Culture and Consumer Behaviour: Comparisons between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia

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Abstract — **Many researches have been conducted to elucidate the decision process of consumers. This is mainly because of the fluidity of consumers' decision process since it evolves over time and space, as well as in different environments such as culture and race. This study attempts to focus on a single community with dual ethnic groups, i.e. the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia. Thus, this study differs from the previous studies in that it attempts to compare two ethnic groups of diverse culture and religious background, within a single Malaysian community. The focuses here are on the students from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) and University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) because of their respective homogeneous racial composition of either purely Malay or Chinese youths, respectively. The findings of the MANOVA showed that there is difference in term of individualism/collectivism (IDV), uncertainty avoidance (UAI) and long-term orientation (LTO) between Malays and Chinese. Despite the long-term co-existence between the Malays and the Chinese, as this study has revealed, these two ethnic groups, although different in their religions, cultures and the means by which wealth is being acquired, do reflect dissimilarities in their decision-making, choice of products, branding and responses towards advertisements.**

Index Terms—**Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, power distance (PDI), individualism/collectivism (IDV), masculinity/femininity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and long-term orientation (LTO).**

I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is not static. This is because of the evolving global environments. In this situation, culture is ever changing to adapt and to reflect the dynamism of the society as well as to maintain harmony within the society. Culture has immense influence on the values and lifestyles of individuals. Due to this dynamism people's psychological construct changes and, therefore, their consumption patterns [1]. According to Belk [2], "multinationalization, world tourism, world sports and increasingly instantaneous world communication and transportation, there is a threat that cultures will be absorbed into a global commercial culture." Belk further emphasized

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that such scenario can lead to global consumption homogenization. As a consequence, the homogenization of marketing intermediaries and marketing tools globally to reach out to the global masses has been prolific. This is highlighted in the case of McDonald where the burgers consumed in the West are very much the same as those being sold in the East. However, this has no longer been effective and applicable. The growing awareness and recognition of religion and specific culture have been known to have strong influence on consumer choice of products and decision making [3]. With the growing intensity in competition in recent years, marketers nowadays can no longer depend on stereotype marketing tools to expand their market shares globally but needed to have specific tailored marketing programmes and strategies to counter each group of consumer around the world that possess specific behavioral and consumption patterns in order to win these selected target market.

Culture is a potent force in any social group whether it is an ethnic group, religious group or special interest group. Researchers generally agree that culture has a profound impact on individual values and life style, and it cannot be underestimated as it actually affects their thoughts, motives and value systems [4]. From the marketing perspectives, since culture explicates the value systems of the consumers that subsequently governs the interpretation of environment around the consumers, it plays an immense role in affecting the consumers' affective and cognitive choices of consumption and spending [5]. The study of consumer cultures and the impact on consumers' behaviour has far reaching implications for designing marketing strategies for any organization with intent of cross-cultural or cross-border investment [6] and there has been increasing recognition of the power of ethnic groups in determining the behaviour of consumers among marketers [7].

However, there is still very little research being carried out on how consumer values in different ethnic cultures influence consumer behaviour, especially among the Asians. [8][9]. The volume of researches in consumer behaviour has mostly been Western bias [10]. Moreover the researches have been mostly focus on the white, the blacks as well as the Hispanics. Lately, there have been some researches on the oriental ethnic cultures such as the Japanese, the Koreans and the Chinese in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China. It is noteworthy to mention that these countries are largely racially homogenous, which means the population is largely dominated by only one race. This is very unlike Malaysia where we see the co-existence of different races such as the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians and other minority ethnic groups with varied and different cultures, religions and practices within a single social system. It is in

this context that Malaysia provides a good platform to further research on consumer behaviour especially with its rich cultural heritage and religious diversity. This research is a comparative study of two ethnic cultures, Malays and Chinese that have co-existed for a long time and their impact on consumption behaviour has been unprecedented. The objective of this study is to exploring and comparing the Malays and the Chinese Consumer Behaviour base on the five Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions.

Malaysia is a relatively small young nation with a population of about 26 million people that comprising of three main races – the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, living together with other minorities even before its independence from the British Empire in 1957. This situation of acculturation of different races within the Malaysian community has prompted the current study. Hence, it is an interesting subject mainly because limited research in this area has been fully explored in Malaysia and none has been conducted in comparing the consumer behaviours based on the five Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. Additionally, the rapid growth of Malaysian economy in the last few decades have transformed the consumption power of all Malaysians, thus, making the subject of understanding and studying consumer behaviour in Malaysia even more interesting and challenging.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been varied definitions on culture by different researchers and scholars. The plethora of definitions of culture bring to our attention that culture is indeed multi-faceted linking every area of our lives. Culture is not static but rather it is very dynamic – it changes and transforms – over time. Indeed, culture is a corporal value system that encompasses the members' personalities, expressions, thinking patterns as well as the manners in problem solving. As the environments in which the members of the culture group interact continue to re-construct itself in order to adapt to the rapid changes of various factors, culture changes accordingly. In fact, culture can actually be summed up as the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, practices, behaviours, symbols and artifacts that the members of a group commonly use to interact and associate with one another within their environments and this system and values are transmitted from generation to generation through learning and instructions.

It cannot be denied that the work of Hofstede is probably the most popular in cultural research. Hofstede [11] defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one category of people from those of another." Thus, it is easily understood and the framework of the outcomes of Hofstede's research reduces the complexities of culture into five dimensions, which can easily be applied to our daily lives. As such, the current study will focus on Hofstede's model of five dimensions of cultural values, power distance (PDI), individualism/collectivism (IDV), masculinity/femininity (MAS), uncertainty avoidance (UAI) and long-term orientation (LTO).

The Power Distance Index (PDI) identifies the "extent to which the less powerful members of organisations, institutions (like the family) and social group accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" [12]. It suggests that the level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders. It also influences the way the leaders dispense power and execute authority as well as the manner in which the followers accept power. In a large power distance cultures, or the cultures that ranks high in the index, everybody accepts his/her place in the social hierarchy and accept the fact that those with power have the right to dispense authority and that it is natural to do so [1]. Japan is a typical Asian country with high Power Distance Index where submission to authority, such as the absolute submission to the Emperor is a good example. Similarly, the Malaysian society exhibits high power distance [11]. The relationships of the members is one of dependency and supportive such as the relationship between parents and children, teachers and students and employers and employees. The state of dependency naturally affirmed the superior-inferior concept of authority. On the other hand, cultures with low Power Distance Index, like the United States of America, authority does not come naturally and is often being challenged. The people here stress on equal opportunity and rights. People are independent and do not need each other as much as those in the high power distance. In summary, power distance indicates the society's readiness to accept hierarchy and it has implications on consumer behaviour. Mooij [13] mentioned that elders in high power distance cultures play important roles in buying and consumption decision-making than those in lower power distance cultures. Country with high PDI is more tolerance to structure in leadership and more readily to accept assumed power and authority in the hierarchy.

Individualism means the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. The individualist usually maintains the philosophy of "minding his/her own business" and he/she looks after his/her own welfare as well as those of his/her family or others that belong to the same group in exchange for their loyalty. Thus, the individualists maintain very loose bonds and the interests of individuals precede that of the group or the organisations they belong to [1][14]. On the collectivist side, it refers to societies in which the people are integrated into strong and cohesive in-groups since the day they were born. These people are highly inter-dependent and the norm or social system evolves out of group identity. In such society, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often with extended families who continue protecting them in exchange for their unquestioning loyalty. The people here promote harmony and avoid "loss of face" since their identities are borne out of the social system they are in. They promote interdependence with each other and aim for the welfare of the group as against independence in the individualistic culture [15].

Masculinity/femininity (MAS) refers to the extent the society is characterised by either "masculinity" as seen in being dominance and assertiveness or "femininity" as reflected in caring, loving and interdependence. People in the masculine society will tend to strive for personal success and achievement [16]. Outwardly, this is usually reflected in preference for branded stuff which is linked to status and success [17]. People in masculine cultures are more concerned with brand names and expensive products; whereas those in feminine cultures tend to shun expensive

consumption and status symbols [14].

Life can be uncertain and unpredictable. There are some people who shun unpredictability and uncertainty, while there are others who do not mind such ambiguity and uncertainty. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) refers to "the extent to which people feel threatened by uncertainty and ambiguity and try to avoid these situations" [12]. Uncertainty avoidance reflects the culture's willingness to take risks and, thus, the tolerance for uncertainty. The society with lower index in this category is more ready to accept risky situation. On the contrary, in a society with high uncertainty avoidance, unfamiliar and ambiguous situations, risky ventures are to be avoided at all costs. There is a clear distinction in UAI, with the Chinese scoring much lower than the Malays [18]. Thus, the Chinese would be more ready to assume risk and, therefore, would be more willing to try new products. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance index will avoid investing in risky portfolio such as stocks; and they prefer to invest in precious metals and gems. Thus, there is a direct inference to link these people to those who tend to search for safety [13].

Values associated with Long Term Orientation are related to respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, persistence and perseverance, thriftiness and a strong sense of shame [19]. On the other hand, people with low index in Long Term Orientation, commonly referred to as Short Term Orientation, tend to be more willing to spend in order to keep up with the trend and social pressures of having to save "face", thus, they are more concern with their social status. They also have fewer saving and are more impatient as they demand quick results [18].

III. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In Malaysia, the Malays are mostly Muslims. This is equivalent to about 65 per cent of the total Malaysian population of 24 million people. Most of these Muslims belong to the Sunni sect in practice. This is one of the sects of Islam whereby the believers are much more mild-mannered, tolerant, and friendly, submissive to authority, peace-loving and put the well-being of the group as more important than personal desires. By definition under Section 160 (2) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia it was explicitly spelled out that Malay is "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs…". By practice it is meant that the cultures and customary practices such as wedding, festivals and funerals of this ethnic group are very much blended with the teaching of the religion. This is because the tenets of the Islamic faith require its followers' behaviour to be "a complete submission to the will of Allah (God)" [20]. Thus it follows that there is a very strong likelihood that even in the situation of deciding to purchase certain goods and services, the guiding principles of the religion play a very significant role.

Islam is the unifying factor of the family [20]. Consequently, in a macro-scale it is also the unifying element that binds the entire Malay race in Malaysia. The Malays are also a cohesive group in the Malaysian society where the younger ones are expected to follow and abide by the leadership of the elderly people in the unwritten adat isti'adat, or custom and norms, with respect to the behaviour of

individual. Relationships among the Malays are largely hierarchical and collective. But in the modern life of the Malays, especially among the young adults, with increasing affluence, they were being exposed to influences of other cultures that portray different patterns of lifestyles and behaviour, particularly the Western cultures, through various media such as television, film media, internet and other large assortments of foreign print materials like the magazines and books.

Essentially, the masses of the Malays in Malaysia are not confrontational and usually are easy going and a bit lay back with their lives; they prefer to leave the major issue of the community to the leader and seldom question their positions. Until today there are still many who would rather seek the quiet and peaceful life in the villages oblivion to the happenings outside their group.

Consequently, in Hofstede's cultural dimensions for Malaysia [21], the findings are consistent with the cultures and customs of the Malays in Malaysia. In Hofstede's analysis [21], this predominantly Muslim community has a very high regard for authority and are willing to subject themselves to those in power as reflected in the very high PDI. This explains the Malays' dominant culture of respect for the elders and parents, Furthermore, the Malay community are generally communal in basis rather than individualistic. The spirit of belonging takes precedent over private well-beings. Thus, decisions-making is often based on group interest over individual ideas. It is also interesting to note that both the Malays and the Chinese exhibit consistently high in the masculinity index as reflected among the oriental nations.

Since the Chinese in Singapore and the Chinese in Malaysia are very closely related with many Malaysian Chinese having close relatives and friends in Singapore. Moreover, the close proximity of Singapore to Malaysia – at the southern tip of Peninsula Malaysia – is separated only by a one-and-a-half kilometre wide Straits of Johore. This Island State is also linked to Malaysia by a causeway where most of the peoples from both sides commute daily for work and leisure. Thus, this study will use the cultural dimensions of the Chinese in Singapore from Hofstede's study as a mirror-image to deduce the cultural traits and practices of the Chinese in Malaysia as it bears many resemblances with that of the Singaporeans. Apart from its similarities in racial and religious compositions, the language usages are predominantly English, Mandarin and Chinese dialects. The economic background and the wealth of the Chinese in these two regions are also quite similar in the sense that both have to strive very hard to carve a comfortable living presently for themselves and their descendants and, at the same time, to save for the future.

Although the Chinese cultural values have evolved and undergone rapid changes due to various factors such as economic advancement, social changes and acculturation, the values and system of overseas Chinese mostly have not been changed. They remain conformed to the doctrine of orthodox Confucianism with tint of Taoism (Yau, 1998). This follows that the Chinese still highly regard value such as face-saving where the pervasive influence of interpersonal relations like "Guan Xi", particularly in business environment, demand one to behave honourably to safeguard the good name of the family and the clan. Since young the Chinese are taught to

respect for authority without questioning. They also hold strong belief in "Yuarn" or fate where it is belief that every event is pre-planned and beyond our control. Generally, like the Malays, the Chinese are cohesive, or clannish, and also collective and very often allowed the leaders, or elders to make many major decisions for them. Yau [22] found that there were changes in value systems of college students in China. He also maintains that, however, some of the traditional Chinese values are still held by these students. This observation is also true of the Malaysian Chinese youths [23].

Putting Hofstede's cultural dimensions of the Malays and the Chinese side-by-side, it is noted that the first three dimensions - PDI, IDV, MAS - are very much similar for both the races. This could be due to the general eastern orientation that exemplifies living in harmony with others, obeying rules, respect and be subdued to authority, seeking for order and stability in society [24]. Nevertheless, the findings showed that the Malays score slightly higher in PDI than the Chinese [21]. This indicates that the society is more structured than the Chinese with everyone, even within the family unit, having clear assumption of their respective role. From the angle of consumer behaviour, the Malays tend to refer and submit to the decision of the elders of the family more than the Chinese. Thus, it is hypothesised in hypothesis 1 (H1) as follow:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is difference in PDI between Malays and Chinese students.

Generally, the Asians are also more inclined towards cohesive lifestyle where collectivism supersedes individualism, group welfare is more important than individual's interest. Both the Malays and the Chinese score almost the same and quite low in individualism/collectivism meaning these ethnic groups are highly coherent and collective. The consumers in these two ethnic groups are more willing to follow the group they belong in purchasing decision making. In the case of masculinity, both the Malays and the Chinese display a very strong male dominated society. There does not seem to have any difference in the score for masculinity for both of these two ethnic groups. The low score in this case may indicate that branded stuff does not matter much to them. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed as follows:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is difference in IDV between Malays and Chinese students.
Hypothesis 3 (H3): There is difference in MAS between Malays and Chinese students.

The marked distinction between the Malays and the Chinese lies in the UAI with Chinese scores are rather low as compared to that of the Malays (Hofstede, 2003). This is mainly evolved as a result of the direct social, economic and political environments they are in. They have come to terms with their legal position in the country and accepted the uncertainty of their futures; nevertheless, they also believe that they can bend this fate by working hard; the Chinese in Malaysia have also resorted to the fact that they have no one to turn to for their economic future and have to be practical in

their approach of gathering and saving as much wealth as possible for themselves to ensure a stable and better future both for themselves and their children. On the another hand, the Malays usually resigned to entrust their life to fate or being ordained by Allah which they, as mortal-beings, have no control at all. Thus, the Chinese would be more ready to assume risk and, therefore, would be more willing to try new products. There is no LTO score for the Malays. The LTO score for the Chinese is about the same with that of the global average of about 40 although it is much lower than the Asian average of 85. Because of the lower score in LTO, the Chinese might possess more impulsive consumer behaviour and less concern about the environments. Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed as follows:

Hypotheses 4 (H4): There is difference in UAI between Malays and Chinese students.
Hypotheses 5 (H5): There is difference in LTO between Malays and Chinese students.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Sample and Data Collection

The undergraduates represent the better-educated group in the country, and they come from diverse socio-economic background from all over the country. Thus, undergraduates from two education institutions located in the Klang Valley in Kuala Lumpur, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) and University Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), are targeted as sample because of their respective racial composition of Malay and Chinese youths. Although the sample mostly a convenience sample, it is noted that the non-probability sampling techniques is used when generalization of the research findings is not the main concern of the research and is often used in exploratory studies [25].

To elicit the information, a total sample of about 300 respondents was recruited from January to February 2006 in these two universities. Personally administering questionnaires to groups of individual selected as mean to collect data. Out of the 255 questionnaires that were returned, 18 were incomplete and were not used in any of the analyses. As a result, only 237 completed questionnaires were received from two universities and were used for the analysis. The detailed of the descriptive analysis of the respondents' characteristics are shown in Table I.

B. Measurement Development and Assessment

Items used to measure the five dimensions variables are adapted and modified from the previous works of Tai and Tam [26] and Kau at. el. [27]. All the variables measured by two to four variables by two observed variables on a 1 to 7 scale where 7 indicates highest of agreement. The Cronbach's α for the five Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions exceeding the value of 0.6, except UAI and LTO, which indicates that the items form the scales, have reasonable internal consistency reliability (Table II).

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS BY ETHNIC
GROUP

Characteristics	Malays (%)	Chinese (%)
Sex		
Male	23.9	37.2
Female	76.1	62.8
Year of Study		
Year 1	38.0	40.7
Year 2	43.5	23.4
Year 3 and beyond	18.5	35.9
Religion		
Islam	100.0	-
Christianity	-	11.7
Buddhism/Taoism	-	86.9
Others	-	1.4
Place of Origin		
Rural	43.5	19.3
Urban	56.5	80.7
Number of Cases	**(92)**	**(145)**

TABLE II: MEAN, CRONBACH'S α AND TEST BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECT
OF FIVE HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Dependent Variable	Ethnic Group	Mean	Cronbach's α	F
PDI	Malay	6.35	0.72	1.22
	Chinese	6.20		
IDV	Malay	6.50	0.72	18.51**
	Chinese	5.98		
MAS	Malay	4.01	0.64	0.18
	Chinese	4.08		
UAI	Malay	4.19	0.47	7.03**
	Chinese	3.89		
LTO	Malay	4.58	0.42	11.83**
	Chinese	4.18		

** $P < 0.01$, Sample Size (Malays) = 92, Sample Size (Chinese) = 145.

V. DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Base on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, five hypotheses were developed to compare the similarities and differences of the Malay and the Chinese students. The Malays scored higher than the Chinese in all the cultural dimensions except MAS (Table II). The findings of the MANOVA supported hypothesis 2, hypothesis 4 and 5.

The higher score of IDV of Malay respondents signifies that the Malay families are shown to be more cohesive than the Chinese families. This can be attributed to their inherent culture of being loving and peaceful as well as their close adherence to the Islamic faith and the efforts of the Malay dominance government in Malaysia to inculcate "islamization" in every aspect of the lifestyles of the Malays. This includes the cultures of submission and respecting the elders, accepting one's destiny as fate ordained by "Allah" and modesty in dressing. They are also more concerned with the well-being of the family and take efforts to maintain harmony within the family.

The Chinese students seem to be more individualistic and have deviated slightly from the close adherent to the conservative teaching of Confucius like their fore-fathers where families are more important than self. This could be attributed to the fact that these youths are second and third generation immigrants from South China where the virtues of cohesiveness and close adherence to the Chinese cultural values have been diluted due to exposure to global modern cultures. Further more, the conversion of the Chinese to Christianity and mother religions or even becoming a free-thinker without any fixed religion could have also diminished the impact of traditional values of Chinese religions such as Taoism, Buddhism - thus their values and lifestyles. The Chinese can be classified as "horizontal and vertical individualist" where they attempt to do their own thing and at the same time strive to be the best; the Malays, on the other hand, can be more aptly confined to "horizontal and vertical collectivism" where they can merge themselves with the group and are ever ready to submit to the authorities and even to sacrifice for the group [28].

The Chinese emerged to be more acceptable to uncertainty than the Malays. The UAI scores for the Chinese are significantly lower than the Malays and therefore they are more tolerance to uncertainty and unfamiliar environments. Consequently, the Chinese are more willing to try on new things.

The Chinese scores lower than the Malays in term of LTO and this affirms that they are more concern with their personal well-beings and pays very little regard to the environments. In addition, Chinese is more concerned with "face saving" and their personal social status. As compare to the long term, people in the short-term orientation are more independence and demand quick results.

The result on PDI is very much similar for both the races with the Malays scored slightly higher than the Chinese. This signifies that the Malays regard the hierarchy in the family as more important than the Chinese and, therefore, the Malays are more willing to accept their position in the family and society. This could be explained from their Islamic worldview where everything is pre-ordained by Allah – insha Allah, or God's will. From this finding, in the Malay family, the parents have greater decision making rights than the Chinese family. Thus, the marketer knows the decision maker in the family and the marketing message must appeal to them. The finding on MAS is to a large extent consistent with the cultures for both the Malays and the Chinese. This may be because both these ethnic groups are largely male-dominance.

Despite the long-term co-existence between the Malays and the Chinese, as this study has revealed, these two ethnic groups, although different in their religions, cultures and the means by which wealth is being acquired, do reflect dissimilarities in their decision-making, choice of products, branding and responses towards advertisements. This is especially true when religions and cultures, particularly Islam, in Malaysia, exerts strong influence on its followers to strictly adhere to its teachings. With this in mind, marketers must choose the appropriate channels of advertisement for any particular ethnic group. They also need to pay particular attention to the cultural factors in order to be more appealing not only to the selected target audience within the multi-cultures society but also to others.

VI. CONCLUSION

Malaysia is a relatively small country. The rich fabrics of its multi-ethnicity community represent a large foray of Muslim society and Chinese population in the world. Hence, these foreign organisations will gain beneficial information because each ethnic groups exhibiting their very own unique cultural characteristics. With this knowledge, it benefits the foreign organization to target the appropriate market segments with appropriate cost effective strategies to reap in maximum profitability.

The present study was limited to a sample of university students in Malaysia. Future research could expand the sample to include more representative sample or young adult sample, in order to ensure the generalizability of the results. It will also be fruitful to investigate the impact of ethnicity and cultural factor links to consumer behaviour on a macro-scale especially among those who are financially independence or those who are gainfully employed with final decision-making authority.

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