

1 The Impact of Cultural Background and Gender Differences on 2 Malaysian Consumption Patterns

3 Yong Le Wong¹

4 ¹ HELP College of Arts and Technology

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6

7 **Abstract**

8 It is important for sellers and marketers to understand consumers' consumption habits
9 because it can directly affect marketing strategies. Different cultural background, religious
10 values and gender result in different consumption patterns across many different countries.
11 Therefore, it has become essential for marketers to understand gender and culture's influence
12 on consumer behavior.

13

14 **Index terms**— consumer behavior, malaysian, gender, culture, malay, chinese, indian.

15 **1 I. Introduction**

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

25 **2 II. Impact of Cultural Background in Malaysia**

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

38 **3 III. The Malays**

39 The Malays are the largest ethnic group in Malaysia, which form more than 50% of the population in this country.
40 Therefore, this subculture is essential for researches and marketers to study Malaysians' consumption patterns.
41 In Malaysia, the Malays are significantly related with the religion of Islam which constitutes a key role in their

4 THE CHINESE

42 ethnic identity and culture (Mastor et al. 2000). The Malays have very different lifestyles from the Chinese and
43 Indians although they live in the same country because Malays' lifestyle are largely shaped and influenced by
44 the religion of Islam. Hence, the religion of Islam has great influences on the Malay culture and the development
45 of their ethnic group. A person who is simultaneously born into the Malay culture and Islam is recognized as
46 Malay and one who rejects Islam will no longer be considered as a Malay (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009).
47 Study indicates that Islam has influenced South East Asia since five hundred years ago and it has integrated with
48 the Malay culture throughout history, thus Islam is considered as an inseparable part of the Malay culture. The
49 Qur'an, showed words of God that provide well defined guidelines for the disciples to follow (Jung & Kau, 2004).

50 The guidance from Qur'an is comprehensive and includes the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual
51 aspect of life (Jung & Kau, 2004). Moreover, the term rezeki in Islam refers to belief in the predestination of one's
52 economic destiny and it further results in fatalism. As a result, Malaysian Malays are less likely to have achievement
53 orientation because they believe that their destiny or fate is determined by Allah and mortals have no strength to
54 change their own destiny. In addition, a research carried out by Kamaruddin (2009) shows that Malay consumers'
55 consumption patterns emphasize more on the product's quality, effectiveness and value of money. They are also
56 more likely to show interest in obtaining technologically produced and high quality products. Malay consumers
57 reported inefficient in processing products and market information and further result in information confusion
58 and overload (Kamaruddin & Kamaruddin, 2009). Some research suggests that religious factors may have an
59 influence in consumers' consumption patterns but it is not sufficient to explain the Malays' consumer behavior
60 because researchers cannot only rely on one factor to explain the complex of consumer behavior. Furthermore,
61 in the Malaysian constitution, the Malays are allowed to enjoy their constitutional rights, which prompted them
62 to view their future opportunities differently compared to Indians and Chinese, which are independent from the
63 strength of religiosity (Moschis, 2011).

64 IV.

65 4 The Chinese

66 The Chinese make up the second largest ethnic group, which is 25% of the population. The ancestors of Malaysian
67 Chinese are Chinese who migrated from Mainland China to Peninsular Malaya between the early and the mid-
68 20th century during Chinese civil war. During 20th century, these Chinese immigrants were mostly found in
69 cities and they had dominated the majority of the economic power in Peninsular Malaya through tin mining
70 and rubber business (Mokhlis, 2009). Before Peninsular Malaya became independent, it was ruled by British
71 colonists. Therefore, the British colonial administration has great influence on Malaysian Chinese. Malaysian
72 Chinese who are more affected by Western culture and values usually have weak identification with Confucian
73 tradition and Chinese culture. In contrast, Malaysian Chinese who are less affected by western culture still have
74 very strong ethnic identification with traditional Chinese culture which is passed down by their ancestors from
75 Mainland China. Today, the new generations of Malaysian Chinese have fused their own culture with other
76 subcultures in Malaysia. Although these Chinese are originally derived from Mainland China, they have formed
77 their own culture that is different from their ancestors. According to studies, Confucianism is the most influential
78 and respected philosophy in Chinese culture and the Chinese have followed Confucian values for nearly thousands
79 years. Mokhlis (2009) indicates that the central to Confucianism are human relationships: parent-child relations,
80 siblings' relation, marriage relations, clan relations, and finally community relations and friendship. Therefore, the
81 Chinese place great importance in groups, community, interpersonal relationship and social interaction. Recent
82 study states that the Chinese culture highly value the concept of 'face' when it comes to interpersonal relationship
83 and social interaction. To the Chinese, the term 'face' refers to reputation, status or prestige. The Chinese tend
84 to place high importance on the protection of 'face' ??Jung & Kau, 2004). The Chinese also believe that losing face
85 in public can bring dishonor to their family, in contrast gaining face can bring great honor to their family. The
86 Chinese's obsession of face-protection and facegaining originate from Confucian value and later strengthen by the
87 influences of Communists, in order to advocate individuals to become subordinate under groups or community.
88 Lin (2013) indicates that Chinese consumers are more likely to make purchase which build face in public, but
89 they tend to be thrifty in private, regardless of income level. They tend to spend more money in public because
90 they don't want to be viewed as stingy or poor, which will result in loss of face. In addition, Chinese consumers'
91 preferences and choices are driven by desire for gaining face. Lin (2013) suggests that Chinese consumers make
92 purchasing decision by considering both gaining face and gaining value from the product. Furthermore, loyalty
93 is regarded as a virtue in the Chinese community. Hence, the Chinese have been taught from early childhood to
94 be loyal to their family and kin. As a result, study indicates that Chinese consumers are more likely to be loyal
95 to their providers. This is because switching new provider would cause loss of face to the old provider, which
96 is an undesirable behavior that a Chinese consumer would choose to avoid (Jung & Kau, 2004). According to
97 Mokhlis (2009), the Chinese with high ethnic attitude are less likely to enjoy shopping and less likely to experience
98 confusion caused by choice compared to Chinese consumers with low ethnic attitudes.

99 V.

100 **5 The Indians**

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

109 **6 VI.**

110 **7 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory**

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

115 **8 VII. Individualism/ Collectivism**

116 Individualism refers to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to
117 take care of himself/herself and his/her immediate family, for example in the United States, England, Australia,
118 Canada etc. (Hofstede, 1991). To individuals who are from a collectivistic culture, their identity tend to be much
119 more connected to the social network and they tend to place great importance on membership and identification
120 with group or community which they belonged, for example, in South American countries ??Hofstede, 1991).
121 Collectivist cultures emphasize on connectedness between individuals, social network and relationships (Singelis,
122 1994). Individualistic cultures value the freedom and uniqueness of individual over group or community whereas
123 collectivist cultures value solidarity and unity of group rather than individual. Hence, individualistic cultures
124 tend to prefer differentiation and uniqueness of individuals. Conversely, collectivistic cultures are more interested
125 in building relationships and maintaining connections with others in the same community. According to research,
126 people who come from collectivistic cultures are more affected by the preferences and choice of close ones while
127 people of individualistic cultures are more motivated by personal preference (Arnold & Bianchi, 2001). Numerous
128 studies state that Asians are more likely to be collectivistic whereas westerners are mostly individualistic.
129 Therefore, family is very important to majority of the Asians, especially the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia.
130 The Malays and Indians both exhibit high levels of collectivism because they believe that staying loyal to their
131 community and family is one of the most important values in their culture. They place the well-being of the group
132 as priority which is far more important than their personal desires (Lai et al, 2010). The Malays also believe
133 that their religion holds them together as a community and it is Islam that shaped their collective identity ??Lai,
134 1991). In Malay community, purchasing decisions are often based on group preferences rather than personal
135 interest (Lai et al., 2010). Chinese's decline in collectivism may be due to the influence of western culture and
136 value. The Malaysian Chinese reported that they exhibit higher on the level of individualism compared to Malays
137 and Indians. This could be due to the new generation of Chinese who mostly move away from their parents'
138 house after they start working or get married, which further result in the loss of intergenerational family (Jung
139 & Kau, 2004).

140 **9 VIII.**

141 **10 Uncertainty Avoidance**

142 The uncertainly avoidance dimension refers to the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by
143 uncertain or unknown situations and the degree of ambiguity and change that can be tolerate ??Hofstede, 1991).
144 Members of societies who have higher degree of uncertainty avoidance tend to feel insecure or anxious when
145 they are threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity, and they will try to reduce their anxiety by formingrigid,
146 formal rules to achieve stability. Societies with higher uncertainty avoidance often feel strong needs to be in
147 control. Study indicates that consumers from high uncertainty avoidance societies display greater preference
148 for established brand name, superior warranty, money-back guarantee, security and resistance to accept change,
149 and they prefer a more traditional and conservative wayincommunicating, for example like Japan (Arnold &
150 Bianchi, 2001). On the other hand, members from low uncertainty avoidance societies can tolerate and accept
151 ambiguity better than high uncertainty avoidance societies. Furthermore, they accept uncertainty and handle
152 it more effectively. Members from low uncertainty avoidance societies are also more flexible when it comes to
153 uncertain or unknown situation thus they tend to prefer less control. According to research, high uncertainty
154 avoidance consumers are more likely to engage in relational market behavior with firms, products, or brands
155 (Arnold & Bianchi, 2001). Different levels of uncertainty avoidance level can affect consumption patterns and
156 how consumers react and behave when they face unknown or uncertain situations (Jung & Kau, 2004). These

157 consumer behaviors include brand loyalty, information search, perceived risk and innovativeness (Gentry et al.
158 1993). Members from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to have more brand loyalty, experiences
159 higher levels of perceived risk, and engage in information search but they are less likely to try innovative products
160 (Jung & Kau, 2004). In general, Malaysian Chinese and Indian reported to exhibit lower tolerance for ambiguity,
161 uncertainty and risk. Chinese's protection of one's reputation result in selecting socially visible products which
162 can gain praise (Lin et al., 2013). Conversely, Malays show higher tolerance for ambiguity and risk due to their
163 trust in religion and belief of fatalism.

164 11 IX.

165 12 Power Distance

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

181 13 X. Masculinity/ Femininity

182 The masculinity/ femininity dimension refers to the dominant gender role pattern which is related to behaviors
183 and values (Hofstede, 1991). Societies with high masculinity admire qualities like ambitiousness, achievements and
184 assertiveness, with an understanding that performance is the means to gain wealth and admiration ??Hofstede,
185 1991). Hofstede ??1991) indicates that male societies think every individual should strive aggressively to advance
186 their career, both by performing well and by gaining recognition from their superiors. Conversely, societies with
187 high femininity value nurturance, quality of life, service, and interdependence (Hofstede, 1991). The female
188 societies are related to patience and they have strong desires to work and serve rather than focusing on life or
189 career. The Malays still hold traditional values toward gender role and gender expectation. Generally, Malay
190 husbands prefer their wives to be submissive to them and become full-time housewives to take care of the children.
191 Malay men still hold conservative sociocultural attitudes, regarding marriage (Jung & Kau, 2004). Majority of
192 Malay men think that their authority figures in the family shouldn't be challenged and they prefer wives with
193 low education level. Majority of the Chinese women nowadays are working wives thus they are economically
194 independent from their husbands and they are capable of taking care of themselves. Hence, the Chinese score
195 low in masculinity. The concept of women should stay at home and look after their children are changing due
196 to the increased education level in the Indian community. Empirical study shows that the Indians are the most
197 profeminists among three main ethnic group (Jung & Kau, 2004). Members from high masculinity cultures tend
198 to engage in male dominant decision making because they believe that men are better at problem solving and
199 should be in charge.

200 14 XI.

201 15 Gender Differences

202 Our society oftenview women as shopaholicswho enjoy shopping, whereas men find shopping boring and have
203 little interest in buying. This view is partly true because Helga (2004) indicates that women are much stronger
204 buying involvement than did men, particularly in terms of emotional involvement whereas men are high on
205 quality and efficiency. These differences between males and females are widely accepted in both western and
206 eastern society. Gender plays an important role in consumption patterns. Although males and females cope and
207 settle problems equally good, but the way they process information and how they deal with problems are quite
208 different. According to research, an individual's sexual characteristics, social gender roles and gender identity
209 significantly determine how they react to certain situation. Empirical Studies also suggest that males and females
210 have different preference, decision making, information gathering and evaluation while buying. Generally, women
211 are expected to be warm, nurturing and home-oriented. As a result, females are considered to be good at
212 buying traditional female products, example like baby products, grocery, home furnishing etc. whereas males are
213 expected to be logical, analytical and aggressive. Therefore, it is commonly believed that male are good at dealing

214 with electronic products, automobiles etc. However, some studies indicate that there are some significant changes
215 in male consumption pattern and domestic responsibilities. According to Teather (1995), men shoppers begin
216 to behave more like female shoppers, such as doing more grocery shopping and becoming more brandconscious.
217 The difference between gender roles and expectations has become blurred due to the increasing amount of highly
218 educated and working women. Study also indicates women are generally more involved in social issues and are
219 also more concerned about environmental issues compared to men. Therefore, women are more likely to show
220 more socially and ecological friendly consumption behaviors ??Berenguer et al. 2005).

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

239 **16 XIII. Discussion**

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

276 also noted that gender does not only refer to biological, but includes a variety of sociological, cognitive and
277 cultural influences that can affect our personality and behavior.

278 XIV.

279 17 Conclusion

280 In conclusion, it has become essential for companies, marketers and product designers to understand consumers'
281 needs and wants. Studying consumer behavior provides a platform for companies and marketers to design a more
282 appropriate marketing strategy for their target consumer groups, especially consumers from different cultural
283 backgrounds. Although there are numerous researches done on consumer behaviors, majority of these researches
284 are Western bias, and lack of Asian consumer behavior studies. Moreover, there is still very little research on
285 how cultural background can influence different people's consumption patterns. Even though there are very
286 little research carried out on Asian consumption patterns, these countries are still racially homogenous, unlike
287 Malaysia which has many interesting subcultures. Malaysia is a unique multiracial country, thus researchers can
288 further study on the impact of ethnic, culture and religion on consumer behavior. Hence, understanding the
289 differences between Malaysia and other countries allow companies and marketers to design strategies according
290 to the cultural and gender differences.¹

¹XII.Sex or Gender?Sex refers to biological and physiological

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