

March 2019

---

# IPSOS VIEWS

---

How the Asian mother is changing  
Human insights for marketers

By Radhecka Roy and Anvaya Sharma



## Context

Mothers in Asia are coming into their own as they navigate the murky challenges of modern parenting – and carving out their identity in the process. In a world where four in five consumers say brands don't know them as an individual<sup>1</sup>, marketers must get to know them better: what are the core motivations of Asian mothers today? How do they cope with the complexities of parenting?

To uncover changing mothering trends in Asia, Ipsos embarked on Mothering Excellence, a self-funded qualitative research study spanning the 11 key markets of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, India, Taiwan, Japan and China. In 2015, the foundational

work was laid out to reveal the core motivations of Asian mothers using Ipsos' proprietary motivational framework, Censydiam. While these core motivations remain the same, the ways that Asian mothers manifest or express them are changing. In 2018, the study was then updated with key emerging trends in mothering behaviour, the new tensions that come with them and a few strategies Asian mothers have developed to cope with these tensions.

One reason why the Asian mother is changing has to do with global macro trends. Personal curation, taking responsibility to be informed, extends to the mothering self as one's family is no longer the sole source of mothering wisdom; for that matter, family



members who have parented in vastly different times may not always offer relevant advice. The rise of social has seen the number of active APAC social media users catapult from 1.2 billion in 2016 to 1.8 billion in 2018<sup>2</sup>. With unbridled access to a diversity of cultures and different geographies online, the freedom to learn from anyone and everyone paradoxically puts mothers under added pressure to pick who gets to go into her own ever-changing circle of trust, be it peers or YouTube influencers.

Consumer confidence buoys with economic development, and ASEAN consumers are particularly upbeat about regular income<sup>3</sup>. Asian mothers are putting food on the table – albeit in more ways than one. Increased education levels uniformly lift female labour force participation, such as in developing markets like Vietnam<sup>4</sup>. Already, 22 of 28 APAC economies have over 50% female participation in the labour force, while 11 markets see 60-80% female participation. East Asia economies have some of the highest labour force participation rates among women worldwide, such as 74% in South Korea<sup>5</sup>.

Female empowerment is also changing the Asian mother. In APAC, women are taking on higher-productivity roles and advancing to historically male-dominated leadership roles; female representation on boards more than doubled in recent years, from 6% in 2011 to 13% in 2016<sup>6</sup>.

The freedom to choose enables women in Asia to manifest their unique motherhood expressions, from being more active in the mothering role and making big decisions for the child, to exercising independence and taking parenting risks. Take faith-dominated markets such as the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, where technology is being infused into actual parenting to impart traditional values: in Indonesia, where 87% of the population is Muslim, modern mothers are turning to installing apps on their iPads that can help their children recite their daily Muslim prayers habitually to affirm their roots. With today's children growing up in an increasingly digital world, the savvy Asian mother finds ways to make technology an invaluable ally for raising her kids.

This white paper will focus on four motivations that are seeing the most significant shifts of note:

- **The super prepared Asian mother**
- **The Asian mother finds her inner child**
- **The Asian mother expresses her identity**
- **The Asian mother is paddling furiously**

## Key takeaways

- From being child-focused to self-focused, the Asian mother is stepping into the limelight and asserting her identity. Being her best self makes her the best mother. She is no longer the steadfast potter who must mould her child's character and future like soft clay.
- Breaking stereotypes, the Asian mother has strong and independent views on child upbringing and is expressing her need for freedom and exploration. She experiments with new ways of parenting and is willing to part with some traditions. What others may expect of her is not what she expects of herself.
- Choosing to enjoy herself, the Asian mother is chasing her own interests, letting go of mummy guilt and finding fun through the simplification of her mothering role.
- Despite taking on more responsibilities with less time to spare, the Asian mother remains in control through the astute management of her mothering duties with efficacy. Besides delegating tasks to the grandparents and fathers of her children, she is also increasingly enlisting the help of nannies, babysitters and helpers.
- Enjoyment, conviviality, belonging, security, control, recognition, power and vitality: these are the eight fundamental human motivations. However, the Asian mother's expressions of these motivations and her corresponding mothering strategies – such as fulfilling duty to meet her need for belonging, and making use of discovery to achieve vitality – are changing.



## 1: Controlling under camouflage: the super prepared Asian mother

For the Asian mother whose underlying motivation is control, the tension comes from the risks of losing it. To stay composed, she must keep her emotions in check. She wants to stay on top of what needs to be done and manage mothering tasks efficiently; regular routines give her stability and structure in life. Doing things her way and on time is critical. Taking charge of parenting, a deep belief held by the controlling Asian mother is that the stakes are too high for parenting to be left to chance, or to the child.

In recent years, intense global attention on the Tiger Mother syndrome, a parenting style that uses authoritarian methods to pressure children into attaining high levels of achievement, has shown overly controlling parenting in a largely negative light. The Washington Post, for instance, reported the author of a Singapore study on primary school children on saying that “parents (who) become intrusive in their children’s lives... may signal to the children that what they do is never good enough”<sup>7</sup>; at the University

of California in Berkeley, a number of studies have pointed to how “children raised by authoritarian parents are showing maladaptive outcomes, such as depression, anxiety and social skills”<sup>8</sup>.

Wary of public disapproval, the Asian mother has evolved to camouflage her need for control. From behaving more like a drill sergeant in the past, she now anticipates needed knowledge. Rationalising her need for control under the guise of being prepared – such as looking up information on websites as to why temper tantrums arise, and ways to combat them – allows her to express this need in an acceptable way.

What does this mean for marketers? For one, they can cater to her need for control through information. They can leverage keywords and mothering topics to create how-to resources such as cheat sheets and guides. To identify her deepest mothering concerns, marketers can look at parenting communities and social media outreach. The enhanced need for efficiency and convenience also points to a golden opportunity for marketers to accentuate the image of the ever-prepared mother in its communications, while using techniques such as humour to humanise her.

### Case study: Screen Time

The controlling Asian mother uses technology to manage her time efficiently, and this adoption of digital extends to the ways she sets parenting rules. In a 2018 study, 8-12-year-olds in Singapore spend an average of 35 hours a week in front of digital screens for entertainment alone, three hours more than the global average<sup>9</sup>. A parental control mobile app such as Screen Time allows her to limit and control just how much time her kids spend on tablets and smartphones.

## 2: Life does not stop with kids: the Asian mother finds her inner child

Living life to the maximum is what the Asian mother is after. The antithesis of a self-sacrificing mummy martyr, the motivation of enjoyment allows her to assert and prioritise herself, whether this means childfree weekend brunches with the girlfriends or making time for shopping alone. However, prioritising herself does not make her a bad or negligent mother. She believes that being the best mother is about giving time to herself.

That she has children does not mean her life is over. The Asian mother believes she deserves some fun and is extremely comfortable expressing this need. Being judged by others does not faze her; she is deliberately pausing her mothering duties and giving up family time in favour of child-free moments. This trend is especially pronounced in markets such as the Philippines, China, India, South Korea and Japan.

For marketers, the shift holds plenty of possibilities, including legitimising the fun aspect of traditionally hectic family moments such as the morning breakfast and acting as enablers of experiences that showcase her self-expression. They should take heed to emphasise boldness and spontaneity in their communications – and do away with the mum-shaming rhetoric and guilt tonality.

### Case study: #MomBeAGirlAgain, Amazon India

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBWKEb6gcRs>

Mothers are empowered to enjoy themselves, and this 2016 evocative ad campaign by Amazon India sounded a reminder to all mums to remember the hobbies they used to love before embarking on parenthood. In one of the campaign's three films, a mother's childhood love for football is rekindled with a little help from her daughter.



**The shift holds plenty of possibilities, such as legitimising the fun aspect of traditionally hectic family moments.**

### 3: Ditching classic stereotypes: the Asian mother expresses her identity

The Asian mother asserts herself as an independent individual with an appetite for adventure. Her experimental and unconventional approach to mothering allows her to embrace her own individuality with personal idealism. This expression is especially strong in markets where there is a parallel trend of female empowerment, such as in India, China and the Philippines, followed by to a lesser extent in Thailand.

She is also breaking stereotypes. Holding strong beliefs, the Asian mother is sure of where she stands; she may be a transgender parent herself, for example. Putting the mother-child relationship on an equal footing, she has no interest in making her children into mini versions of herself; to her, they are individuals in their own right.

### Case study: Times have changed, NTUC Income

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBOwYdZ5pcU>

Taking the audience through a woman's perspective from childhood to parenthood, the film for Singapore insurance firm NTUC Income's 2017 Times Have Changed campaign challenged outdated stereotypes about a woman's rightful place in life, with an affirmative nod to how women can now be themselves.

Marketers looking to satiate this mothering motivation can celebrate her purpose and connect it with brand purpose, should both align. They should also appeal to her as an individual, highlighting her unique beliefs, passions and accomplishments.



#### 4: Mounting pressure in a social world: the Asian mother is paddling furiously

For many affiliative cultures in Asia, the mother is expected to fully dedicate herself to nurturing, feeding and caring for her children. Now that parenting duties are amplified in a social world, the Asian mother faces the pressure of not only conforming to her immediate communities, but also has to meet universal expectations. She must keep up with new trends and ‘do it for the Gram’ with family moments, so as to hold up the image of her ‘perfect’ family online. This has led to the Duck Syndrome – where she must paddle furiously to stay afloat and gain the approval of her peers online.

Marketers can help the Asian mother through the pressures of parenting by validating her efforts. They can provide support in pivotal moments where she needs to shine, such as during exam periods and family rituals. Direct search queries and net conversations on online parenting groups and communities can reveal her biggest concerns.

#### Case study: fun gets the morning done, Coco-Pops Australia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFuhCNdedNM>

Targeted at mums, this ad from 2014 inspires mothers to get the morning running like clockwork. The ad shows the breakfast cereal putting the fun into the first meal of the day, placating even impatient kids who just want to get going and play ball.



**Marketers can help the Asian mother through the pressures of parenting by validating her efforts.**



## The Future of Asian Parenting

The Asian mother may be changing, but she is not alone. Parenting itself is undergoing changes of its own in Asia. One such shift is gender neutrality. Stay-at-home dads – coupled with breadwinning mums – are relatively rare in the region, but the trend is gaining traction. Non-traditional family models are on the rise.

Increasingly, Asian dads are sharing parenting duties and responsibilities usually taken on by mums. Even the Singapore government, which is grappling with a greying population, is encouraging fathers to play an active, lifelong role in their kids' lives through its Dads for Life national movement.

How will the dynamics between parents change? How will their relationships with their children change? What are the implications on brand choices and decision-making? The only constant, after all, is change.



**Stay-at-home dads are relatively rare in the region, but the trend is gaining traction.**

### Four ways to win over Asian mothers:

- 1. Be her inspiration.** Brand purpose can be a game-changer in communication. By recognising the Asian mother's reason for being, marketers can make a powerful connection through celebrating it.
- 2. Be her voice for change.** With her changing mindset, the Asian mother's attitudes and needs towards core categories such as education, nutrition, and play are also shifting. Evolving with these new perspectives, marketers who develop products and communication for her stand to benefit the most.
- 3. Be her anchor.** As social media amplifies motherhood, the Asian mother grapples with conforming to a wider virtual community. Search and social media outreach/ communities are imperative for marketers to fully comprehend her concerns. Brands can be her supporters during pivotal moments when she needs to shine.
- 4. Be her productivity ally.** Higher productivity will remain high on the Asian mother's wishlist. Efficiency and simplification are key. Through tech-driven personalisation and digital tools that anticipate her needs, marketers can help her ace her productivity goals.



**Radhecka Roy** Global Service Lead, Strategic Curation

**Anvaya Sharma** Director, Ipsos in Singapore

## About Censydiam Framework

Censydiam, Ipsos' proprietary framework, takes a people-centric marketing approach to connect brands with deeper human motivations mapped out in the context of social and personal dimensions. For more on Censydiam, go to [www.ipsos.com/en/brand-strategy](http://www.ipsos.com/en/brand-strategy)

## About The Centre of Curation



Ipsos' Mothering Excellence study is curated and presented by the Ipsos Centre of Curation, a global network of strategic thinkers and storytellers who integrate, distil and simplify all available data to answer business questions in a way that creates impact. Curators are connected with multi-disciplinary experts, including data scientists, semioticians, category or topic experts, designers and more, to extract insight using our proprietary CURATE framework.



All of the insights from this study are hosted on Ipsos's proprietary curation platform, Insight Cloud – brought alive with rich narrative story-telling and full, multi-media glory. Please follow this link to learn more about Ipsos Insight Cloud: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/content-curation>.

To access the full set of insights and stories for Mothering Excellence, please write to [Anvaya.Sharma@ipsos.com](mailto:Anvaya.Sharma@ipsos.com)

**[www.ipsos.com](http://www.ipsos.com)**  
**@ipsos**

The **Ipsos Views** white papers are produced by the **Ipsos Knowledge Centre**.

### GAME CHANGERS

<< Game Changers >> is the **Ipsos** signature.

At **Ipsos** we are passionately curious about people, markets, brands and society. We make our changing world easier and faster to navigate and inspire clients to make smarter decisions. We deliver with security, simplicity, speed and substance. We are Game Changers.

**GAME CHANGERS**

