

FACTORS AFFECTING APPAREL BUYING AMONG MALAYSIAN FEMALES

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Abstract- Malaysia's vibrant and dynamic retail industry has influenced the styles of its diversity consumer markets. The distinctive ethnic background has resulted in different behaviors, preferences, and attitudes in the behavior of consumers. Age plays an important role when making good judgments and decisions. The unique ethnic diversity background has made Malaysia a competitive market place and marketers need to understand the diversity of the Malaysian consumers if they intend to market their offerings successfully. The purpose of this study was to explore how demographic factors such as ethnic and age effect on Malaysian female consumers in apparel buying. Out of the 200 distributed questionnaires, 133 were returned. The final sample size consisted of 113 responses. The Malay ethnic group was found significantly different on both size and comfort attributes when compared to the Chinese and the Indian: (size: $F = 6.40$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$; comfort: $F = 6.21$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). The importance of apparel attributes was found to be significantly different by age groups: (size: $F = 9.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; comfort: $F = 16.46$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; color: $F = 9.48$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; appropriateness: $F = 13.56$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; quality: $F = 12.22$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; fiber: $F = 7.22$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$). The age groups of Malaysian female consumers identified the importance of intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors on apparel attributes. Information sources usage related to apparel buying was significantly different by ethnic groups ($F = 3.77$, $df = 2$, $p < .01$). The Malay ethnic group was significantly different with the Chinese and the Indian on store promotions used as information sources for buying apparel. The major contribution of the paper lies in its insights about apparel buying in Malaysia, an emerging consumer market for apparel products. The results of this study managed to confirm that demographic factors contribute towards consumer's apparel buying and this result was observed in the previous study. To attract different ethnic and age groups of consumers, retailers should not ignore the importance of apparel attributes as well as promotional strategies that will cater to each ethnic and age group's expectations.

Index Terms- apparel buying, demographic, Malaysian females, consumers

I. INTRODUCTION

Understanding apparel preferences based on the perspective of a consumer's market is vital to aid apparel marketers in developing strategic marketing planning that will meet the consumer's expectations [1], [2]. Consumers are influenced by both internal and external factors that shape them in making a final purchase decision [3]. Such a factor like demographics have been used extensively by marketers to identify target markets [3]. Demographic factors, like ethnic backgrounds, age and other important personal characteristics have been identified as having a strong influence on consumer behavior in shopping [4], [1]. Segmentation has become a major tool for companies in planning their marketing strategies [3]. The influence of demographic variables on consumer's buying behavior continues to become important sources for apparel businesses in segmenting their market into different types of products or services that they offer [4], [5], [6]. While demographic factors continue to serve as an appropriate tool to identify target markets, very few attempts examine exclusively the effect of multi-ethnic markets in making apparel choices. Malaysia is a country located in South East Asia that embraces a distinctive cultural value. One of Malaysia's unique characteristics is its multicultural society. Multiple cultures have been congregating and mixing in Malaysia since the very beginning of its history. Malaysia's culture is formed by three (3) main

ethnic groups: Malay (53 %), Chinese (26 %), and Indian (8 %) [7]. Each group maintains its cultural traditions and values, including religion and language [10]. This diversity has made Malaysia a unique marketplace. The cultural differences that exist among the different communities of the ethnic groups in Malaysia have contributed to the heterogeneity in the behavior of Malaysian consumers where the domestic market is characterized by the "ethnically segmented consumer markets" [8].

The vibrant and dynamic retail industry in Malaysia has somehow affected Malaysian shoppers. Malaysian shoppers have increasingly become more discerning and sophisticated and this contributes towards Malaysia's overall retailing strategy [9]. In addition, Malaysia's retail business is growing rapidly. Malaysia's retail market has gained an average of 6.1% yearly from 2001 to 2006 [9]. Malaysia's retail sales have increased RM77.3 billion in 2007 [9].

Since the apparel industry is locally competitive, it is essential for apparel marketers to be able to identify and understand the different needs in apparel buying behavior across cultures in Malaysia. Ethnicity that is derived from the cultural phenomenon plays a significant part in influencing consumer's values, habits, attitudes and behaviors [10], [11]. Ethnicity is perceived as one of the most influential demographic factors that motivate and shape consumers behavior [10]. To penetrate Malaysia's apparel market, apparel marketers need to understand the unique characteristics of each ethnic group in Malaysia. By

identifying the preferences of each ethnic group in the market, apparel businesses could enhance their market strategy according to each market segment.

Therefore, this study attempts to explore how ethnicity may affect Malaysian consumers' apparel buying. This research will also identify any differences that may exist by age groups and income levels in relation to apparel choices among Malaysian consumers. Research related to consumer behavior in developing countries with traditional value structures is limited and this demands further investigation [10]. The changing consumer expectation is one of the challenges that faced by most retailers [12]. This research will be useful in understanding and appreciating the unique distinctive preferences of the multi-ethnic Malaysian market.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Apparel Attributes

Consumers place an importance on certain apparel attributes when they make a decision on apparel purchasing [1]. Many studies have found that clothing attributes include clothing quality, fabric, fiber content, brand name, designer label, country of origin, price, workmanship, construction, style, fit, and product functions. These all are critical when consumers are making purchase decisions [13], [14]. Clothing quality includes intrinsic cues as being the build-in part of the apparel product [15]. This represents fit, style, size, the type of fashion and support fabrics. Consumers use informational cues (i.e., extrinsic attributes) to consider clothing quality and to form their expectations of apparel performance [14]. The clothing quality informational cues include country of origin, workmanship, brand, and price. These are important factors that will influence consumer preferences on apparel buying.

B. Ethnicity

Demographics contribute to the dynamic changing pace of retailing and shopping centers [3]. Age and ethnic groups are two major demographic changes that will gradually influence retailing and shopping centers and this will lead to the changing of consumers' fundamental shopping habits significantly [16]. Ethnicity is a complex construct that has a strong effect on the consumption pattern that shapes consumer's behavior [11], [10].

Ethnicity is composed of both inherited and acquired characteristics that highly influence the behavior of consumers in the market [11]. The social environment and type of product influences the relationship between ethnicity and consumer behavior [17]. Consumer's ethnicity background and the surrounding environment will predict the type of product that consumers will purchase and this contributes to different preferences among consumers [17], [5], [17], [18]. Past research related to retailing has investigated the influence of ethnicity on various

aspects of consumer behaviors, including brand loyalty, consumption patterns, shopping patronage, and perception towards advertising [11]. Ethnicity is viewed as an influence on consumer attributes that affect consumer's buying behavior. Individual differences and backgrounds yield distinctive preferences on apparel attributes that influence consumers buying [19], [5], [4]. Based on the preceding discussion the following hypothesis was developed for this study:

H1a: The importance of apparel attributes differs by ethnic groups among Malaysian female consumers.

C. Age

Age plays an important role when making good judgments and decisions [20]. Individual differences derive from personal characteristics that include age and race [20]. These individual differences are viewed as an influence on consumer attributes. Previous studies on apparel consumption by female consumers found demographics to be a significant factor in the consumer buying behavior process [1]. Age and income are known to significantly influence purchasing behavior of working women [4]. [1] also recognized that career working females between the ages of 25-34 had their own preferences on their clothing styles and this affects their apparel selection. When it comes to apparel buying, young and middle-aged adults correctly used the information in a flexible way, but on the other hand, older adults are less flexible to change [20]. [21] found that a low price was indicated as an adequate reason to buy clothing for younger consumers, but on the other hand, suitability was a more important factor for older consumers on purchase decision making. Based on the preceding discussion the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1b: The importance of apparel attributes differs by age groups among Malaysian female consumers.

D. Income

Income is one of the demographic characteristics used by marketers for market segmentation [22]. The amount consumers spend for shopping differs as they are influenced by their socio-economic status or income levels [22]. Generally apparel products involved a critical decision making process as apparel deals with higher levels of social and financial risks compared to other consumer products (Hawes & Lumpkin, 1986). Consumers highly refer to price when making their apparel choices as a high price reflects a quality product [23]. Consumers with higher incomes normally engage in purchasing more expensive apparel products to suit their social class backgrounds, image and personality [1], [4]. Consumers who possess a higher economic status are likely to have high purchasing involvement compared to the lower socio-economic class [22]. Hence, consumers' levels of income provide a significant impact on apparel preferences. Based on

the preceding discussion the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Apparel preferences significantly differ according to income levels among Malaysian female consumers.

E. Information Sources

[23] defined information sources as internal knowledge (i.e., past product experience, objective knowledge, and subjective knowledge) in different purchase situations that influence search behavior and purchase confidence. Consumers use information to shape their opinions about the possibility of a product meeting a particular need [21]. Information sources include advertising, impersonal (i.e., magazines, newspaper, television, radio), personal (i.e. friends, salespeople, experts), and word-of-mouth [24]. [24] reported that there is a significant impact of word-of-mouth from family members, friends, and peers on an individuals' behavior.

Past findings also suggest that individuals have a tendency to behave in conjunction with group or social norms when they belong to and behave negatively toward opinions that diverge from their norms [24]. Chinese consumers are somewhat traditional and they still hold on to their strong primary ties [25]. The strong tradition in the Chinese culture will influence their buying decisions as they might depend on their significant others in making decisions. Based on the preceding discussion the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3a: The use of information sources on apparel buying differs by ethnic groups among Malaysian female consumers.

Personal background influences the way consumers search for information [24]. The younger group of consumers, generally, come from the age of technology. The generation Y consumers (i.e., ages 18-25) are technologically savvy and independent in making decisions and they are unlikely to refer to their peers [24]. Older groups of consumers refer to newspapers as information sources (Lumpkin, 1985). Based on the preceding discussion the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3b: The use of information sources in apparel buying differs by age groups among Malaysian female consumers.

III. METHODOLOGY

Two universities located in Selangor were chosen as the survey sites for this study. These universities were chosen due to their established fashion program that has large numbers of female staff that will be appropriate to represent the sample for the purpose of the study. A convenience of non-probability sample was used for this study. The sample consists of 200 females who belong to the main ethnic groups, and who were employed at two large universities in Selangor. Females were selected as the target respondents for this study. This is because women

were perceived as the primary purchasing agents for the majority of consumer products as well as traditional buying agents of apparel for themselves and family members [1]. Questionnaires were distributed to female university employees who belong to either academicians or secretarial support groups. Those who agreed to participate were asked to complete the two-page self-administered questionnaire.

Close-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. Responses were captured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by 1 as "Not at all important" / "Very strong disagree" to 7 as "Very important" / "Very strong agree". Demographic information on age, gender, education, income, marital status, ethnicity, type of university and employment status was obtained by asking participants to select their identifying category. A total of 200 questionnaires (N=200) were distributed to female university employees working at the public and the private universities. Each university received 100 questionnaires. Of the 200 distributed questionnaires, 133 were returned and 113 were retained as usable (N=113).

IV. ANALYSIS

The first hypothesis is to test whether any differences exist on the importance of apparel attributes by ethnic groups. The ethnic groups were divided into three (3) major groups that include Malay, Chinese and Indian. The multivariate analysis of variance (manova) revealed that size, comfort and country of manufacturing were important attributes and they were significantly different among the three (3) ethnic groups. For the Malay consumers, apparel size and comfort were found to be significantly more important than for the Chinese and Indians ($F(2,108) = 10.55, p < .01$; $F(2,110) = 8.67, p < .01$). Nevertheless, no significant difference was found between the Chinese and the Indian ethnic groups on size and comfort attributes.

Interestingly, the Indian consumers found that country of manufacturing was significantly more important for them when selecting apparel than for the Malays ($F(2,110) = 6.14, p < .01$). However, no significant difference was identified between the Chinese and the Indian or between the Malay and the Chinese on the country of manufacturing attribute. Hence, H1a was partially supported. The second hypothesis is to examine whether any differences exist on apparel attributes by age groups among Malaysian female consumers. The age groups were divided into two major segments, 18-35 and 36-55 years of age. Based on the ANOVA analysis, the importance of apparel attributes was found to be significantly different by age groups. The ANOVA results showed for size ($F(1,109) = 9.15, p < .01$), comfort ($F(1,111) = 16.46, p < .01$), color ($F(1,110) = 9.48, p < .01$), appropriateness ($F(1,110) = 13.56, p < .01$), quality ($F(1,109) = 12.22, p < .01$), and fiber ($F(1,111) = 7.22,$

$p < .05$). For the older female consumers in the age group between 36 and 55, size, comfort, color, appropriateness, quality and fiber were found to be significantly more important than the younger age group segment, 18 to 35. Interestingly, the age groups of Malaysian female consumers identified the importance of intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors on apparel attributes. Thus, H1b was partially supported. For income levels, groups were divided into three main levels of monthly income: group 1: less than \$1,800; group 2: \$1,800 - \$3,000 and group 3: more than \$3,000. The MANOVA and ANOVA analyses revealed that there were significant differences on apparel attributes existing by levels of income. The apparel attributes that showed significant differences by income were comfort $F(2,110) = 3.16, p < .05$; appropriateness $F(2,109) = 5.44, p < .01$ and quality $F(2,108) = 4.89, p < .01$. Interestingly, the upper income level group of consumers preferred more intrinsic compared to extrinsic attributes when buying apparel. Consumers who had higher incomes tend to be more selective and careful when purchasing clothes than those who have lower incomes. Therefore, H2 was supported. With respect to information sources used to learn about apparel, the Malay ethnic group relied significantly less on media sources (i.e., TV, magazines and celebrities) in comparison to the Chinese ethnic group ($F(2,109) = 5.20, p < .05$). Both Chinese and Indians referred to media sources as important apparel information. The Chinese consumers used store promotions/company information (i.e., catalogs, fliers and store personnel) more as apparel information sources than the Malay ethnic group, $F(2,109) = 9.84, p < .01$.

In relation to the significant others, the Malay was found to be significantly different with the Chinese ethnic group ($F(2,107) = 4.70, p < .05$). Interestingly, the Chinese relied heavily on their significant others as information sources when buying apparel. Indians moderately referred to their significant others. The Malay ethnic group was the least dependent on their significant others as information sources related to apparel purchase. Additionally, the Malay was the ethnic group who least referred to information sources such as media, store promotions/company information and significant others in relation to the Chinese and Indian groups. Thus, H3a was partially supported. Based on the ANOVA analysis, none of the information sources utilized in relation to apparel buying was found significantly different by age groups among Malaysian female consumers. This result indicated that types of information sources did not really matter among the Malaysian female consumers by age groups. Hence, H3b was not supported.

V. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this research was to investigate how the demographic elements of ethnic, age and

income may affect Malaysian consumers' apparel preferences. Fully supporting the first hypotheses, it was documented that the importance of apparel attributes differed by participant's ethnic backgrounds. This result reflected that ethnic background played a significant role in influencing preferences as well as the importance of certain apparel attributes. This finding suggests that each ethnic group has distinctive choices and preferences toward the importance of apparel attributes. For example, the Indian was less concerned with intrinsic attributes (i.e., size and comfort) than extrinsic attributes (i.e., country of manufacturing) compared to the Malay and Chinese. The finding also showed that the Malay ethnic group valued more intrinsic factors (i.e., size and comfort) and were least concerned with the country of origin attribute. This finding provided some supports for the study by [19] that most important evaluative criteria related to clothing to be size and comfort. The support of H1a is also consistent with the result of other studies which have found that ethnicity significantly influences consumers' buying preferences [17].

Thus, apparel retailers and marketers need to review their marketing efforts and strategies in meeting consumers' distinctive needs across multiple cultures. As predicted by the H1b hypothesis, the importance of apparel attributes differed significantly by age groups among Malaysian female consumers. The age groups relied more on the importance of size, comfort, color, appropriateness, quality and fiber. When making apparel selections, the age factor played an important role in determining types of apparel attributes that could satisfy consumers. The importance of certain attributes varies according to the consumer's age. For example, as age increases, consumers are likely looking for intangible attributes (i.e., comfort, appropriateness to the occasion and quality) rather than tangible attributes (i.e., pleasant to others, brand name, country of origin). Generally older consumers place importance on quality, comfort, function and aesthetics elements [26]. Older consumers have distinct characteristics that are different from younger people [27].

This finding is consistent with a study by [4] that found age to be significantly related to consumer's apparel selections. These distinctions lead to variations of apparel choices that relate to consumers' apparel preferences. Hence, retailers need to take into consideration the impact of the diversity of age groups on the changing consumer buying choices and preferences. As predicted by the second hypothesis, the participant's ethnic background significantly influences the types of information sources used in relation to ideas on clothing styles as well as apparel purchase. This result suggested that ethnic groups vary in locating and searching out for ideas on clothing styles and apparel shopping. Three types of

information sources derived from the factor analysis: media, in-store promotions and significant others. The emergence of the information technology has driven consumers to source information from all varieties of media that include media electronics, printed media as well as in-store promotions.

Based on the three main types of information sources, the Chinese and Indian referred to media, in-store promotions and significant others more than the Malay. However, the Chinese highly referred to their significant others in relation to apparel purchase. This finding supports a study by [10] which identified that Chinese in Malaysia still hold on to their primary ties to the family and associations based on their dialectical or geographical background origins. This result also supports [4], [27] who found that different personal characteristics tend to influence types of information sources used for making apparel purchases. We also examined whether information sources used related to apparel purchase differs significantly by age groups. Unlike our expectation, information sources used did not differ by the participant's age groups.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

This research provides useful insights in understanding apparel preferences in the multi-ethnic Malaysian markets. As recommended by [28] research identifying similarities and differences among consumers of different sub-cultural groups is needed. The globalization forces apparel retailers/apparel buyers/apparel exporters to search for new avenues to accommodate and meet the challenges of changing apparel consumer behavior. Based on distinctive apparel buying patterns and multi-ethnic needs, it is important for apparel retailers/apparel businesses to provide apparel selections that meet each different market segment.

Further research is also needed to expand the consumer apparel decision making among the main ethnic groups across several nations in South East Asia. Countries like Singapore and Indonesia have similar components of ethnic groups as in Malaysia. A study investigating the differences on apparel buying behavior among similar ethnic groups across nations would offer advantageous benefits for apparel producers around the globe.

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