The Impact of Cultural Background and Gender Differences on Malaysian Consumption Patterns

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I. Introduction

As the world is becoming a global village, many corporations are expanding their business into global market, which means they need to deal with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds. Marketers start to acknowledge the essentials of understanding the consumption patterns of the growing amount of global consumers. Individuals have been known to behave and react differently to the same situations based on their cultural background and general experience (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin). Other than culture, modern marketing has also relied on gender to help them understand and explain consumers and their consumption patterns (Caterall & Maclaran, 2002). Numerous studies suggest that culture and gender are both the key determinant that influences consumers' consumption patterns. Moreover, religiosity is also used as an explanatory variable to study about the differences in the consumption patterns of consumers from different countries (Moschis, 2011).

II. Impact of Cultural Background in Malaysia

It is important for marketers to understand the impact of cultural background on consumer behavior. Recent studies on Asian consumer behaviors are mostly carried out in Japan, Korea, Taiwan and mainland China. These Asian countries are culturally homogenous because their populations are mainly formed by one race, unlike Malaysia which hasrich multiracial cultures. Malaysia is a relatively small young nation with a population of around 26 million people formed by different ethnicitiesliving together even before the British Empire in 1957 (Lai et al., 2010). Hence, Malaysia can provide a good foundation to study Asian consumer behavior because this country shows an unusual harmony between three main ethnic groups and other minority subcultures. Majority of the population in Malaysia is formed by three main ethnic groups, which are Malays, Chinese and Indians. Although numerous studies about consumption patterns were done over the last decades, most of these studies are focusing on western countries instead of Asia. Therefore, corporations who seek to expand their market in Asia should investigate the cultural diversity and the impact of ethnics in Asia country, especially Malaysia which consists of many different Asian subcultures.

III. The Malays

The Malays are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, which form more than 50% of the population in this country. Therefore, this subculture is essential for researches and marketers to study Malaysians' consumption patterns. In Malaysia, the Malays are significantly related with the religion of Islam which constitutes a key role in their ethnic identity and culture (Mastor el al. 2000). The Malays have very different lifestyles from the Chinese and Indians although they live in the same country because Malays' lifestyle are largely shaped and influenced by the religion of Islam. Hence, the religion of Islam has great influences on the Malay culture and the development of their ethnic group. A person who is simultaneously born into the Malay culture and Islam is recognized as Malay and one who rejects Islam will no longer be considered as a Malay (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). Study indicates that Islam has influenced South East Asia since five hundred years ago and it has integrated with the Malay culture throughout history, thus Islam is considered as an inseparable partof the Malay culture. The *Qur'an*, showed words of God that providewell defined guidelines for the disciplesto follow (Jung & Kau, 2004). The guidance from *Qur'an*is comprehensive and includes the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual aspect of life (Jung & Kau, 2004). Moreover, the term *rezeki* in Islam refers to belief in the predestination of one's economic destiny and it further result in fatalism. As a result, Malaysian Malays are less likely to have achievement orientation because they believe that their destiny or fate is determined by *Allah*andmortals have no strength to change their own destiny. In addition, a research carried out by Kamaruddin (2009)

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shows that Malay consumers' consumption patterns emphasize more on the product's quality, effectiveness and value of money. They are also more likely to show interest in obtainingtechnologically produced and high quality products. Malay consumers reported inefficient in processing products and market information and further result in information confusion and overload (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). Some research suggests that religious factors may have an influencein consumers' consumption patterns but it is not sufficient to explain the Malays' consumer behavior because researchers cannot only rely on one factor to explain the complex of consumer behavior. Furthermore, in the Malaysian constitution, the Malays are allowed to enjoy their constitutional rights, which prompted them to view their future opportunities differently compared to Indians and Chinese, which are independent from the strength of religiosity (Moschis, 2011).

IV. The Chinese

The Chinese make up the second largest ethnic group, which is 25% of the population. The ancestors of Malaysian Chinese are Chinese who migrated from Mainland China to Peninsular Malaya between the early and the mid-20th century during Chinese civil war. During 20th century, these Chinese immigrants were mostly found in cities and they had dominated the majority of the economic power in Peninsular Malaya through tin mining and rubber business (Mokhlis, 2009). Before Peninsular Malaya become independent, it was ruled by British colonists. Therefore, the British colonial administration has great influence on Malaysian Chinese. Malaysian Chinese who are more affected by Western culture and values usually have weak identification with Confucian tradition and Chinese culture. In contrast, Malaysian Chinese who are less affected by western culture still have very strong ethnic identification with traditional Chinese culture which is passed down by their ancestors from Mainland China. Today, the new generations of Malaysian Chinese have fused their own culture with other subcultures in Malaysia. Although these Chinese are originally derived from Mainland China, they have formed their own culture that is different from their ancestors. According to studies, Confucianism is the most influential and respected philosophy in Chinese culture and the Chinese have followed Confucian values for nearly thousands years. Mokhlis (2009) indicates that the central to Confucianism are human relationships: parent-child relations, siblings' relation, marriage relations, clan relations, and finally community relations and friendship. Therefore, the Chinese place great importance in groups, community, interpersonal relationship and social interaction. Recent study states that the Chinese culture highly value the concept of 'face' when it comes to interpersonal relationship and

social interaction. To the Chinese, the term 'face' refers to reputation, status or prestige. The Chinese tend to place high importance on the protection of '*face*' (Jung & Kau, 2004).The Chinese also believe that losing face in public can bring dishonor to their family, in contrast gaining face can bring great honor to their family. The Chinese's obsession of face-protection and face-gaining originate from Confucian value and later strengthen by the influences of Communists, in order to advocate individuals to become subordinate under groups or community. Lin (2013) indicates that Chinese consumers are more likely to make purchase which build face in public, but they tend to be thrifty in private, regardless of income level. They tend to spend more money in public because they don't want to be viewed as stingy or poor, which will result in loss of face. In addition, Chinese consumers' preferences and choices are driven by desire for gaining face. Lin (2013) suggests that Chinese consumers make purchasing decision by considering both gaining face and gaining value from the product. Furthermore, loyalty is regarded as a virtue in the Chinese community. Hence, the Chinese have been taught from early childhood to be loyal to their family and kin. As a result, study indicates that Chinese consumers are more likely to be loyal to their providers. This is because switching new provider would cause loss of face to the old provider, which is an undesirable behavior that a Chinese consumer would choose to avoid (Jung & Kau, 2004). According to Mokhlis (2009), the Chinese with high ethnic attitude are less likely to enjoy shopping and less likely to experience confusion caused by choice compared to Chinese consumers with low ethnic attitudes.

V. The Indians

The smallest ethnic group in Malaysia, the Indians, formsonly 10% of the population in Malaysia. Malaysian Indians are an Indian descent group who migrated to Peninsular Malaya during British Colonial administration. As the smallest ethnic group in Malaysia, there is only a few research carried out on Indian consumers' consumption patterns. Research indicates that caste differentiation still exist among Indian community in Malaysia. However, the caste differentiation has no formal function on the Indian community but some Indian still use caste system as a cultural marker to distinguish other. Moreover, the majority of Malaysian Indians are Hindus. Hinduism indicates that men are not born equal. The inequality of men was explained in terms of the merits and demerits accrued in previous incarnations (Jung & Kau, 2004).

VI. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's cultural dimension theory is widely used in many cultural researches. In 1991, Hofstede

proposed four independent dimensions of national culture. These four dimensions are: individualism/ collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and power distance. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory demonstrates the impact of political, demographics, economic and geographic characteristics on a nation's society and culture.

VII. Individualism/ Collectivism

Individualism refers to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to take care of himself/herself and his/her immediate family, for example in the United States, England, Australia, Canada etc. (Hofstede, 1991). To individuals who are from a collectivistic culture, their identity tend to be much more connected to the social network and they tend to place great importance on membership and identification with group or community which they belonged, for example, in South American countries (Hofstede, 1991). Collectivist cultures emphasize on connectedness between individuals, social network and relationships (Singelis, 1994). Individualistic cultures value the freedom and uniqueness of individual over group or community whereas collectivist cultures value solidarity and unity of group rather than individual. Hence, individualistic cultures tend to prefer differentiation and uniqueness of individuals. Conversely, collectivistic cultures are more interested in building relationships and maintaining connections with others in the same community. According to research, people who come from collectivistic cultures are more affected by the preferences and choice of close ones while people of individualistic cultures are more motivated by personal preference (Arnold & Bianchi, 2001). Numerous studies state that Asians are more likely to be collectivistic whereas westerners are mostly individualistic. Therefore, family is very important to majority of the Asians, especially the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. The Malays and Indians both exhibit high levels of collectivism because they believe that staying loyal to their community and family is one of the most important values in their culture. They place the well-being of the group as priority which is far more important than their personal desires (Lai et al, 2010). The Malays also believe that their religion holds them together as a community and it is Islam that shaped their collective identity (Lai, 1991). In Malay community, purchasing decisions are often based on group preferences rather than personal interest (Lai et al., 2010). Chinese's decline in collectivism may be due to the influence of western culture and value. The Malaysian Chinese reported that they exhibit higher on the level of individualism compared to Malays and Indians. This could be due to the new generation of Chinese who mostly move away from their parents' house after they start working or get married, which

further result in the loss of intergenerational family (Jung & Kau, 2004).

VIII. Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainly avoidance dimension refers to the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations and the degree of ambiguity and change that can be tolerate (Hofstede, 1991). Members of societies who have higher degree of uncertainty avoidance tend to feel insecure or anxious when they are threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity, and they will try to reduce their anxiety by formingrigid, formal rules to achieve stability. Societies with higher uncertainty avoidance often feel strong needs to be in control. Study indicates that consumers from high uncertainty avoidance societies display greater preference for established brand name, superior warranty, money-back guarantee, security and resistance to accept change, and they prefer a more traditional and conservative wayincommunicating, for example like Japan (Arnold & Bianchi, 2001). On the other hand, members from low uncertainty avoidance societies can tolerate and accept ambiguity better than high uncertainty avoidance societies. Furthermore, they accept uncertainty and handle it more effectively. Members from low uncertainty avoidance societies are also more flexible when it comes to uncertain or unknown situation thus they tend to prefer less control. According to research, high uncertainty avoidance consumers are more likely to engage in relational market behavior with firms, products, or brands (Arnold & Bianchi, 2001). Different levels of uncertainty avoidance level can affect consumption patterns and how consumers react and behave when they face unknown or uncertain situations (Jung & Kau, 2004). These consumer behaviors include brand loyalty, information search, perceived risk and innovativeness (Gentry et al. 1993). Members from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to have more brand loyalty, experiences higher levels of perceived risk, and engage in information search but they are less likely to try innovative products (Jung & Kau, 2004). In general, Malaysian Chinese and Indian reported to exhibit lower tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and risk. Chinese's protection of one's reputation result in selecting socially visible products which can gain praise (Lin et al., 2013). Conversely, Malays show higher tolerance for ambiguity and risk due to their trust in religion and belief of fatalism.

IX. Power Distance

Hofstede (1991) suggests that power distance is the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Members from high power distance societies are more

likely to be submissive toward their rulers or leaders and they prefer a more authoritarian leader. In contrast, members from low power distance societies tend to value equality, freedom and democracy, and they view themselves equal to the leader. Moreover, power distance can also influence individuals' willingness to trust others (Hosfstede, 1991). Members from high power distance societies see other people as a threat and thus they develop lower amount of trust on others, Mexico for example. Members of low power distance societies tend to feel less threatened and develop more trust. In general, Malaysians scored high in power distance compared to westerners. The religion of Hinduism indicates that humans are not born equal and they are categorized to different social status. The Chinese, who are majority Buddhists or Christians, believe that men are equal and thus they exhibit lower levels of power distance than Malays and Indian. In power distance dimension, the predominantly Muslim community has a very high regard for authority and are willing to subject themselves to the leader (Lai et al., 2010). Research states that the degrees of power distance influence opinion seeking behavior. High power distance societies have larger number of opinion seekers and consumers in which they tend to seek opinion from someone who are older and have powerful status.

X. Masculinity/ Femininity

The masculinity/ femininity dimension refers to the dominant gender role pattern which is related to behaviors and values (Hofstede, 1991). Societies with high masculinity admire qualities like ambitiousness, achievements and assertiveness, with an understanding that performance is the means to gain wealth and admiration (Hofstede, 1991). Hofstede (1991) indicates that male societies think every individual should strive aggressively to advance their career, both by performing well and by gaining recognition from their superiors. Conversely, societies with high femininity value nurturance, quality of life, service, and interdependence (Hofstede, 1991). The female societies are related to patience and they have strong desires to work and serve rather than focusing on life or career. The Malays still hold traditional values toward gender role and gender expectation. Generally, Malay husbands prefer their wives to be submissive to them and become full-time housewives to take care of the children. Malay men still hold conservative sociocultural attitudes, regarding marriage (Jung & Kau, 2004). Majority of Malay men think that their *authority figures in the family shouldn't be challenged and they prefer wives with low education level.* Majority of the Chinese women nowadays are working wives thus they are economically independent from their husbands and they are capable of taking care of themselves. Hence, the Chinese score low in

masculinity. The concept of women should stay at home and look after their children are changing due to the increased education level in the Indian community. Empirical study shows that the Indians are the most pro-feminists among three main ethnic group (Jung & Kau, 2004). Members from high masculinity cultures tend to engage in male dominant decision making because they believe that men are better at problem solving and should be in charge.

XI. Gender Differences

Our society oftenview women as shopaholicswho enjoy shopping, whereas men find shopping boring and have little interest in buying. This view is partly true because Helga (2004) indicates that women are much stronger buying involvement than did men, particularly in terms of emotional involvement whereas men are high on quality and efficiency. These differences between males and females are widely accepted in both western and eastern society. Gender plays an important role in consumption patterns. Although males and females cope and settle problems equally good, but the way they process information and how they deal with problems are quite different. According to research, an individual's sexual characteristics, social gender roles and gender identity significantly determine how they react to certain situation. Empirical Studies also suggest that males and females have different preference, decision making, information gathering and evaluation while buying. Generally, women are expected to be warm, nurturing and home-oriented. As a result, females are considered to be good at buying traditional female products, example like baby products, grocery, home furnishing etc. whereas males are expected to be logical, analytical and aggressive. Therefore, it is commonly believed that male are good at dealing with electronic products, automobiles etc. However, some studies indicate that there are some significant changes in male consumption pattern and domestic responsibilities. According to Teather (1995), men shoppers begin to behave more like female shoppers, such as doing more grocery shopping and becoming more brand-conscious. The difference between gender roles and expectations has become blurred due to the increasing amount of highly educated and working women. Study also indicates women are generally more involved in social issues and are also more concerned about environmental issues compared to men. Therefore, women are more likely to show more socially and ecological friendly consumption behaviors (Berenguer et al. 2005).

XII. Sex or Gender?

Sex refers to biological and physiological characteristics which define male and female whereas

gender refers to characteristic that are culturally or socially learned, like masculine and feminine. Gender identity is a person's sense of their own gender. Gender roles refer to social norms and beliefs that decide how men and women should behave in a socially appropriate way according to their gender. Men and women in all societies or cultures are expected to follow the gender expectation and sex role norms since they are children. Although biological sex does have great influence on consumption patterns, a person's biological sex does not fully determine their behavior. Some studies argue about which variable have more influence on consumption behavior. Some products are designed for specific gender, for example cosmetics, whereas some are for specific biological sex, such as sanitary napkins. Products which are 'gendered' often associate with feminine or masculine image but are not necessarily connected to biological sex. For example, both women and men can use facial masks, but many people think that facial mask are only for women and it would be weird for men to use it because it is against the male gender role. Hence, consumers tend to buy products or brands which fit their gender role and majority of them are unwilling to try products or brands which are against their gender role. According to research, sex differences are not mainly caused by biological influences, but also often affected by social norms and cultural variations. Hence, "masculinity" does not equal to "male" and "femininity" does not equal to "female". Studies also indicate that gender identity plays a key role in shaping consumption patterns because it influences consumer brand perceptions through creating brand meanings for consumers (Ye, 2012). Consumers tend to define the meaning of the product or brand by associating their gender identity with the products or brand's image.

XIII. Discussion

The Malays are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia and they are greatly influenced by the religion of Islam. Islamic values and practices are noteworthy the primary factor which influences the development of Malaysian Malays' culture and community. Malay consumers focus more on the product's quality, effectiveness and value. Malay consumers are also inefficient in processing products and market information and overloaded information may cause confusion. In addition, Malays are a very strong male dominated society. Malaysian Indians are the smallest group among three main ethnic groups. Majority of the consumer behavior research carried out in Malaysia are mostly Malays and Chinese, there are very few research on Indian consumers' consumption patterns. Generally, Malaysian Chinese are more concern on the protection of the 'face' and their social status. In addition, study indicates that Chinese consumers are more likely to spend more money on a product or service when the purchase behavior occurs in public place or the products are often used in public, even if they have limited income. Hence, companies and marketers should understand that the primary factor that determine Chinese consumers' consumption pattern is gaining face. The Chinese have different purchase decision from other two ethnics. In general, majority of the Asian countries are collectivistic, so are Malaysians. The Chinese, Malays and Indian are more collectivistic compared to westerners. Among these three ethnic groups, Chinese exhibit higher individualism because their new generations are affected by western values and they show less loyalty to family and groups, thus result in decline in collectivism. The Malays and Indian still hold traditional values and view loyalty to their own community as a virtue. Therefore, both Malays and Indians still remain collectivistic in their culture. Malaysian Chinese and Indians are more likely to show uncertainty avoidance whereas Malays show higher tolerance for ambiguity and risk because of their trust in religion. In power distance dimension, Malaysian Indians score the highest level of power distance among the three ethnics because Hinduism states that men are not equal due to the previous incarnations. Malay men still hold conservative sociocultural attitudes and thus they score high in masculinity level. Majority of the Malays prefer their wives not to be graduates and they think that women should stay at home take care of children instead of working. They are dominant husband who expect wives to be submissive. Controversy, the Chinese and Indian are becoming more modernized. Increased education and achievements result in more dual-income family and independent working women. Chinese and Indian score higher on femininity compared to high masculine Malay society.Moreover, gender differences have significant influence on consumer behavior and it helps to explain and understand the differences between male and female consumption patterns. In most of the societies, women are always viewed as nurturing, warm, emotional and home oriented and thus they are always associated with child care products, grocery and home furnishing. Men are usually viewed as dominant, logical and adventurous and they are associated to products such as electronic device, automobiles and sport equipment. However, the increase in education level result in more male consumers willing to do more grocery shopping and become more brand-conscious thus the difference between gender role become blurred these days. Majority of the products or services are made and designed for specific gender type and these products or services can have feminine or masculine image. The consumers' gender role and gender identity influence how a product or service is viewed. Some studies argue that gender differences are not inborn, but are shaped through culture or society, and men learnt to behave in

socially appropriate way. Recent studies also noted that gender does not only refer to biological, but includes a variety of sociological, cognitive and cultural influences that can affect our personality and behavior.

XIV. Conclusion

In conclusion, it has become essential for companies, marketers and product designers to understand consumers' needs and wants. Studying consumer behavior provides a platform for companies and marketers to design a more appropriate marketing strategy for their target consumer groups, especially consumers from different cultural backgrounds. Although there are numerous researches done on consumer behaviors, majority of these researches are Western bias, and lack of Asian consumer behavior studies. Moreover, there is still very little research on how cultural background can influence different people's consumption patterns. Even though there are very little research carried out on Asian consumption patterns, these countries are still racially homogenous, unlike Malaysia which has many interesting subcultures. Malaysia is a unique multiracial country, thus researchers can further study on the impact of ethnic, culture and religion on consumer behavior. Hence, understanding the differences between Malaysia and other countries allow companies and marketers to design strategies according to the cultural and gender differences.

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