BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS FOR KOREAN PRODUCTS ENTERING MULTICULTURAL MALAYSIAN MARKET

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Abstract: With the introduction of foreign products in Malaysia, the business and management dimensions of conventional businesses are challenged and require learning and adaptations to cater for introduction of foreign products in the local market. Malaysian culture looks simple on the outset, but woven in complex intricacies over decades of interactions between her people who are multicultural and lingual, compounded with different faith/religion of the people. These factors have impact to the business operations and management of both foreign and local companies in Malaysia. This study investigates the acceptance of Korean products among Malaysians by focusing on the Korean country image and cultural impact to Malaysian consumers. Qualitative research was conducted using Online Focus Group Discussions (FGD) technique, explained using content and thematic analysis. Ten Malaysian participants comprising of Malays, Chinese and Indians participated in two separate Online FGDs. This study identifies various themes including 'respect for elders', 'valuing relationship', 'projection of boldness and confidence' and 'cautious followers' among others, that explain Malaysians' perception towards Korean products. These findings could help businesses from Korea by suggesting attributes that need to be taken into consideration in order to effectively reach the Malaysian audience.

Key words: Korean Country Image, Foreign Products Entrance, Online Focus Group, Multicultural Consumers, Thematic Analysis.

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Introduction

Malaysian economy is expected to grow with increased exports, due to the global economic growth, stable monetary policy by the Malaysian government, and vitalization of domestic demand. Several retail and service companies are entering the Malaysian market, which is the leading ASEAN consumer market and serves as

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a hub for Southeast Asia. The country, thus, continues to act as major target markets for the global consumer goods companies.

The characteristics of Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia that have an open attitude to foreign culture are creating a huge ripple effect by influencing the influx of Korean wave contents (Cho, Lee, & Rha, 2017). The country is also progressing rapidly on the electronic commerce front both in the urban and rural sector (Victor et al., 2018). Although the attractiveness of the Southeast Asian market including Malaysia is increasing in international trade, research on the perception and behaviour of Southeast Asian consumers is still lacking (Cho et al., 2017).

As Malaysia is a country with multicultural society it has unique characteristics that are different from other existing export markets. It's business environment is unique even compared to her immediate neighbour Singapore who share large part of common history (Nathan et al., 2019). In Malaysia, cultural and religious background of consumers affect their purchase behaviour. Islam is not only regarded as a religion by the Muslims, but as a way of life, hence more rigorous research efforts are needed to understand Islamic consumers market (Sandikci & Jafari, 2013; Rajiani and Kot, 2020). In other words, it would be necessary to study how religious norms influence the consumption behaviour of a Muslim-majority country like Malaysia.

Malaysia is regarded as a test bed for the multi-cultural and Muslim consumer market as the geographical advantage located in the centre of ASEAN and the contact point of Islamic culture and Western consumption culture emerge (KOTRA, 2016; Lee et al., 2020). As such, understanding how a foreign product enters and remains successfully in a country like Malaysia, could provide valuable insights to Korean firms and also to firms from other countries and SMEs in the future who plan on entering a new country with multicultural residents.

Literature Review

With the popularity of Korean Wave, Korean consumer goods companies are also entering the Malaysian market to solidify their business base in Malaysia. However, in order to successfully enter the Malaysian market, it is important to properly understand the purchase behaviour of consumers in the Malaysian market who are comprised of people with multiple cultural and religious backgrounds.

One of the factors that is importantly discussed in explaining the decision-making process for consumers to evaluate and purchase foreign products is the country image (Kaynak, Kucukemiroglu, & Hyder, 2000; Martin & Eroglu, 1993; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Country image is defined as the sum of associations and beliefs individuals have toward a particular country (Martin & Eroglu, 1993). If the information on the product is insufficient, the country image affects the evaluation of the product quality. In other words, country image as an information cue often signals product quality (Han, 1989; Lee and Ganesh, 1999; Nebenzahl et al., 2003;

Wang et al., 2012). This indicates the overarching influence of country image in creating consumers' perceptions about products from a specific country. Therefore, country image, consumers' beliefs and attitudes toward a specific country, affects product evaluation and purchase intention (Han, 1989; Han & Terpstra, 1988; Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009). Empirical studies related to the Korean country image by foreign consumers also revealed that a positive country image of Korea increases the intention to visit Korea (Kim, 2012), a favourable image of the product, and a high intention to purchase Korean products (Lee & Kang, 2006). Therefore, when Malaysian consumers purchase Korean products, the country image of Korea is expected to influence their purchasing behaviour.

The popularity of Korean Wave began rising in East and Southeast Asia with television dramas and pop music in the 1990s. It has now penetrated other industries such as cosmetics and film, and has become a global sensation (Kuwahara, 2014). These trends indicate that the Korean Wave is now an effective cultural tool not only to raise awareness of Korean goods, but also to positively shape Korea's image abroad. The Korean Wave, which is expanding all over ASEAN, is gaining popularity as the central consumption class expands to the 20-30s, so many people, such as the government, academia, and industry, are interested in the impact of the Korean Wave on related industries (CFT, 2012).

Southeast Asia is regarded as a representative halal market with more Muslim population than the Middle East, and continuous growth is predicted. The global halal market continued to grow, reaching a record $ 2.6 trillion in 2016, of which the halal food market grew to $ 1.24 trillion in 2016, leading the overall halal market (Thomson Reuters 2017). Although Malaysian market is dynamically formed under the influence of external cultures such as Western capitalism spread through various media such as TV, advertising, social media, and magazines (Gökariksel& McLamey, 2010), the consumption behaviours of Malaysian consumers are deeply rooted in Islamic religion (El-Bassiouny, 2014). For Muslims, Islamic religion is a culture, and it is closely linked to the way of life, so what Muslims are allowed to do, the presence or absence of halal certification, has a direct impact on consumption behaviour (Cheng, 2008; Aziz and Chok, 2013; Awan et al., 2015).

To answer the question of what is the impact of Korean country image and product image towards Malaysian's consumption of Korean products, and its implications to business entering Malaysia, this study formulates a qualitative research approach to investigate this phenomenon in depth. Therefore, a Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to study the needs and purchasing behaviour of Malaysian consumers from religious and multi-cultural perspective is conducted.

This study aims to provide deeper understanding on the impact of Korea's country image and product image towards the consumption of Korean products among Malaysia; and its business implications to Korean companies entering the Malaysian market.

Research Design

This research adopts constructive research as the underlying paradigm to study this phenomenon of multicultural society in Malaysia and their acceptance of Korean products. It follows a qualitative research approach using a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with small groups of participants who are regular users of Korean products. The paradigm of constructivism observes individuals as actors who interpret their surrounding stimuli and act according to their multiple intangible mental constructs (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

FGD as a technique of qualitative research data collection has been widely used and accepted in social sciences studies for several decades (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998; Ochieng et al., 2018) as well as specifically in marketing research (Morgan, Krueger, & King, 1998). Unlike an in-depth interview, the FGD is unique as it involves the element of discussion, argument and counter-arguments among participants that contributes to the group dynamics. Two FGDs were conducted online to capture as much themes as possible through the discussions based on pre-designed questions.

As this study was carried out during the pandemic outbreak of covid-19 which forced most people to stay at home (from March to June 2020), it was not possible to conduct face-to-face FGD as was originally planned. The Malaysian government enforced a Movement Control Order (MCO) in the whole country from 18th March till 9th June 2020, during the covid-19 global outbreak (MCO Malaysia, 2020). Hence an Online FGD was conducted in two groups to facilitate better interactions among participants. The use of Online FGD has also gained popularity in recent years in social science studies with the advancement of computer-mediated tools and online human-interactions (Stancanelli, 2010; Steward and Williams, 2012).

Questions for FGD were prepared prior to the online FGD to facilitate the discussions of moderator with and among participants. The FGD was conducted in English where Twenty-five questions were prepared by researchers in this study covering 5 major areas of the study, which are Korea country image, Korean culture, Korean products, perception of people who purchase Korean products, and impact of personal characteristics and values towards their purchase behaviour.

Data Analysis Method

The qualitative data obtained from the FGD was video recorded and transcribed to aid with subsequent content analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely accepted technique in contemporary qualitative research. Thematic analysis is argued to be a flexible qualitative data analysis that could be adopted for conversation analysis or interpretative phenomenological analysis (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

As recommended by Willis et al. (2009), the analysis of focus group data ideally covers three 'layers' of discussions which encompasses the individual level, group

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level and the group interaction level. Focus group allow respondents to react to and build upon the responses of other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014).

Result and Discussion

For the first section of questions regarding usages of types of Korean products, participants mentioned products which include cosmetics, skincare and food products.

Participants mentioned 'tourism destination', 'K-Pop and K-drama' which led to discussion across these themes. 'Etiquette' was discussed as an outstanding image of the Korean culture. Where 'respect for elders' and 'family-orientation' were extensively discussed. 'Korean Food' and specifically 'Kimchi' was discussed as a health food. All participants, fans and non-fans alike mentioned that Korea is a 'peaceful country' and welcoming to tourists. Malaysians from all backgrounds seem to be on agreement on the positive appeal of Korea's country image and see it as a complement to Malaysian culture and way of life. This is in agreement with previous studies that found wide acceptance of Korean culture in Malaysia (Kuwahara, 2014; Jeong et al., 2017; Tajul Arifin, et al., 2018). Statistics also show large increase in year to year visit of Malaysians to South Korea for tourism, from 2012 to 2016. In 2016, approximately 311, 000 inbound visitors from Malaysia travelled to South Korea, which was an increase from 223, 000 the previous year (Statista Research Department, 2018).

Conversely for Korea country image question, we identified 'plastic surgery' as a negative theme discussed by participants. This led to an extensive discussion where both fans and non-fans iterate on the growing trend of plastic surgery among Korean celebrities and this is said to be negatively perceived by Malaysian consumers. Although data for acceptance of cosmetic surgery among Malaysians is not available, a recent survey among Malaysians medical practitioners asking if they would be a consumer for cosmetic surgery revealed a very low percentage of agreement by the survey participants. Only 6.11% of the participants in Malaysia responded that they would go for cosmetic surgery in the future (Johan et al., 2018). This does indicate the low acceptance of cosmetic surgery among Malaysian consumers and this helps to explain Malaysians' negative view of cosmetic surgery among Korean celebrities.

This finding indicates that Malaysians from all backgrounds view Korea's country image as a positive one, nurtured with values that are compatible with Malaysian values. Overall, we notice a theme 'inviting country and people' in the discourse of various keywords in discussions among Malaysians regarding Korea's country image. Our finding also shows that despite being open to new cultures, Malaysians are wary not to adopt some trend that is viewed as negative from their lenses such as cosmetic surgery in this case.

Korean Culture

The next section of questions were about Korean Cultures. Responses were positive centred around 'love' and 'dedication' (internal values), 'dressing' and 'fashion' (external traits). Fans also mentioned 'unique dance moves' and 'humble and hardworking' (humility). Both fans and non-fans mentioned 'dedication' as an ethos of work for Koreans and Malaysians seem attracted by this value.

Themes of 'respect for elders', 'family', 'clothing' and 'food' were mentioned. Malay participants related with the similarity of food and especially 'spicy food' similarity between Korean and Malay food. Additionally, Malay participants discussed about 'Baju Kurung' the traditional Malay dress worn by Malay ladies in relation to the Korean traditional costume for ladies 'Hanbok'. Chinese participants related with the similarity of 'filial piety' and 'respect for elders' between Korean and Chinese cultures. Indian Malay participants on the other hand related with the similarity of 'family harmony' between Korean and Indian cultures. Indian participants also mentioned about the 'sense of cultural pride' of cultural and tradition heritage among Malaysian Indians which is celebrated by the ethnic group similar with Koreans having 'sense of cultural pride' of their Korean culture and heritage, regardless of their popularity and fame.

On the differences between cultures, 'fast-paced lifestyle' was debated in the discussion. All participants in both FDGs agree that Korean work life is more fast-paced than Malaysian work life and its implication was discussed negatively in the debate by both fans and non-fans. Malaysians tend to view Korean lifestyle as fast-paced and this is perceived negatively. Malaysians hence still seem to celebrate their slower-pace of life, compared to Koreans.

Korean Fans mention they are closer to Korean culture by emphasizing values such as 'love', 'family', 'harmony', 'loyalty' and 'Asian culture', as compared to other foreign cultures. While non-fans felt they were not closer to the Korean culture than other foreign cultures. This shows a potential divide and extent of acceptance of Korean culture between Korean fans and non-fans.

The findings in this section show positive impact of Korean culture towards Malaysians. Two emerging major themes in this section include 'Valuing Relationship' and 'Asian Compatibility'. Malaysians from all races value this and find this a uniting force towards the Korean culture.

Korean Products

This section discusses questions relating to Korean Products. Participants mentioned 'affordable' in their responses. Other keywords that emerge at the group level include 'natural health', 'good packaging', 'credibility' and 'advanced technology'. Fans and non-fans agree on these and debated them in both FGD discussions. However, a non-fan mentioned 'hype' in her response. As FGD discussions involve group dynamics and debate among member, other members in the discussion were quick to raise themes including 'credibility' and 'quality' to counter the argument for just a 'hype'. Through the discussions, participants agree

that although K-Pop could bring about the hype for Korean products in Malaysian market, however the products themselves are able to survive in the competitive market due to their 'affordable quality' which emerged as an important theme in this discussion. This finding asserts the quality and reliability perception of Korean products in Malaysian consumers' mind, and there was consensus among all ethnic groups of participants.

Participants from both FGD mentioned Korean company and brand names that are global which includes Samsung, Hyundai, Innisfree, Laneige, Atomy and etc. Participants (both fans and non-fans) were found not aware of Korean SME products. When probed further, we discovered the lack of promotion/awareness and Korean SME products among Malaysian consumers. This suggests the need for more initiative and promotion among Korean SMEs to be recognized in Malaysian market.

Participants mentioned 'Social Media', including Instagram and Facebook and 'Word of mouth' when it comes to how they obtain information regarding Korean products. Malaysian consumers emphasize the importance of 'online word of mouth' and especially the feedback from users who have experienced the product before. The theme 'friends' was mentioned repeatedly during this discussion on information about Korean products which signals peer influence and 'subjective norms'.

In both FGDs there's a subtle difference among fans and non-fans, whereby fans emphasize more soft-aspects of the Korean products (flawless, ambassador, celebrity), while non-fans seem more functional oriented (utilitarian) by focusing on testimonial, quality, affordability. This does indicate the subtle yet important difference between fans and non-fans.

Malaysian perceive Korean products as affordable good quality products (cosmetics and skincare products) and believe it 'actually works' and not just claims to work. Participant 2 mentioned *"When a country has a good image, people want to follow and use their products. For Korea, skincare products are recognized as their country image"* to affirm that Malaysians perception of Korean 'technology advancement' in cosmetics and skincare, coupled with 'Korean country image', 'Asian identity' and 'affordable quality', it is accepted by Malaysians that Korean skincare and cosmetics are superior than others.

Consumer and Purchase Characteristics

The next section of the FGD discusses issues surrounding consumer characteristics that influences their behaviour, including ethnic groups and religion, moral code and regulations. Majority of the participants mentioned their social circles are supportive of them adopting Korean products. Participants noted that Korean culture is 'highly family oriented', and there is no evidence of negativity for them to worry about, as aspects of 'filial piety' in Malaysian family is compatible with 'respect for elders' and 'Asian values' evident in Korean cultures.

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Discussions also showed that Muslims participants do not have any concerns for Korean products, be it food or cosmetic due to the halal certification process that is conducted my Malaysian Islamic authorities would have ensured the 'halal status' of the products for Muslim consumers' consumption. Participants from FGD1 also noted that most workers in Korean restaurants in Malaysia comprises of Malay Muslim staffs, hence gives greater confidence to Malay customers. Through the discussions we note that both fans and non-fans of Korean wave are fond of consuming Korean food and ethnicity nor religious of Malaysians had any hindrance to their Korean products consumption behaviour.

It was an interesting observation that Muslim participants in both FGDs did not mention the issue of 'halal' at all in their discourses, on the contrary the non-Muslim participants frequently highlighted the need for food to be 'halal' for their Muslim friends. This indicates Malaysians 'protective/caring' nature of their Muslim friends, vegetarians, Hindus and anyone who belong to a different faith or a diet preference. We term this as the 'empathetic understanding' trait of the Malaysian society that suggests a mature and caring society who although differ in their way of life is still able to celebrate differences among ethnics in the country, and furthermore take it to the next level by playing a role of looking out for each other's welfare, to ensure that their peers from other cultures can be consistent with their own way of life.

Participants also discussed the impact of 'famous Korean celebrity', 'positive word of mouth', 'influencer' and 'social media presence' to their intention to try out Korean products. Participants also view the promotion of Korean products in Malaysia are consistent with their values and accepted by their social circles. All participants view the Korean wave in Malaysia has created along with it a strong social media presence that promotes Korean cultures and products.

Result Discussion

The findings of this study largely indicates the impact of multicultural background of Malaysian to their consumption behaviour towards an external product, i.e. Korean products entering Malaysian market. We find cultural influences what serves as both 'for' and 'against' in patronizing Korean products.

Result shows that Malaysian consumers are attracted by the attributes of 'Valuing Relationship' where they feel compatible to Korean cultural norm where Korean culture also exhibit similar notion in their social relationships. Similarly, Malaysians feel 'Asian compatibility' an important drive when purchasing Korean products. This is certainly an advantage for Korean products and SMEs to leverage when entering into the Malaysian market.

Result also show Malaysians view Korean products as 'natural and authentic'. This perception appeals to consumers with concerns for sustainability and ecological product. We find that emphasis of many Korean products and SMEs on their natural product ingredients winning the hearts of the diverse Malaysian society.

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Besides natural products, Malaysians are also drawn towards the 'creativity and innovation' embodied by Korean products. It allows Malaysian to have a sense of progressiveness and some participants also commented how the progressive nature of Korean products allows them personally to 'project a sense of boldness and confidence'.

Malaysian consumers were also found to be 'cautious followers' when it comes to adopting products that they view incompatible with their cultural norms, such as plastic surgery which received negative criticism from participants in this study. Additionally, Malaysian were found to exhibit 'protective and caring culture' towards other Malaysian consumers who are of different faith and culture, for example non-Muslim Malaysians consistently showed concern for their Muslim friends when it comes to Halal products.

Korean firms choosing to enter Malaysian market, thus, need to implement marketing programs that highlight compatible values as discussed above that appeals to the Malaysian consumers. For example, Korean cosmetics firms can develop new products that contain natural ingredients and sell the products through authorized retailers to appeal to Malaysian consumers. The many compatibility of Malaysian culture and Korean culture can be leveraged by Korean firms wanting to enter the Malaysian market.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 outbreak globally and in Malaysia, which made face to face FGD not possible, hence Online FGDs were carried out. Online FGD may hinder the observation of participants' emotional responses during the discussion, hence this limitation could be overcome with a face to face FGD in future studies for better capturing of emotional and non-verbal responses of participants.

Using a collective FGD in this study, where our focus was to get responses that are culturally interactive, could be a weakness when one ethnic group may self-censor their responses not wanting to disclose deeper nuances in the presence of other ethnic groups in the same FGD. We recommend future studies in this area to consider conducting separate FGDs for each ethnic group and compare the findings with FGDs what contains mixed ethnic groups of participants.

The same can be said regarding gender-based FGDs as well, where participants may feel more free to express their gender-specific responses in a FGD with only male or only female participants. Additionally, future studies may carry out a quantitative study to further test and validate the themes discovered in this research. Big data analytics using social media data measuring the themes presented in this study would be advantageous as found in recent works (Lee et al., 2020).

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IMPLIKACJE BIZNESOWE DLA KOREAŃSKICH PRODUKTÓW WPROWADZANYCH NA WIELOKULTUROWY MALAJSKI RYNEK

Streszczenie: Wraz z wprowadzeniem zagranicznych produktów do Malezji, wymiar biznesowy i zarządzania konwencjonalnych przedsiębiorstw jest wyzwaniem i wymaga nauki i adaptacji, aby zapewnić wprowadzenie zagranicznych produktów na lokalny rynek. Kultura malezyjska na początku wygląda na prostą, ale przez dziesięciolecia spleciona w złożone zawiłości między jej ludźmi, którzy są wielokulturowi i językowi, połączeni z różnymi wyznaniami / religią ludzi. Czynniki te mają wpływ na działalność biznesową i zarządzanie firmami zagranicznymi i lokalnymi w Malezji. Niniejsze badanie dotyczy akceptacji koreańskich produktów wśród Malezyjczyków, koncentrując się na wizerunku kraju koreańskiego i wpływie kulturowym na malezyjskich konsumentów. Badania jakościowe zostały przeprowadzone techniką Online Focus Group Discussions (FGD), wyjaśnione za pomocą analizy treści i analizy tematycznej. Dziesięciu uczestników z Malezji, w tym Malajów, Chińczyków i Hindusów, wzięło udział w dwóch oddzielnych FGD online. W tym badaniu zidentyfikowano różne tematy, między innymi „szacunek dla starszych", „wartościowanie relacji", „projekcja śmiałości i pewności siebie" oraz „ostrożni naśladowcy", między innymi, które wyjaśniają sposób postrzegania produktów koreańskich przez Malezyjczyków. Te ustalenia mogą pomóc firmom z Korei, sugerując cechy, które należy wziąć pod uwagę, aby skutecznie dotrzeć do malezyjskiej publiczności.

Słowa kluczowe: koreański wizerunek kraju, wejście produktów zagranicznych, grupa fokusowa online, konsumenci wielokulturowi, analiza tematyczna.

韩国产品进入多元文化马来西亚市场的商业意义

摘要:随着马来西亚引进外国产品,传统企业的业务和管理规模面临挑战,需要学习和适应,才能将外国产品引入本地市场。马来西亚的文化从一开始就看起来很简单,但是在其多元文化和语言的人民之间数十年的交往中,错综复杂地交织在一起,再加上人民的不同信仰/宗教。这些因素对马来西亚的外国和本地公司的业务运营和管理都有影响。这项研究通过关注韩国的国家形象和对马来西亚消费者的文化影响,调查了韩国人对韩国产品的接受程度。使用在线焦点小组讨论(FGD)技术进行了定性研究,并使用内容和主题分析进行了解释。由马来人,中国人和印度人组成的十名马来西亚参与者参加了两个单独的在线烟气脱硫装置。这项研究确定了各种主题,包括"尊重长者","珍惜关系","大胆和自信的投射"以及"谨慎的追随者",这些主题可以解释马来西亚人对韩国产品的看法。这些发现可以通过建议必须考虑的属性来帮助韩国的企业,以有效地吸引马来西亚受众。

关键字:韩国国家形象,外国产品入口,在线焦点小组,多元文化消费者,主题分析。