study is structured around the two-dimensional framework comprising distributive fairness and procedural fairness (Ejelöv & Nilsson, 2020).

Distribution fairness mainly examines whether consumers think that the cost distribution of different plastic bag prices is fair in different price situations, and whether they think that the costs they bear are commensurate with the resulting environmental benefits. In contrast, the process fairness focuses on consumers' trust in the pricing decision-making process. Consumers' acceptance of the policy is influenced by their trust in the procedure. If the procedure is considered unfair, even if the price of plastic bags is objectively reasonable, the policy will be questioned due to this fundamental distrust.

4. Research Design

4.1 Research Subjects and Process

This study employed an online scenario questionnaire survey method. Through convenience sampling, a total of 312 valid questionnaires were collected. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three pricing scenarios (CNY 0.5, CNY 1, CNY 2) and asked to imagine themselves shopping at a supermarket without bringing their own shopping bags before answering the test items.

Variable	Category	N	Percentage
Total		312	
Gender	Male	124	39.7
	Female	188	60.3
Age	18 and below	15	4.8
	18-25	102	32.7
	26-40	112	35.9
	41-60	72	23.1
	Above 60	11	3.5
Education Level	Junior high school or below	25	8.0
	High school / Vocational school	54	17.3
	Associate degree	74	23.7
	Bachelor's degree	125	40.1
	Master's degree or above	34	10.9

Price Level	CNY 0.5	109	34.9
	CNY 1	83	26.6
	CNY 2	120	38.5

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Of Personal Information

4.2. Measuring tools

We manipulate price levels through situational experiments. The measurement of fair perception adopts two dimensions: procedural fairness and distribution fairness (Ejelöv&Nilsso., 2020), with a total of 6 questions to measure (example questions: "I think the current charge price of each plastic bag is reasonable" "If I have any objections to the charge of plastic bags, I have Effective channels can be reflected or appealed"), using Likert 5-point scoring (1 = very disagree, 5 = very agree). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the scale is 0.811, which has good confidence. The KMO value is 0.832, and the sig of the Bartlett test is 0.000, indicating that the survey data is valid and can be analyzed.

4.3. Results Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the table shows the perceived fair scores of different price groups. Preliminary descriptive statistics show that with the improvement of the price level, the average perceived fairness is on a downward trend. This result confirms that consumers' fairness perceptions are negatively influenced by plastic bag pricing, with higher price points correlating with diminished perceptions of equity. Specifically, within the price range of CNY 0.5 to CNY 1, the perception of equity decreased slightly, but it was not statistically significant. However, when the price reaches CNY 2, the perceived fairness deteriorates significantly, indicating that this price threshold triggers a strong psychological reaction, undermines consumers' trust in the policy, and may undermine compliance with the policy.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics Of Fairness Perception Across Price Levels

Price Level	N	Mean	SD
CNY 0.5	109	22.11	3.42
CNY 1	83	21.46	2.09
CNY 2	120	19.10	4.46
Total	312	20.78	3.83

The results of the single-factor analysis of variance (Table 3) show that the main effect of the price level on perceived fairness is significant ($F = 22.047$, $p < 0.001$). The effect size of $\eta^2 = 0.12$ measurement shows that the price level explains the variance of 12% in fair perception. This finding confirms that the government can systematically influence consumers' perception of equity through strategic price adjustments. However, it should be noted that other factors, including information transparency and the established consumer-business trust relationship, will also affect fair perception.

Table 3. ANOVA for Fairness Perception Across Price Levels

Source	SS	Df	Ms	F	P
Between Groups	569.659	2	284.830	22.047*	.000
Within Groups	3992.081	309	12.919	**	
Total	4561.740	311			

The result of LSD shows that the perceived equity score of the CNY2 group is significantly lower than that of the CNY0.5 group (average difference = -3.010, $p < 0.001$); the perceived equity score of the CNY2 group is also significantly lower than that of the 1 tuple (average difference = -2.36, $p < 0.001$); the difference between the 1 tuple and the 0.5 tuple is smaller (average difference = -0.65, $p = 0.214$). For consumers, the price of CNY 0.5 to CNY 1 may make them hesitate to buy plastic bags, and their attitude towards the policy itself is relatively neutral. However, when the price of plastic bags exceeds CNY 1 and reaches about CNY 2, the low cost of plastic bags and the gap between prices greatly reduce consumers' sense of fairness. They began to question the true purpose of the policy, which may provoke consumer anger and directly oppose the basic policy.

5. The Conflict Between Price Levers and Consumers' Sense of Fairness

5.1 Consumers perceive their inherent rights are deprived

The fundamental purpose of implementing the "plastic restriction order" and plastic bag charging is to curb plastic consumption by raising consumers' cost awareness. However, many consumers may not understand the potential intentions of this policy, and they only see a sudden rise in the price of resources that used to be free. Most consumers think it is unreasonable to charge more, because they always think that plastic shopping bags are a free and convenient thing that can improve the shopping experience. Over time, these free shopping bags have been seen as an inherent shopping experience right, and their chargeable is often seen as a deprivation of vested rights, creating a sense of unfairness. In response, consumers who refuse to pay for plastic bags tend to seek free alternatives with equivalent functions, such as shopping inner bags provided by supermarkets. According to the cognitive disorder theory, consumers who buy plastic bags may compensate for perceived losses by increasing the use of free shopping inner bags, even if they are unnecessary. In this way, they alleviate the psychological losses caused by paying for shopping bags.

5.2 The Gap Between Consumers Perceptions and Policy Objectives

In the process of cultivating sustainable consumption habits, the blind implementation of policies may obscure the true intention of environmental protection practise. Although the unit price of a single plastic bag is still very low, the accumulated cost is a considerable financial burden for frequent shoppers. This increased economic burden prompts consumers to carefully reconsider their actual demand for plastic bags when shopping. Some price-sensitive consumers may reduce the use of plastic bags or use reusable substitutes. However, it is quite difficult for consumers who have become dependent on plastic bags to change their behaviour. Despite

rising prices, these consumers may continue to buy plastic bags, but they often have a resentment and psychological resistance to the charging policy. This boycott greatly undermines people's acceptance of the "plastic restriction order" and undermines the effectiveness of its policies. More importantly, if consumers only reduce the use of plastic bags for cost reasons and do not really accept the policy or understand its environmental purpose, once the implementation of the policy is weakened, they are likely to return to the previous consumption pattern, resulting in a significant behaviour rebound effect.

5.3 The differential impact of policies on different consumer groups

There are significant differences in the price sensitivity of consumer groups from different income classes to plastic bag charges, which poses a major challenge to the fairness and effectiveness of the plastic restriction policy. This difference is manifested in the obvious differences in behaviour response and psychological cognition of different social economic groups.

The rise in the price of plastic bags has directly increased the shopping costs of all consumers. Due to the additional economic burden, low-income consumers who are highly price-sensitive often hesitate or refuse to buy plastic bags, often choosing to use reusable alternatives or giving up using plastic bags altogether. This behaviour adaptation proves the effectiveness of the policy in reducing the consumption of this group. On the contrary, the demand price elasticity of the high-income class is significantly lower, because the cost of plastic bags is negligible in their economy. These consumers attach more importance to the convenience of shopping and the comfort of the experience, and despite rising prices, they maintain their plastic bag consumption patterns instead of adopting sustainable alternatives.

From a fair perspective, the plastic restriction policy aims to produce a wide range of environmental benefits. However, price leverage has different effects on different groups. Low-income people bear a relatively heavy economic burden, while high-income people are less affected. Regarding the effectiveness of the policy, because high-income groups are not sensitive to prices, the use of plastic bags under the plastic restriction order may not change significantly. What's worse, they may not have the motivation to understand the real plastic reduction intention behind the plastic restriction order.

5.4 The main body of plastic reduction in the eyes of consumers

Throughout the life cycle of plastic shopping bags, consumers are at the end of the value chain and can't do much. For consumers, the use of environmentally sustainable materials still depends entirely on the formulation of national policies and the production decisions of enterprises. Only government departments can formulate material standards, and only enterprises can determine whether the materials circulating in the market have recyclable or environmentally friendly properties. The characteristics of these materials have been determined before the products reach consumers, and the production of environmentally friendly materials as substitutes also depends on the production of enterprises. Therefore, although consumers have expressed their willingness to share the responsibility for reducing plastic, they believe that the main responsibility lies with the government and enterprises.

Regarding the charging mechanism of plastic bags, consumers do not understand the ultimate use of the profits earned by enterprises after charging. Some enterprises even price plastics unreasonably to maximize profits, which disrupts the market. This chaotic price makes people deeply sceptical of the charging policy, especially when the price of plastic bags reaches CNY1- 2 or more than CNY 2, the price greatly exceeds the production cost, which inevitably causes consumers to question the purpose of charging. Therefore, many consumers believe that the charging system is just a action for enterprises to earn additional income while shifting environmental responsibilities. Environmentally conscious consumers especially feel that their goodwill is being used. They feel cheated, which will erode the credibility of enterprises and government agencies in environmental protection, and seriously weaken the public's belief in ecological protection.

6. Countermeasures and Recommendations

6.1 Set a reasonable price for plastic bags

Policymakers and retail operators should carefully evaluate the pricing of plastic bags, keep the price of ordinary plastic bags in the price range of CNY 0.5 to CNY 1 , and avoid the threshold of CNY2. Exceeding this key price point may bring short-term profit growth to enterprises, but in the long run, it will seriously damage the fair perception of the policy and the public trust of enterprises and the government, which is really stupid.

For environmentally friendly plastic bags priced at CNY 2 or more, the government should strengthen supervision to ensure the compliant use of certified environmentally friendly materials, and their pricing is based on actual costs. At the same time, enterprises should strengthen the research and development of sustainable materials and produce alternative shopping bags to meet the shopping needs of consumers. Pay attention to the aesthetics and practicality of substitutes, publicize their green and durable characteristics, and make consumers willing to accept them.

6.2 Increase information transparency

In addition to the price itself, information transparency is a key factor affecting consumers' perception of fairness. Two-way information communication is not only conducive to the implementation of policies, but also to the supervision downstream of the value chain. The government can establish a digital platform for plastic management to clearly register the fees charged by major retailers for plastic bags, the units they pay and the expenditure items. The platform should transparently show the public how to allocate plastic bag fees to environmental assumptions. In addition, the latest national environmental policy standards can be updated, promoted and interpreted in real time on this platform to eliminate public confusion. This will raise public awareness of the environmental and personal hazards of non-compliant plastics. Actively encourage the public to report supermarkets and small merchants who set illegal plastic bag prices on the digital platform, and transparently show the illegal handling procedures and results to the public, and publicly announce the punishment for non-compliant entities in a timely manner.

6.3 Provide consumers with alternatives

The charging mechanism of plastic shopping bags is a negative incentive mechanism, which may be effective, but will inevitably trigger negative consumer sentiment. Combining a positive incentive mechanism can make up for this error, and combining a double-angle incentive to encourage consumers to change their behaviour. Supermarkets and shopping malls should display signs to encourage consumers to use cloth bags, shopping carts or baskets. For plastic bags purchased when necessary, consumers can be encouraged to reuse them as household garbage bags to improve the recycling rate of plastic bags (Sun et al., 2017). At the same time, retailers should provide cloth and fibre bags to consumers in a timely manner, and provide appropriate subsidies for consumers who choose to buy these bags from stores, so as to reduce their costs (Omondi & Asari, 2021). Supermarkets can also provide appropriate points, discounts or rebates for consumers who actively use environmentally friendly materials such as cloth bags to shop. This affirms their contribution to the environment and encourages their voluntary environmental behaviour.

For customers who forget to bring their own shopping bags but are unwilling to pay more than the psychological price for eco-friendly plastic bags, supermarkets can provide rental eco-friendly shopping bags. Setting the rent for each use is less than CNY 0.5, which can encourage consumers to develop the habit of using environmentally friendly plastic bags at affordable prices.

6.4 Enhance public education and awareness campaigns

Environmental protection is a long-term undertaking that requires the cooperation of all social stakeholders. Consumers' accurate understanding of policies will have a positive impact on their views on equity, so public awareness and education of these policies must be deepened.

In terms of policy promotion, choose densely populated communities and hold environmental awareness lectures from time to time, starting with practical examples of how residents implement environmental protection behaviors in daily life. In today's digital era, people obtain various information online, and environmental information can also penetrate into daily life. This includes cooperating with bloggers to produce videos to advise and promote environmental protection knowledge, cooperating with platforms to promote environmental documentaries, and establishing official accounts to respond to public concerns about environmental issues. These methods gradually integrate environmental protection permeate into every corner of daily life, enhance the public's awareness of environmental protection, and regulate sustainable behaviour.

In order to stimulate the public's enthusiasm for environmental protection behaviour, a platform can be designed to track the number of times residents use reusable shopping bags. Participants will register every time they buy environmentally friendly items. Those who have reached a certain number of check-ins can decide the use of the plastic bag fee charged to their nearby supermarkets, such as installing recycling boxes or organizing a community environment knowledge quiz with prizes. The same reward and points system is also applicable to plastic bag collection. Plastic bags collected on the road or on branches that have been handed over to the processing point can earn points for enthusiastic people. Communities can take various ways to

encourage consumers to participate flexibly in the "Reduce Plastic" initiative, not just limited to the price war in supermarkets.

7. Conclusion

Under the background of the "plastic restriction order", the price of plastic shopping bags affects consumers' perception of fairness. In order to maintain the fairness of consumers' policy, the price of plastic shopping bags should be set at about CNY 0.5 to CNY 1. Improving policy transparency, diversifying incentive perspectives, and clarifying consumers' understanding of policies will improve their perception of fairness. This will improve the acceptance of the policy, encourage consumers to comply with the "plastic restriction order", and actively promote the environmentally friendly shopping behaviour of peers.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li Rong: Conceptualization; research design; methodology; supervision; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review & editing; Li Zhengqi: Data collection; investigation; data curation; formal analysis; statistical analysis; visualization; validation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the participants and interviewees for their valuable contributions to this study. The authors also appreciate the constructive comments provided by anonymous reviewers and the editorial team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data generated and analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. All data will be provided without undue restriction.

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