An Investigation On the Cross Cultural Factors That Regulate Malaysians in Choosing International Brands

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays buying, selling and modern technologies in Malaysia provide great opportunities for international brands to expand across different ethnic groups. Therefore, it is very important to know the cultural differences and their possible influence on the people's behavior when choosing an international brand (Sian et al., 2010; Leo, 2005). The aim of this research is to investigate the cross cultural factors that regulate Malaysians in choosing international brand. The study is ethnographic in nature and aims to share a broad description of the experiences and perceptions of thirty three respondents. Data were collected from thirty three respondents using open-ended questions (unstructured interview). The information obtained from the open-ended questions was recorded into narratives. The method used to analyze the data was narrative analysis. The business owners and consumers with good knowledge in cross cultural factors and international brand were the respondents. The results show that power distance, masculinity, long term orientation and uncertainty avoidance are cross cultural factors that influence Malaysians in choosing international brands.

Keywords: *Cross cultural factors; International brand; Malaysia ethnic groups*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross culture is an indispensable issue in global business, as the success of foreign trade relies upon the smooth communication of consumers or employees from different regions and cultures. The rate of interaction of people from distinct backgrounds in the business world depends on the level of understanding of cross cultural differences (Naylor, 2011). Combining two or more cultures in brand market can be essentially said to be a medium of conflict and misunderstanding where two or more groups attempt to know each other's differences in a reciprocally accepted manner (Ahmad et al., 2007). With the

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globalization of commodity, where a huge number of business deals involve foreign consumers, joint ventures or suppliers, cross cultural challenges may take place at any point in time and it can start from misunderstanding that may easily arise during communication (Brett, 2007). For a business relationship to be successful between local and foreign groups, they must have a good knowledge of the business at hand and a good knowledge of the economic and cultural background of each other. Trade across cultures is not only about reaching an agreement for a successful business deal, but it is also about the norms of the business partners and showing a long term sincere relationship for trade (Rashid et al., 2002).

Many business relationships today involve individuals from different cultural heritage. Each party comes up with a different order of assumptions regarding decision making processes, kingdom priorities and hierarchical structures (Hooker, 2007). Therefore, while creating a more complicated assumption than single ethnic networks through foreign firms or international businesses, the benefits and diversities of intercultural partnerships can be significantly comprehended, especially when dealing cross culturally with the goal of digging out the best foreign brand. A true connection with cultural partners that take advantage on their expertise can signify the difference between failure and success (Naylor, 2011). For a firm in another country to be accepted by a local community or a local firm, there must be a brand acceptance that qualifies the relationship and achievement. People desire foreign brand for the reason to upgrade products and expand into a new economy (Rashid et al., 2002), therefore, foreign firms are more productive than local firms. When performing business abroad, it is fundamental to comprehend the local culture. A culture that includes areas such as a country's values, norms, behaviors, architecture, food, art and fashion that makes up a local firm (Blonigen & O'Fallon, 2011). And that is to say that the subjective view of culture includes a dimensional array of shared norms, beliefs and values of a specific group that are observed in day to day social institutions and practices, and have been cultivated historically, deemed, transmitted and functional across time. Hence, cultures are viewed as shapers of future behavior and as products of past behavior, and simultaneously, humans are viewed as fabricators of culture and are being shaped by it (Spering, 2001).

Malaysia is one of the most religious and ethnically diverse countries in the world, where the existence of different parties is mostly peaceful. The Malays are found as the largest ethnic society with a population of 50.4%. The Chinese group occupies only 23.7% of the total population. The Indigenous group mostly in Sabah and Sarawak occupies 11% of the total population. And the Indian society dominates only 7.1% of the total population. These parties are reasonably and equally distributed across the country with the exclusion of the preponderantly Malay group on the east coast, and the concentration of most native groups in the regions of Sarawak and Sabah (Rahim et al., 2010; Kamaruddin et al., 2009). The Malays are largely in Islamic religion through

which the believers are tolerant, gentle manner, submissive and friendly to authority, peace keeping and put the happiness of the group as more significant than individual desires. The Islamic religion accepts practices that include funerals of Malay and wedding festivals of ethnic group that are very much agreed with the instructions of the Islamic religion. It is observed that there is a very powerful likelihood that even in the condition of deciding to buy some goods and services, the leading principles of the religious belief play a very meaningful role (Ahmad, 2010; Algesheimer, 2005).

Chinese followed the teaching of orthodox Confucianism with shade of Taoism. This means that the Chinese extremely respect value such as dignity or prestige where the pervasive effect of social relations like Guan Xi, especially in business surrounding, require one to behave in a honorable manner to secure the good image of the family and the group. The Chinese are like the Malays in a decent perspective such that they are cohesive and collective and very frequently allowed the leading bodies or elders to make major decisions for the group (Sian et al., 2010). Chinese consumers spend more time for searching products of superiority and performance for the reason that they expect commodity to last long. Chinese are more interested in hierarchy among individuals in the group and this may interpret into a sense of hierarchy among products of changing quality, especially if high quality is connected to individuals who control higher positions in the group (Leo, 2005; Hofstede, 2001). The Indian consumers are observed for the high level of value orientation. Such orientation to value has marked Indians as one of the most apprehensive consumers in the world. Even the superior brands have to design an incomparable pricing strategy with the objective of getting a foothold in the Indian market. Indian consumers have a high level of family orientation (Somani, 2012; April & Peters, 2011). This orientation actually extends to the related families and friends too. Brands with distinct personality that support family values are incline to be well known and accepted quickly in the Indian market. Indian consumers are as well connected with values of parenting, affection and care. These values are far more frequent than values of achievement and ambition. Product that transmits emotions and feelings are properly stuck to the Indian consumers (Somani, 2012).

The rising awareness and identification of specific culture and religion have been recognized to have strong effect on consumer choice of brand and decision making (Sian et al., 2010). McDonald faced some cultural problems while cultivating an effect to make the world know about the uniqueness of some special commodities. The world had the perception that McDonald's marketing practices, life style and fast food concepts were not suitable to any food consumer rather dangerous to human health. This is because of the fact that McDonald was not following the different cultural beliefs and lives of every ethnic group that comes along. McDonald believed that one business ideology can be applicable in all the parts of the world without knowing that different countries have different cultures and beliefs that cause consumer behavior looks

totally different from other ethnic groups. But at last McDonald realized that since people in a particular culture agree differently with people in another culture so shall they do when it comes to consumption, especially in consumer food and style. Therefore, McDonald bent over backwards to blend into local cultures of different ethnic societies (Lada et al., 2009). Today, the company advertises itself to its disagreeable people as a global company owned and run by local people. Indeed, the authority makes it so that McDonald in Japan is run by the Japanese and McDonald restaurants in Israel are run by Israelis. Local business practitioners choose their offerings for a menu to fit their cultural practices. They create suitable marketing and find alternative suppliers for their culture. From the marketing views, since culture formulates the value systems of the consumers that later on govern the significance of environment within the consumers, it exercises a great role in touching the consumer cognitive and affective choices of spending and consumption (Sian et al., 2010).

From a religious point of view, Muslims are declared to consume only halal food product. According to Lada et al (2009) in a study of consumer behavior in Malaysia, it is a necessity when it concerns marketing of halal products. The truth of the matter is that Muslim consumers are precisely similar to any other consumer in the segments that are demanding quality and healthy products just that it must conform to Shariah requirements (Al-Harran & Low, 2008). Religion can act upon consumers' behavior and food purchasing decision as well as eating habits (Shaharudin et al., 2010). In many parties, religion exercises one of the most powerful functions determining food choice. Consumers would direct their interest to a commercialized product that does not possess a halal label but they might read its constituents opposite to buying the one that possesses less quality but bears a halal mark (Al-Harran & Low, 2008). From the marketing view, it is realistic to comment that ethics and religion are able to determine the behavior of the Malays in choosing a brand. This is more significant with regard to ethnic effect. Generally, the whole concept of consumption in Malaysia is directed towards realism and quality awareness (Kamaruddin et al., 2009). This kind of consumption places importance on attributes such as quality, high utility and best value for money. Malays being quality conscious consumers, display much attention in getting high quality products without being conspicuous or materialistic buyer. Realistic consumption orientation should diffuse in many views of marketing experience to be able to perform with the ethnic and religious values could be a difficult job for marketers in Malaysia (Kamaruddin et al., 2009).

Cultural differences are frequently the fundamental for foreign marketing communications and international brand management schemes as they have a branded influence on buying decisions (Ko et al., 2006). An advert message for example can be used to encourage the advantages of a company or product whereas it can as well concentrate on interference appeal, and the success of the advertisement depends upon the culture of the individuals being commercialized

(April & Blass, 2010). Being conscious of cultural standards can help societies define clearly the target partners and make marketing more efficient. Sometimes, it is not only about whom to target but also in what way to target them (Hooker, 2007). In a country where international business activity is increasing, people have to be aware of cultural differences that can place impact on what is satisfactory and what does not (Ahmad et al., 2012; Chung & Smith, 2007). Despite the huge uptake of international business and outsourcing in Malaysia the empirical investigation on cross cultural factors in Malaysia is generally rare. Therefore, this study will seek to fill up the space by collecting empirical prove on cross cultural factors that are influencing Malaysian to choose foreign brand.

Nowadays the growing effect of global economic forces and international marketing activities are progressively taking place across cultural boundaries. In a world where processes of globalization run deeply in life of people, different groups of people can easily move from one part of the globe to another (Chung & Smith, 2007). Trade is connecting countries and continents, growing cross cultural factors that influence globalization, international business and trade relationships (Chirkova, 2011). Once a certain group of people wants to operate on the foreign market, they should be conscious of potential differences in prospective business partners that can influence on accomplishment of good relationship in general and buying of the commodity in particular (Chirkova, 2011). The systematic and parallel analyses on the recently emerging cross cultural factors are still hard, although such studies are quite insufficient in the context of the new global economy and international businesses (Ahmad et al., 2012). This study is an effort to fill this gap, focusing on emerges of cross cultural differences and inequality in consumer behavior.

Businesses in Malaysia today are extending their boundaries outside domestic markets. In this international business environment, cross cultural differences becomes a common challenge (Hartman et al., 2009). This is primarily due to the fact that the business parties are frequently from different nations, with dissimilar cultural beliefs and values which they normally bring with them to the contracting table (Khan et al., 2009). The nature of international business, how it is communicated or contracted and how individuals think and act during negotiations can change across cultures (Yusof & Bhattasali, 2008). Therefore, it is very important to know the cross cultural issues in selecting brands, because even though both groups fully understand the concepts of the business, other factors like actions or discussions may adversely impact the outcome of choosing brands in the society (Brett, 2007). However different nations have their own particular culture and communication traits, which are for sure influencing the understanding of branding (Chung & Smith, 2007).

Cultural dimension has strong effect on consumer behavior. The consumers who emerge from different countries have the respective reasons to consume commodities. A brand should be designed in different marketing plans and

schemes to meet the demands of consumers (Jing, 2011; Dolnicar & Grun, 2007). Despite a growing body of literature on the cross cultural issues and consumer behavior, no distinct and systematic analyses have been conducted to the best of knowledge on cross cultural factors and consumer behavior. The cross cultural factors that are influencing Malaysian to choose foreign brand have not yet been studied in depth. The present study aims to address these gaps. And that brings up the research question "What are the cross cultural factors that regulate Malaysians to choose international brand?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture relates to shared beliefs and values that define what is appropriate for a group. Culture is the ordinary thinking made which the members of a group of individuals are different from those of other groups. Culture refers to the active process that takes place within a particular society group which creates the knowledge of beliefs, meaning, values and attitudes that drive good communication, perception, thoughts and actions (Leo, 2005). Study found that where ever there is an active cultural practice there is high level of consumer behavior. Consumer behavior refers to the psychological approach or orientation a consumer has for making choices (Leo et al., 2005). Culture is proven to have impact on someone attitudes and values, therefore culture is expected to have a meaningful influence on consumer behavior (Leo et al., 2005).

2.1 Hofstede's model

This study applies Hofstede's intercultural five dimensions model to express cross cultural factors influencing Malaysians in choosing foreign brand. Geert Hofstede is a Dutch psychologist who conducted one of the earliest and well known cultural studies in management, on IBM's operations in 70 countries around the world and identified five dimensions of culture: power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and Long term orientation. These five dimensions of culture help to understand the factors that differentiate cultures (April & Peters, 2011; Hofstede, 1983).

Power distance is the level to which a culture admits that power in a group of people is distributed unequally. High power distance corresponds with high organizational hierarchies, with more dominating leadership and little employee or individual involvement in decision making (Spering, 2001). Cultures with high power distance would be likely to pursue the quality conscious decision-making manner. Cultures in Japan, Malaysia, Russia, Spain and Thailand are typical cultures with high power distance where submission to authorities (Leo et al., 2005).Cultures with low power distance, like the cultures of United States of America, challenge authority and authority does not come naturally. The people in United States of America stress on equal rights and opportunity. They are independent and do not involve each other as much as people in high power

distance. High power distance societies tend to expect obedience for superiority and a clear difference between people with power and people without power (Hofstede, 2001).

Individualism is the attitude of people to take care of themselves, their likes and their immediate families only. This cross cultural factor focuses on the level to which a society supports collective achievement, individual and interpersonal relationship. Individualism is a religious belief that the goals, values and needs of an individual take priority over that of the group. If a culture of a country has a high Individualism score, this shows that individual rights are exercising control (Leo, 2005; Hofstede, 2001). Individualistic individuals are extremely inter-dependent and the social system evolves out of group identity. In such group, people from birth onwards are incorporated into cohesive and strong in-groups, often with the extended families who proceed in protecting them for unquestioning loyalty. The people here encourage harmony and avoid loss of appearance since their identities are supported by the social system they are into (Sian et al, 2010). Individualistic cultures convey brand and fashion consciousness. It is demonstrated that Japan, United States, Singapore and Australia are more brand conscious (Leo et al., 2005; Hofstede, 2001).

Uncertainty Avoidance is the degree to which people feel endangered by unstructured situations and have created beliefs and institutions for avoiding or minimizing those uncertainties. This dimension or cross cultural factor concerns the level of acceptance for ambiguity and uncertainty within a society. A country's culture with a high Uncertainty (doubt) Avoidance score will have low tolerance. As an outcome it is normally a very rule oriented society and follows a well-established and defined law, control and regulation (Spering, 2001). Low uncertainty avoidance grade aims to a society that is less involved about uncertainty and ambiguity and has more allowance towards experimentation and variety. Such a society for example United Kingdom is less rules oriented, readily admits change and is ready to take risks. High uncertainty avoidance societies like Japan, Malaysia, Argentina and France will be bent in the high priority placed on routines, rituals, and procedures in societies and organizations in general (Sian et al., 2010).

Masculinity is the level to which the dominant values of a cultural group are success, material things and money. According to Hofstede, Masculinity is a cross cultural factor assigned to achievement, aggressive self-assurance, and material success (Japan, Mexico, Germany, UK) as being in opposition to the feminine values of relationships, caring, modesty, and the quality of life (Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands). A high Masculinity score shows that a country' culture undergoes a high degree of gender differentiation. In such culture, males have a tendency to dominate a large portion of the power and society structure. A low Masculinity score signifies that a society has a low level of inequity and differentiation between genders. In such a society, females are

treated to the same degree as males in all views of the society (Leo, 2005; Hofstede, 2001).

Long Term Orientation is corresponding to respect for tradition, persistence, fulfilling social obligations, perseverance, and a strong sense of shame. Indian cultures have a high score in long term orientation (Somani, 2012). On the other hand, culture with low score in Long Term Orientation, usually referred to as a Short Term Orientation. People in Long Term Orientation are willing to spend in order to maintain the social pressures and trend of having to save face; therefore, they are more interested with their social status. They also tend to resist change and are high tempered as they demand fast results (Sian et al., 2010).

3. METHODOLOGY

It is postulated that case studies of experiences of other people's comment on cross cultural factors that regulate Malaysians in choosing international brand would be an effective tool for teaching and learning or more suitably for training. The purpose of this research is to produce case studies of individuals that have experienced cross cultural differences in their businesses which could be used for educational purposes. The case studies are developed based on interviews with eleven Malay people, eleven Chinese people and eleven Indian people in Malaysia that have good knowledge in cross cultural factors and international brand. After short questions to draw out contact details, personal details and educational background, a few questions relating to cross cultural factors that regulate Malaysians in choosing international brand were asked. The questions include the number of years and experience of the international business, when the business began, the type of commodity, the primary business activity, and the cross cultural challenges faced when selling and buying the commodity.

The study is ethnographic in nature and aims to share a broad description of the experiences and perceptions (Berelson, 1952) of thirty three respondents. Data were collected through open-ended questions. The information obtained from the open-ended questions is recorded into narratives. The method used to analyse the data is narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a story or a report involving the narration of a series of events in a planned sequence which stretches out in time (Jovchelovitch, 2000). Narrative is an approach which intends to raise and inspect stories about the topic or person being studied, and it is often collected through interviews (Jovchelovitch, 2000). It is believed that the findings would light up our understanding of the challenges caused by cross cultural factors in choosing international brands. The purpose is to provide a chance to speculate on issue relevant for future research on the cross cultural factors in choosing international brand.

4. RESULTS

The findings obtained from the unstructured interview are written in the form of narratives which we name Narrative 1 and Narrative 2.

A. Narrative 1 – The story by seventeen respondents

According to respondents, power in different ethnic groups in Malaysia is distributed unequally. Malaysian authority emphasizes differences in people's power, status or wealth. Therefore, Malaysia is a high power distance society. This inequality is seen as a non-collective aim of society, and upward mobility is uncommon in selecting international brands. Muslim group has a high respect for authority and is ready to submit to those in power as directed in choosing international brands. The Chinese and Indian groups have a high respect for culture. They dominate the culture of respect for elders and parents. The spirit of belonging takes dominance over private well-beings and has affected the personal choice on international brands. This is because the decisions making is frequently based on group interest over individual ideas. It is also fascinating to note that the Indians, Malays and Chinese exhibit systematically high in the masculinity power as mirrored among the neighboring nations and narrated by respondents.

Malay, Chinese and Indian groups exhibit the effects of long term orientation, therefore tend to resist change. They possess diversity seeking tendencies because of the cultural supposition that choice is declarative of an act of self-expression. The respondents pointed that Malay, Chinese and Indian groups are influenced by long term orientation that illustrates living in harmony with other people, respect, obeying rules and are inhibited by authority, maintaining order and stability in society that results in rejecting the choice for international brands. This indicates that the society is structured even within the families, having clear presumption of their various roles.

B. Narrative 2 – The story by sixteen respondents

Malaysian societies encourage building relationships with large number of people. A low Individualistic society points to a society that is more collectivistic in nature. In such society, people incline towards collective obligation. Brands represent a great meaning to consumers. Some brands convey meanings of achievement and quality hence there are as well brands that convey meanings pertaining to low price and beauty. Consumers with low individualistic values are less likely to be concerned with some brands especially those that portray international meaning. In Malaysian group, the goals, values and needs of an individual do not take priority over that of the group.

The various ethnic groups in Malaysia possess high uncertainty avoidance and tend to underline submission to regulations. Ethnic groups with high uncertainty

avoidance will avoid committing in risky portfolio and prefer investing in valuables and treasures. Therefore, there is a direct illation to link these groups to those who incline to search for safety. The act of rejecting international brands in Malaysia due to high uncertainty avoidance hinders consumers in effort minimization and does not provide a sense of familiarity; so this increases the risk involved in the relationship between consumers who have low uncertainty avoidance. The respondents expressed that Malaysian society practices more brand consciousness while being the group that places high emphasis on saving face.

5. CONCLUSION

The result presented in this study has explored the cross cultural factors that influence Malaysians in choosing international brands whilst using Hofstede's cultural model. Specifically, the result found four cross cultural factors (power distance, masculinity, long term orientation and uncertainty avoidance) that influence Malaysians in choosing international brands except individualism. This study has discovered that the negligence of international brands by Malaysians is not caused by individual choices (individualism) since Malaysians do not submit to individual choices but rather submit to the choices that are selected and approved by authorities (group choices).

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