

## **The Influence of Pre-Immigration Elements in Malay Sojourner's Consumer Acculturation in the United States of America**

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**Abstract:** This study described the pre-immigration elements that influence the Malay sojourner's consumer acculturation in the United States of America. The process of consumer acculturation involves the newcomer's acculturation into the dominant host culture's attitudes, values and behaviors towards their consumerism. Being an ethnic group which struggles to integrate into a dominant host culture and is quite ethnocentric in their consumption behavior presents a need to examine the factors that could influence the Malay's consumption behavior. To achieve this objective, an examination on the Malay sojourners' initial reactions to the American market and their consumption patterns in the United States was conducted. The study employed an exploratory qualitative method by examining the sojourners' experiences through self-reports. This involved 15 in-depth interviews conducted with Malay sojourners in Washington, D.C.; Athens, Ohio; Columbus, Ohio and Kalamazoo, Illinois. The sojourners consisted of students, expatriates, Malaysian Embassy staff and spouses of the first three groups. The result showed that the Malay sojourners used symbolic consumption to strengthen their existing identity built on faith and culture. They had to adjust their purchasing behaviour due to the lack of Islamic compliant products in the American market. The ethnic group's collectivistic nature played an enormous part in their pre-purchase information search. These findings were discussed and associated with the Malaysian local market, the Malay culture and Islamic practices in Malaysia.

**Key words:** Consumer acculturation, consumer behaviour, Malay sojourners, pre-immigration, identity

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This research is an exploratory qualitative study to understand Malay sojourner's consumer acculturation and identity negotiation through symbolic consumption in the United States of America. Sojourners are defined by Swagler and Jome (2005) as people who "no longer reside in (their) native country but whose stay in another country is temporary, voluntary, at least six months long and related to a specific task".

The 21st century marks a notable growth in cultural migration. In 2009, the United Nations Population Division reported that the number of international migrants had reached 213 million. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Malaysian migrants to OECD countries increased from 214,300 in 2000-245,000 in 2005/06. Of this total, the United States had the second highest number of migrants after Australia. However, the numbers declined in 2010, making the United States the fourth-ranked nation after Great Britain, Australia and Japan. According to the

International Organization of Migration, sojourning of professional individuals and then their return to their homeland has become an important element of migration.

The sojourning process in the United States could be especially difficult for Malaysians considering the small proportion of the sojourner population they constitute compared to other nationalities. According to Garoogian (2005), based on the 2000 Census in the US, Malaysia represented the smallest numbers of populations from all Asian countries. Apart from having the smallest immigrant population in the US, difficulties might emerge from cultural distance during the transition process. According to Berry (1989), cultural distance means the dissimilarity between two cultures in contact and the cultural distance between Malaysia and the US is high (Mulok and Aimuddin, 2010).

Previously, numerous studies were conducted on the acculturation process for immigrants. However, few studies have examined sojourners and fewer still examined sojourner's identity negotiation. Most of the studies

conducted have discussed the sojourner's perception of their environmental changes resulting in pressures and challenges they had to endure. Less commonly discussed are the implemented strategies used by sojourners to maintain their mental and social stability during the acculturation process (Swami *et al.*, 2010).

Significant psychological, societal, physical and economic transformations are likely to occur during major changes in a person's life. According to Swami *et al.* (2010), migrating is a challenging process that involves finding and implementing various coping strategies. These drastic changes require one to make significant alterations in one's daily life. In such a change, maintaining one's identity is problematic, requiring intervention through various means (Mueller, 2008; Williams *et al.*, 2005). According to Belk (1988), material possessions could symbolize identity as objects are used to express self-concepts. More often than not, individuals use products to project a certain social image in order to affirm their self-identity and to achieve their perceived role in society (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Therefore, it is possible to deduce that individuals who are adjusting in a new culture would show greater reliance on material symbols in order to build and sustain their sense of self. However, the act of consumer acculturation of adapting into the host culture's attitude and behavior towards materialism is also heavily influenced by pre-immigration understanding and background (Kim, 1989; Maldonado and Tansuhaj, 1999).

**Statement of the Problem:** According to Swami *et al.* (2010), Malay Malaysian sojourning students in the UK reported significantly poorer socio-cultural adjustment compared to Chinese Malaysian sojourning students. The Malays were also reported to have more negative responses to a range of predictors. It was found that less contact with host and co-nationals, language incompetence, higher perceived cultural differences and more perceived discrimination led to difficulties in the adjustment period by the Malays (Swami *et al.*, 2010).

Immigrants and sojourners may find initial difficult adjustments in foreign lands due to: limited means to communicate one's self-concept, insubstantial identity and lack of traditional means to convey status (Maldonado and Tansuhaj, 1999). Gennep (1960) stated that when a person is going through a transitional period such as immigrating or sojourning, the individual goes through three phases separation, liminal and incorporation. According to Gennep (1960), within the liminal period, the individual goes through role destabilization, resulting in feelings of obscurity, insecurity and an ambiguous identity.

Noble and Walker (1997) said that individuals who are in the liminal stage will feel ambiguous and resort to

"identity play" in order to find a personality they are comfortable with. One of the methods used for identity stabilization would be symbolic consumption, in which individuals would resort to alterations in their buying and consumption habits. In their minds, these alterations would be deemed necessary in order to 'fit in' during the liminal stage. Kwak and Sojka said that a way for immigrants to adjust themselves in a new culture is by purchasing and consuming branded merchandise. Prestigious brands are surrogates to status and this reliance on merchandise is especially relevant to immigrants as they are in a state that is unstable. They suggested that immigrants tend to purchase high-end branded products during sale promotions so that they would be able to consume the goods even though they might not have ample monetary resources. This behavior suggests that symbolic consumption plays a big role in the acculturation process. According to Lee (1989), consumers tend to consume products to build social image and satisfy role performance. Therefore it is possible that acculturating individuals rely on material purchases to create a belonging feeling.

Being sojourning Malays in the US would presumably cause identity clashes for the sojourners since Malaysians, as citizens of a developing country, have a different culture compared to Americans, as citizens of a developed nation (Burns and Brady, 1996). According to Kamarudin *et al.* (2002), generally, as an ethnic group, the Malays were found to be "less open to foreign culture, more conservative-minded and to have highly fatalistic attitudes". They were also more ethnocentric in their consumption behaviors.

Adams (2011) found that Muslims, in particular, have spiritual underpinnings that encourage them to preserve traditions such as dress, diet and leisure choices, causing assimilation to be slower. Wong (2007) and Fischer (2008) said that Islamic based materialism is growing to be a major identification of the new ethnic Malay identities, provoked by the intensification of Islamic practices in Malaysia. According to Fischer (2012), the nationalization of Islam by the Malaysian government has deepened and widened concerns for Islamic consumption and commodities among Malaysian Muslims. As new consumer practices emerge, new debates on the meaning of Islam and its proper practices are brought forth.

However, according to Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009), religion alone is not sufficient to affect the Malay's product's decision-making style. This is supported by Mochis and Fon's study which found that religious values of three main ethnic groups in Malaysia do not influence brand selection and store preferences.

**Purpose of the Study:** In its largest scope, the objective of this research was to investigate sojourner's adaptation and identity negotiation in another land. Specifically, the objectives were to uncover the acculturation process of a clearly defined group, the Malays from Malaysia and their perception of their consumption habits during their stay in the United States and the pre-immigration elements that might influence it.

**Literature review**

**Acculturation:** According to Sam (2006) and Organista, *et al.* (2010), there is a growing attention to acculturation studies and discussion, particularly relating to immigrants and refugees. However, the true understanding and operationalization of the term in social science remains obscure due to the naturally elusive concept and limited scientific development. Early social scientists in the beginning of 20th century defined acculturation as “a process of change that occurs when individuals from different cultures interact and share a common geographical space following migration, political conquest or forced relocation” (Organista *et al.*, 2010). Other scholars proposed the definition of acculturation as “all the changes that arise following ‘contact’ between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds” (Sam, 2006) while Gordon (1964), defines acculturation as “change of cultural patterns to those of host society”. O’Guinn, *et al.*, (1986) defined it as “the immigrants’ adoption of the dominant society’s attitudes, values and behaviors”. It is also important to note that since this area is quite conceptually indefinite, some scholars use the term ‘acculturation’ and ‘adaptation’ interchangeably and quite ineptly. For example, Kim (1989) mentioned adaptation, acculturation, assimilation and integration could be used interchangeably.

Some of these scholars and many more, construct a rather limited conceptualization of acculturation that one group changes to become like another. This idea reveals a unidirectional flow in which the two cultures presumably are mutually exclusive and one has to move towards another. This inevitably leads to assumptions that the newcomer’s original cultural identity and practices would be weaker than those of the dominant group and they will essentially absorb the dominant culture (Sam, 2006; Organista *et al.*, 2010).

Some scholars such as Berry (1997) and Organista, *et al.*, (2010) have rejected the idea of a cumulative progressive acculturation. They prefer to think that acculturation is at least two-dimensional where the newcomer would retain some aspects of their culture while adopting new ones. However, the level of adapting and retaining will vary for each individual. Kim (1989) has

suggested that scholars need to conduct more investigation into the influences of the newcomer’s disposition which results from interactions of environmental and pre-immigration conditions.

For the purpose of this research, the researchers prefer to employ Organista *et al.*, (2010) definition of acculturation as it serves the researchers purpose best while including all the elements which have been discussed. They define acculturation as:

A dynamic and multidimensional process of adaptation that occurs when distinct cultures come into sustained contact. It involves different degrees and instances of culture learning and maintenance that are contingent upon individual, group and environmental factors. Acculturation is dynamic because it is a continuous and fluctuating process and it is multidimensional because it transpires across numerous indices of psychosocial functioning and can result in multiple adaptation outcomes (Organista *et al.*, 2010).

**Consumer acculturation:** Consumer acculturation is a distinct perspective of consumer behavior studies in the sense that it combines the viewpoints of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. “The term ‘consumer acculturation’ is defined as the general process of movement and adaptation to the consumer cultural environment in one country by persons from another country” (Penaloza, 1994). O’Guinn *et al.*, (1986) mentioned that consumer acculturation is derived from the understanding of acculturation as it could be explained as a subclass of acculturation. They explained that the process of consumer acculturation involves acculturation into the host’s consumer culture. This means that the newcomers would adopt the dominant host culture’s attitudes, values and behaviors towards their consumerism. This change in consumer behavior is what we term as “consumer acculturation.”

Maldonado and Tansuhaj (1999) proposed a pattern called Consumer Acculturation Model that divides the process of consumer acculturation in three stages: pre-immigration, transition and outcome (Fig. 1). This

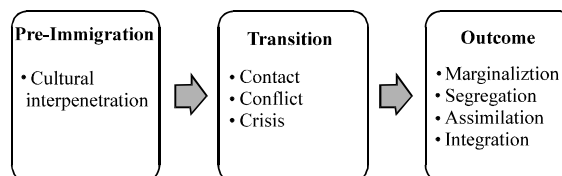


Fig. 1: Consumer acculturation model (Maldonado and Tansuhaj, 1999)

model takes into consideration that the process of consumer acculturation is affected by the newcomer's background and the exposure to the dominant culture in the original nation.

**Pre-immigration:** The pre-immigration phase takes into consideration aspects that could build up an individual's personality, such as individual, psychological, social and cultural characteristics. The model also touches on an aspect of "cultural interpenetration", based on Andreason (1990), considering the newcomer's initial exposure to the new culture before the actual immigration. Andreason (1990) explained:

By cultural interpenetration, I mean the exposure of members of one culture (or subculture) to another through direct experience and/or indirectly through the media or the experiences of others. This, of course is not a new phenomenon. Over many centuries, a major impact of wars, conquests of new continents, political alliances, religious crusades and many and diverse trade developments has been to provide opportunities for particular populations to be exposed to sometimes in extremely unpleasant ways the influences of other peoples and cultures.

It is important to examine this concept, as it allows researchers to understand the culture penetration extent of the host country in the newcomer's country. This socialization could stem from various means, such as media, exported products, brand names, ideology, etc. The exposure of the culture from the host country will have an impact on the acculturation process of sojourners and immigrants (Maldonado and Tansuhaj, 1999).

**Transition:** Maldonado and Tansuhaj (1999) explained further that the second phase, transition, follows the actual immigration. In this stage, newcomers have to adjust and change to fit into the new environment. This phase is also called the liminal phase (Noble and Walker, 1997). During this phase, the newcomers would leave the roles previously established in their countries of origin. This ambiguity would result in role destabilization which could cause the newcomers to resolve to experiment with new self-concepts that would suit them better in the new environment.

The newcomers would face crisis and conflict during this phase, from both this ambiguity and from a bombardment of new information which they would have to evaluate, filter and use in order to build up a new self-concept. They will also come across a lot of new marketplace encounters, such as advertising and other

promotional activities. The encounters will bring forth an adaptation or rejection towards the newcomer's product consumptions resulting in symbolic consumptions.

**Outcome:** The last phase is the outcome phase in which the person disengages from his/her previous roles and moves into one of the four possible outcomes: marginalization, separation, assimilation or integration (Berry, 1997).

**Identity negotiation through symbolic consumption:**

Identity discrepancy happens when certain parts of the self contradict each other in situations where individuals struggle with personal or environmental challenges. Scholars have studied identity discrepancy in relation to variables such as acculturation, perceived discrimination, depression, or educational satisfaction (Jung *et al.*, 2007; Wadsworth *et al.*, 2008; Valenta, 2009). Maldonado and Tansuhaj (1999) said that individuals who are adjusting in a foreign land would resort to "identity play" in order to find a personality with which they are comfortable. They proposed that psychological benefits could be obtained when one reduces the discrepancy between one's internal self-view and the external role during a profound change in one's life. Urban and Orbe (2010) examined immigrants from various cultural backgrounds in their transition stage in the United States and found that the immigrants negotiate multiple dimensions of their identities, expressing their need to adapt while preserving portions of their cultural identity at the same time.

There are various consumer culture studies using consumer culture theory deliberating on ways consumers use consumption to build a sense of self, especially those who travel away from their homeland and are adjusting to a foreign land. These individuals resort to "identity play" in order to find a personality they are comfortable with (Maldonajo and Tansuhaj, 1999). One of the methods used for identity stabilization is symbolic consumption, whereby the individuals would resort to alterations in their buying and consumption habits. The idea is that the market is a mythic and symbolic resource enabling individuals to construct narratives of identity (Belk, 1988; McCracken 1986). In many ways, consumers rely on this social image associated with products to assert self-identity and satisfy role performance.

Being a sojourning Malay in the US would presumably cause an identity disparity since Malaysians, as citizens of a developing country, have a significantly different culture compared to Americans. According to Swami *et al.* (2010), sojourning Malay students in the UK reported significantly poorer sociocultural adjustment compared to Chinese Malaysians. There are a variety of

reasons why this could be so, religion being one of the possibilities. Adams (2011) found that assimilation among ethno-religious groups is slower compared to ethnic groups defined by country of origin. Muslims, in particular, have certain spiritual underpinnings that encourage them to preserve traditions such as dress, diet and leisure styles. According to Fischer (2005a, b), modern Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia is incomprehensible without taking into consideration the understanding and practices of Islamic consumptions. Therefore it is a possibility that sojourning Malays, as acculturating individuals would rely on material purchases to create a feeling of belonging as mentioned by Lee (1989), Belk (1988) and McCracken (1986). Consequently, it would be essential to examine Malay sojourner's perceived identity discrepancy and symbolic consumption as a way to negotiate their identity. The research questions address the pre-immigration elements that could influence Malay sojourner's consumer acculturation. What could be the existing factors contributing to their consumption as they acculturate to the host culture? Apart from that it also seeks the meaning of consumption by the Malay sojourners and how that was translated into portions of their identity. Considering that they were newcomers in the United States, their identities have supposedly destabilized. Therefore, do they resort to consumption in order to negotiate their identity? What does their consumption symbolize? Therefore the following research questions were addressed:

- RQ1) How do Malay sojourners in the US use symbolic consumption to negotiate their identity?
- RQ2) What are the pre-immigration elements influencing Malay sojourner's consumer acculturation in the US?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Past research has examined the Malay sojourner's adaptation in the United Kingdom (Fischer, 2005; Swami, 2009) but there has been no previous study conducted in the United States. Fischer (2009) reported on a study on the Malay's consumption patterns in his book entitled "Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia." Swami *et al.* (2010), who have studied Malaysian Chinese and Malay students in the United Kingdom, reported that Malaysian Malay students adjusted significantly worse socio-culturally when compared to Malaysian Chinese students.

However, there is no known study on Malays' consumer acculturation in the United States. Therefore, this study was an exploratory investigation which purpose was to examine a subject that is relatively new

and to find variables that are important to the issue (Babbie, 2010). Babbie also said that exploratory studies are often conducted:

- To satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding
- To test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study and
- To develop methods to be employed in a subsequent study" (Babbie, 2010).

Qualitative methods were used in this study. Merriam (2009) explained qualitative research as, understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world."

There were two reasons the researchers chose to conduct this research through qualitative means. First, the topic was unexplored and needed an initial examination to find the corresponding variables. Secondly, the researchers wanted a method that could uncover opinions, perceptions and attitudes. Many human attitudes are constructed by situational restrictions and motivations. This socially constructed nature of reality could be explained by the "intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied," (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The researchers believed that a qualitative study would be able to explain the thoughts and actions of the Malay sojourners.

The main method employed for this research question was in-depth interviews. It is by far the best qualitative method, as it can be used to learn about the perspectives of individuals and can be useful to prompt informants to reveal their personal feelings, opinions and experiences. It was an opportunity to gain insight into how people interpret and order their world. According to Seidman (1998), in-depth interviews allow researchers to collect opinions from the perspective of the person who is experiencing the matter. At the same time, the method also allows researchers to derive meaning from their narratives. It was a beneficial tool to learn how they negotiated their identity through consumer culture.

**Research instruments:** The researchers developed an in-depth interview protocol that guided the administration and implementation of the interviews according to suggestions given by Lindloft and Taylor (2002), Lofland *et al.* (1995) and Boyce and Neale (2006). These instructions were followed in each interview to ensure consistency and increase the reliability of the findings.

**Respondent selection:** The number of Malaysians in the United States is very low compared to other Asian ethnic groups. As of the year 2000, there were only 10,711 Malaysians in the US (Garoogian, 2005). This number represents all of the different races in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, Indians, indigenous groups and others). It would be hard to estimate the percentage of Malay sojourners from this number. It is possible that there are more Malay sojourners compared to other races. This is due to more opportunities in working at the embassy and getting study scholarships for Malays. However, there might be more Chinese emigrants compared to Malays or Indians emigrants, as Malaysian Chinese are more proactive to find opportunities in settling outside of Malaysia.

For this study, the networking technique proved very valuable in locating potential informants. According to Lofland *et al.* (1995) "There is a great deal of wisdom in the old saying, 'It's who you know that counts.' Gaining entry to a setting or getting permission to do an interview is greatly expedited if you have 'connections.'" The recruitment process had generated a few important contacts which later led to more contacts. This method is known as snowball sampling which is effective for "locating rich key informants," (Patton, 1990). This method is especially important to communicate with the harder to reach sojourners.

### **Procedures**

**Data collection:** The data collection process for this study started in May 2013 and ended in August 2014. The researchers started the process by conducting in-depth interviews in Kalamazoo, Michigan; Washington, D.C.; Athens, Ohio and Columbus, Ohio. Fifteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted the informants in an informal way in order to gain insight into their acculturation. All of the interviews were conducted face to face. This element is important, as it allowed the researchers to observe any significant body and/or facial movements that could indicate emotions. It also gave the researchers an opportunity to seek any necessary clarifications of the sojourner's explanations. Each session lasted between 60-90 min. An interview guide was followed to ensure reliability throughout the interviews.

Before starting the interviews, the researchers provided the informants with the consent form. All of them read through the form and gave their permission to be interviewed. The researchers also asked for permission to audio-record the sessions and all of them agreed. During each interview, the researchers wrote down important points brought forth by the informants. After each session, the researchers would write anecdotes in their interview journal, detailing important occurrences for

that session. According to Lofland *et al.* (1995) fieldnotes are needed to remind the researcher of important information that might be forgotten. At first, the researchers did not regard this as a very important portion of the data collection phase. The researchers only realized how important this was after some time had passed and their notes really explained the setting and context of the interviews.

**Data analysis:** Babbie (2010) and Lofland *et al.* (2006) surmised that the data analysis process of qualitative methodology is very abstract and cannot be summarized in a mechanical and rigid way. Glesne (2011). said that it involves "organizing what you have seen, heard and read so that you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced." The methods, however, are also quite different and distinct from one researcher to another. Qualitative research is in its entirety open-ended and as much an art as a science. However there are steps and guidelines that could be implemented to ensure legitimacy and a researcher should know which steps to adopt in order to make his/her research work (Lofland *et al.*, 1995).

For this research, the researchers referred to Lofland *et al.*, (1995); Babbie (2010); Ellis (2004); and Dutta and Pal (2005). The main concern of the analysis is to link the overall theoretical frame, research questions and the data collected. The researchers chose to conduct thematic analysis to frame and organize the information they obtained from the interviews. According to Glesne (2011), thematic analysis uses analytical techniques in organizing and segmenting the information by separating them into themes and subjects. "Thematic analysis refers to treating stories as data and using analysis arrive at themes that illuminate the content and hold within or across stories. The emphasis is then is on the abstract analysis rather than the stories themselves" (Ellis, 2004).

The data analysis steps adopted were referred to methods described by Babbie (2010) and Dutta and Pal (2005). All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to enable the analysis process to be conducted. Given that there were many interviews to be transcribed, the researchers commissioned some help for a few of the interviews. The researchers made sure to review and correct all of the transcribed manuscripts to ensure correct data transferal.

The data was then labeled into sets of codes that could classify specific items. The concept is the organizing principle of this stage. Coding is an acceptable method to test an assumption that has been generated by prior theory. In this research, two types of coding were used: open coding and axial coding, as explained by

Babbie (2010). First, the researchers conducted open coding, in which every piece of information was broken down, examined and compared to each other in order to look for connections. Subsequently, the discrete ideas that were related to the same phenomenon were categorized into the same concepts, termed 'categories'. Then, axial coding was conducted, in which the core concepts of the study were formed. This stage involved regrouping the concepts made during the open coding stage. Formulations of relationships among and between the categories were conducted. As data was being coded, the researchers wrote memos and notes in order to organize the data. Code labels and their meanings are particularly important, as they will give a clear explanation of the coding. Theoretical memos are also important as they explain the relationships between concepts and theoretical prepositions. Not all relationships were easily derived and straightforward. Therefore, a lot of notes were needed to explain and develop links between categories.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section examines the outcome of interviews and discussions conducted with Malay sojourners in the United States. The main objectives of this research were to understand the consumer acculturation and identity negotiation process of Malay sojourners in the US. Taking into consideration that Malaysian Malays have a highly complex identity resulting from social, political and religious factors, this research aims to narrate informant's experience as newfound consumers in a secular surrounding. Each of the narrations were examined from the perspective that Malaysian Malays are Muslims by law and tradition, bound by specific consumption practices. By the end, this research synthesized the conflict of the Malay identity in a material based nation and how they represent their identity through symbolic consumption.

**Self-representation through Islam:** One of the main themes that permeate most of the conversations the researchers had with the respondents was on the difficulty of maintaining an Islamic way of life in a secular environment such as the United States. Being Muslims, they have to abide certain requirements in their lifestyle. According to the interviews, the sojourning Malays were ready to make substantial sacrifices in order to continue with their Islamic lifestyle, as Islam is an all-encompassing guideline in life. This guideline includes consumption, worship and identity, as the informants had informed me. Some adjustments had to be made in order to continue with their Islamic lifestyle.

The consumer environment in the US is significantly different than Malaysia. This is also a source of liminality in the sojourning Malays as their way of life is altered quite drastically. Therefore it is possible that sojourning Malays, as acculturating individuals, would rely on material purchases to create a feeling of belonging as mentioned by Lee (1993); Belk (1988) and McCracken (1986). Various consumer culture studies considered ways individuals use symbolic consumption to build identity. The idea is that the market holds a symbolic resource enabling individuals to construct narratives of identity through specifically selected types of consumption. This happens as consumers associate products with certain social image and, therefore, assert self-identity and satisfy role performance (Belk, 1988; McCracken 1986).

**Food:** Food products and clothing are some of the main concerns that require some adjustments from the sojourners. The sojourners do have concerns about the production of some of the goods in the American market. Most of the respondents said that the main problem for them was in getting halal meat and food, as they are not commonly sold in every city. Many of them have to travel long distances in order to get the meat supply. Borhan, Ahmad, Anuar, Elfira and Lily were residing in Athens, Ohio and they all traveled for one and a half hours in order to reach the nearest halal butcher. During most of the interviews conducted with the Malay sojourners, the informants told the researchers that they are very cautious with their grocery shopping. They would ensure that the food items they buy are free from non-halal sources. This includes approaches such as scanning the ingredients for elements such as gelatin or whey that might originate from pork or non-zabihah animals.

**Clothes and image:** Generally, Islam asks its followers to dress modestly and offers certain guidelines which Muslim men and women should follow. However, these guidelines vary for each gender and are based upon situations in which persons find themselves. For example, men should always be covered from navel to knee when around anyone, even other men. Women are also required to cover themselves from navel to knee among other women. However, in the presence of non-related men, women are required to cover themselves in loose garments from head to toe, except for the face and hands. This act of covering is a sign of submission to God and is commonly called hijab. The modest way of dressing represents a principle to be used out of respect for their bodies and not as a means of attracting unnecessary attention or lust.

In Malaysia, it is common to see Muslim females to cover themselves and wear headscarves in public. However, the degree of the hijab depends on each individual. Some would cover themselves rigorously. Others would resort to covering their hair but not their feet or forearms. Interestingly, it is also quite common to see women dressing in tight clothes while wearing the headscarf and totally missing the point of hijab.

All except one of the informants wore headscarves and abided by the rule of hijab. Most of them were basically covering themselves thoroughly, with the exception of a few who exposed their forearms and feet. Some of them mentioned having difficulties in finding clothes in the US that were compliant with Islamic law. This problem is especially pronounced during summer months when clothes on sale would be shorter with designs that would show skin. Some of the materials would also be less opaque. The informants said that they would wear an additional inner layer to avoid showing their body shape, or just avoid buying and wearing the revealing clothes altogether.

Most of the female informants were keen to identify themselves as a Muslim woman from their way of dressing. There were even a couple of cases in which the informants got more religious and more determined to present themselves in a Muslim identity through hijab in the United States compared to when they were in Malaysia. According to Azura (personal communication, August 31st 2014), she started covering herself one year after she moved here. Her story is interesting because she decided to cover up and limit her choice of clothing items after spending time in the United States, a land that is known to be tolerant and secular. Something must have moved her to make this unexpected choice.

These findings that Malays often represent themselves as Muslims more than anything else is very parallel to a previous study by Brown (2010) which found that 93.3% of the Malaysian Malay regards Islam as one of their three main identity aspects. In regard to consumption, Malay consumers were found to be more ethnocentric compared to other races in Malaysia in their consumption behavior (Kamaruddin *et al.*, 2002). Halal materialism is growing to be a major identification of the new Malay identity (Wong, nd). On the other hand, Kamaruddin and Kamaruddin (2009) found that religion alone is not sufficient to affect Malaysian decision-making styles on products, while Mochis and Fon found that religious values of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia do not influence brand selection and store preferences. However, these studies were conducted in Malaysia, therefore it is irrelevant to base the analysis in a condition whereby the Malays already have access to

products which are compliant with their religious obligations. This religious based consumption practice could be largely due to the intensification of Islamic practices in Malaysia which the researchers will discuss in the next section.

**Branded merchandise as a symbol of status:** Many of the sojourners mentioned that most of the high branded products they saw in the US were familiar to them since the products were in Malaysia. Many of the sojourners were acquainted with many international brands due to the media and global market penetration. Even if the sojourners were not familiar with some of the locally distributed brands, they did not have major problems in placing the unfamiliar brands in the new brandscape. The strategy to do this came from information seeking.

The informants mentioned a substantial difference in their branded products consumption behavior in Malaysia and the US. Although, they might be familiar with the brands back in Malaysia, they were not able to purchase them back home due to their high cost. Therefore, many of them took the chance to use high-end brand names here. They emphasized that the quality that comes with the brands convinced them to start using them. There are also a few that mentioned that the brand itself is an attraction, meaning that the items convey a status and prestige that comes with the brand.

According to Kwak and Sojka, newcomers in a foreign land often use prestigious brands to establish and communicate their personal identity. Brands are often used as a surrogate of status, serving as a symbol to indicate how the society should perceive the consumer. The brand acts as an extended self, a representation of who a person is through visual and material aspects. This medium of self-expression is especially important to newcomers who have not established their identity in a foreign society. These newcomers arrive to new surroundings without any of their former means to communicate their self-concept, such as "job title, income, social status or reference group". However, this point of view does not represent all of the sojourners. The expatriates and embassy officers established identities as a consequence of their position at work. Their income would be stabilized and they would have established a higher social status. Most likely students would be the most unstable group of all the sojourners.

The media also played a role in introducing and depicting international and high-end brands as a "must-have" in Malaysia. As a result, most Malaysians are keen to possess and use branded items, as proven by many of the informants' iteration. Many would prefer to use branded items compared to generic ones and some would



even play a role as a goods mediator to people home in Malaysia. They would either help people shop, or become an agent to sell American-based items to people back home.

This identification with expensive branded products is common in Malaysia, as noted by the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations (FOMCA) Chief Executive Officer, Datuk Paul Selvaraj. In a newspaper article dated September 26, 2011, he mentioned that despite the rising cost of living, Malaysian consumers preferred to purchase expensive branded products compared to in-house brands. He said that Malaysians had become obsessed with brands by placing unrealistic importance on appearance instead of utility. This habit could be traced to the Malaysian value system and could lead to extravagance (Rahim, 2011).

This socio-cultural observation could be linked with one of Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of culture, in which he stated that Malaysia is a country with high power distance which means that Malaysian citizens value authority stemming from unequal power within the society. What a person possesses and how a person lives represents the power that a person has and that power is something that is strived for in the society. This results in luxurious public consumption. Hirschman (1981) also mentioned that product consumption could imply symbolic meanings based on the images it projects, especially for items that imply particular status and social position in society.

This symbolic meaning also relates to why the Malay community in Malaysia is so involved with high branded materials, especially Coach handbags. It is interesting to note that Coach received numerous mentions in the interviews compared to other brands although there are many other high-end brands in the US. The researchers believe Coach is the benchmark among Malaysians in portraying high status as it is known to be very expensive while having good quality.

This observation and theory could also be connected to Malays' tendency to be highly concerned with others' material condition and status. Being a collectivistic country, Malaysians tend to be very close-knit as a community. Nevertheless Malays also tend to be impressed with high status and power. This conflict results in a community that is competitive in appearing powerful.

Malays also tend to be hypersensitive of other's perception of themselves. This tendency to appear high-status and respected directs the Malays to be extra cautious of the way they dress and present themselves to the world. Mastor (2000) in his study of the Malay culture and personality found that Malays score higher in the

"Self-consciousness" aspect. This finding relates to a conventional study by Swift (1965), who conducted an ethnographic study and found a cultural concept that is fundamental in the Malay trait; they are very concerned about other people's judgment about them. This trait, if studied reflectively, also means that the community tends to judge and analyze others in terms of what is 'correct' and 'proper'.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the consumer culture of sojourning Malays from the perspective of one, with aid from dialogues involving fellow Malay sojourners. By no means do the researchers claim that it is exhaustive or representative. Nevertheless, it allows a glimpse into a world that has not been explained before.

From the discussion, we could see that the Malay identity is complex, bounded by tradition and religion, yet modern and progressive at the same time. Malay sojourners would have been exposed to western culture and artifacts through the media and market prior to their shift to America. From the consumerism perspective, Malay sojourners are bounded by many pre-immigration elements, causing their consumer acculturation to be quite complex. Religion and culture play a big role in building Malay's identity, influencing their consumer habits as they tend to shape their product and food consumption to their identity. However, although, it is true that halal consumption is requested by the religion, the stringent background by the implementation of halal economy, rhetoric and lifestyle by the government also contributes to their unwavering consumption habits.

The Malay sojourners' inclination for high branded goods are also very much influenced by culture instead of utilitarian aspect. Many also mentioned the brand itself was an attraction, meaning that they appreciated that such items conveyed high reputation and prestige. The informants mentioned that they wanted to possess such branded products as using these products would place them in a higher hierarchy socially.

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