

The influence of role models on young adults purchase

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of direct (parents) and vicarious (celebrities) role models on young consumer's purchase intention and behavior in Malaysia. The study partially replicates previous studies conducted in the west while exploring the eastern perspective. The data was collected using convenience sampling. Respondents were mostly undergraduate students at a public university in Sarawak, Malaysia. They were asked to respond to a structured questionnaire which was based on previous studies conducted in the same area. Regression analysis was carried out to estimate the impact of role model influence on purchase intention and behavior. The results indicate that both direct and vicarious role model significantly influence purchase intention. However finding do suggests that the direct role model does not influence purchasing behavior. This study significantly contributes in understanding the role model influence on ever growing youth market in Malaysia.

Introduction

Role models are regarded as a potential group of people that are able to leave impact on the consumption intentions and behaviors of individuals (Bush and Martin, 2000). Role models can range from direct models such as parents, peers, relatives and to vicarious role models such as celebrities (Bandura, 1986; Bush and Martin, 2000). As a marketer, it would therefore be important to note whether parents or celebrities play an important role in influencing young adults purchase behavior.

In Malaysia, the population of teenagers under the age ranging from ten to nineteen is more than five million and young adults from age twenty to twenty-nine are around four and a half million people (Anonymous, 2008). The combine population of this segment constitutes a quarter of the total Malaysian consumer market. Despite the potential influence of role models on young adults, a limited amount of study has looked into the influence of these role models on a target market particularly in Malaysian context (Bush and Martin, 2000).

Malaysia is unique as a country due to its multiracial, multicultural, multi-religious, and multilingual social construct (Abraham, 1999; Tsunashima, 2004; Waller and Fam, 2000; Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005). These communities live side by side in harmony to maintain a peaceful society despite preserving their own ethnic identities (Razak and Mokhlis, 2003; Tsunashima, 2004). Malaysia has a total population of 27 million people. Malays are the largest ethnic group, which represent more than 13 million people. This followed by Chinese with around 6.2 million and Indian around 1.8 million people (Anonymous, 2008). The national language is Bahasa Malaysia, however, different groups (Chinese, Iban, Indian etc.) speak their own languages (Shumsul, 2003). Major religions in Malaysia are Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (Asma and Lrong, 2001).

The economic growth in last two decades brings along the rapid cultural changes in Malaysian society with ever increasing living standard (Razak and Mokhlis, 2003). There are increasing number of working class parents, which naturally resulted into less supervision of adolescents and younger generation. Electronic media in Malaysia has also developed and matured with introduction of private TV channels and satellite television operator, as compared to the past where Malaysian could only enjoy state run television network. Secondly internet is becoming the favorite pass time and prime mode of communication for students and educated youth. Fast food chains are taking over the traditional food and are aggressively targeting Malaysian youth in their advertisement campaigns probably forcing undesirable shopping behavior (Razak and Mokhlis, 2003). Many famous and upbeat brands flooded media with TV advertisements showing celebrities endorsing their brands (Anonymous, 2007).

Mobile phones usage is becoming a compulsion for young Malaysians, elevating them as major revenue contributor for mobile phone operators. Nonetheless Malaysian young adults are becoming notoriously famous for their conspicuous consumption behavior (Tsuruoka, 1992). Research shows that shopping is becoming the choice of leisure activity for Malaysian youth (Othman and Sim, 1993). In the presence of these visible and significant changes, one can predict that it will, if it's not affecting the basic fabric of Malaysian society.

These changes can affect the traditional influence of parents as role model for their children. Apart from moral or ethical implication of this possible shift, these changes could bring profound effects on the consumption behavior of Malaysian adolescents and young adults. A diminishing role of parent's supervision due to rapid economic growth, and migration to urban areas of the country can possibly increase the influence of celebrities on the purchasing intention and behavior of Malaysian youth.

This study examines the relationships between role models (parents and celebrity) on young adults' purchase intentions and behaviors. There is a lack of research on role model influence on the younger generation consumption intention and behavior in Malaysian society. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first discussion of the relevant literature is presented; then the methodology of the study and its findings; and finally academic and managerial implications, limitations, and areas for future research are discussed.

Literature review

Social learning theory

Individual's consumption related attitude and behavior is the direct outcome of their learning experience (Bush and Martin, 2000). The Social Learning Theory (SLT) advocates that human learn behavior by observation (Bandura, 1977; Bush and Martin, 2000; Solomon, 2004). According to SLT, learning take place in four sequential processes of attention, retention, production and motivation (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996). Attention processes refers to the way in which an individual attempt and extorts information about the main features of the modeled behavior (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996). Consequently, retention process will take place when the individual retains the observed models' behavior in his/her memory (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996). Production processes refer to the learning stage where the individual is able to perform the observed behavior. Motivation process is a condition arises whereby the retained behavior is practical for the individual (Solomon, 2004).

In the consumption world context, SLT proposes that individual develop general consumption behavior and attitude by modeling the behavior of others (Bandura, 1977). These models often become the “role models” for young individual influencing their self view and inspiring their objectives (Bush and Martin, 2000).

Role models

Consumer behavior is considered to be a complex process affected by variety of internal and external factors (Shiffman and Kanuk, 2000). Like other social behaviors, human beings keep on learning skills required to survive in this consumer world. These skills are considered important antecedent to predict individual’s consumption behavior. The individual’s socialization process starts at very early stage, deeply influenced by their culture, peers and role models (Solomon, 2004).

Each external and internal factor plays a unique role in developing individual consumption behavior. However, the potential of a factor to be used effectively through mass media promises maximum effect on shaping consumer behavior with little cost. Role models are probably one of such factors rigorously used in the past and contemporary era of marketing communication.

Role models are individuals possessing successful attributes or behavior that people generally like to admire and imitate (Donahue, 2002; Schroeter, 2002). Individual desire to emulate certain aspects of his/her role model attributes or behaviors stem from his perception to be similar (Gibson and Barron, 2003). The role models impact on individual’s decision making behavior by directly or indirectly contacting with them (Bandura, 1977). Nevertheless, the extent that a person will emulate the behavior of his/her role model depends on the extent of the individual’s perceive similarities with that model and the authority that particular role model holds over an individual (Berns, 1993).

Human’s role models come from all segments of our social life. They could be the closest individual in our life like parents, relatives, friends and teacher or they can be famous individual from politics, media or sports world (Bush and Martin, 2000; Commuri and Gentry, 2000; Donahue, 2002; Moschis, 1987; Shreffler, 1998; Solway, 1994; Sureshchandar, Rajendran, and Kamalanabhan, 2001). Parents are the closest personal relation experienced by humans throughout their childhood and adolescence life. Past studies have shown that most individual prefer to choose their parents as role models as compared to other possible choices (Commuri and Gentry, 2000; Moschis, 1987; Sureshchandar, Rajendran, and Kamalanabhan, 2001).

Parents as role models

Parents act as primary source to convey belief and reinforce behavior of their child (Weiss and Fretwell, 2005). In addition, parents play the important role in formatting, structuring and conditioning of an individual’s attitude and behavior by acting as an agent of values (Feltman, 1998). Parents can influence one’s behavior directly or indirectly in numerous ways by providing rules, perspectives and principals through interaction or communications (Gunter and Furnham, 1998).

Consumer behavior is one of the important subset of a child’s learning under his parent’s supervision. Children start learning shopping behavior from their parents. The process is carried out through interactions and observed behavior occurring between parties essential for

the transmission of attribute, attitudes and products' knowledge to the child (Feltman, 1998). This learning has proven to have a profound effect on individuals store selection, choices of brand and even the style of shopping (Gunter and Furnham, 1998). Past research affirms that the experience and attribute gained from parents in childhood reflect later shopping preferences (McIlveen and Strugnell, 1999).

Celebrities as a role model

Celebrities are individuals who achieve a certain degree of fame across or among a section of a society. Celebrities can be actors, sports persons, politicians, or pop icons. Their fame and success allow them to inspire and influence others (Schroeter, 2002). Interestingly teenager and young adults are more susceptible to be influenced by celebrities as compared to mature population. Teenagers tend to follow the footsteps of celebrities to accommodate characteristic that they are lacking in their personal life. Many teenagers dress and behave like their favorite entertainer (Taylor and Stern, 1997; Weiss, 2004). This allows them to compensate their low self-esteem (Weiss, 2004). Furthermore, there are some who would go over the limits by having plastic surgery just to look like their favorite celebrities (Everelles and Leavitt, 1992). However as individuals get more mature their role models might change to fulfill the emerging need of maturity and soberness.

Sports stars are recognized as favorite celebrity role models for most young individuals (Bush and Martin, 2000; Donahue, 2002). Past researchers have shown that athlete role models are able to influence young generation's behavioral intentions, especially positive word-of-mouth regarding the products endorsed by them (Bush and Martin, 2000). Nonetheless, other researchers argued that the positive influence from sports icons or athletes as role models is still doubtful (Donahue, 2002; Solway, 1994).

Hypotheses

This study was conducted to determine the relationship of two types of role models (i.e., parents and celebrity) on young adults purchase intentions and behaviors. Thus, the following hypotheses were tested:

H₁: Role models will positively influence young adults purchase intention

H₂: Role models will positively influence young adults purchase behavior

H₃: Parents (direct role model) are more influential on young adults purchase intentions and behavior as compared to celebrities.

Methodology

Undergraduates from a public university in Sarawak were used in this study. Students were used as respondents because they represent homogeneity and represent young adults segment (Blackwell and Mitchell, 2003). Sampling was done by convenience, using the snowball technique. A questionnaire was designed partially based on the previous study by Bush and Martin (2000) which consisted of four sections. The first section asked for the demographics of the respondents. The second and the fourth section was on role models influence on young adults purchase intentions and behaviors. The third section consisted of four simple mathematical questions, computed to avoid the occurrence of order bias due to the usage of the same questions applied in section two and four (Aaker, Brumaugh, and Grier, 2000).

The role model influence was measured using five-item scales on a 7-point Likert scale (Bush and Martin, 2000). Each respondent completed two role model scales, one for his parents and another for his favorite celebrity. Purchase intention was measured using four items on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 relates to totally disagree while 7 relates to totally agree (Bush and Martin, 2000). Purchase behavior was measured using a single item question (Bush and Martin, 2000). The details of item used are listed in Appendix A. Data was analyzed using Means and Simple Linear Regression.

Findings

250 questionnaires were distributed and 237 sets were usable as 13 sets were incomplete. The response rate of 94.8% is good (Malhotra, 2007). The scales for role model influence and purchase intention were factor analyzed to establish that the scales meets the criteria of being uni-dimensional, indicating that the measurement items are capturing the same construct. The overall KMO for role model scale was 0.907, Bartlett's test was significant (Chi Square=2547.25, df 10 $p<0.001$) and Cronbach alpha was slightly above 0.95 that is considered excellent in social science research. The overall KMO for purchase intention scale was 0.752, Bartlett's test was significant (Chi Square=758.53, df 6 $p<0.001$) and Cronbach alpha was slightly above 0.834 that is considered good in social science research (Appendix B). Respondents' demographic are depicted in Table 1. The individual means and standard deviation values for role models influence, purchase intentions and purchase behaviors of parents and celebrities are depicted in Table 2.

Table 1: Respondents' demographics

Demographic		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	55	23.2
	Female	182	76.8
Year of Study at university	1	92	38.8
	2	79	33.3
	3	66	27.8
Faculty	Social Science	31	13.1
	Applied and Creative Art	29	12.2
	Computer Science and Information Technology	18	7.6
	Economic and Business	42	17.7
	Engineering	22	9.3
	Cognitive Science and Human Development	55	23.2
	Resource Science and Technology	40	16.9
Age	19	22	9.3
	20	50	21.1
	21	70	29.5
	22	40	16.9
	23	42	17.7
	24	11	4.6
	25	2	0.8

Demographic		Frequency	Percentage
State of Origin	Johor	7	3.0
	Kelantan	13	5.5
	Kedah	4	1.7
	Kuala Lumpur	6	2.9
	Melaka	2	0.8
	Negeri Sembilan	2	0.8
	Pahang	9	3.8
	Penang	9	3.8
	Perak	8	3.4
	Perlis	1	0.4
	Selangor	10	4.2
	Terengganu	4	1.7
	Sabah	16	6.8
	Sarawak	145	61.2

Table 2: Means by role models

Scale	Items	Role Models			
		Parents		Celebrities	
		Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
RMI	Provides a good model for me to follow	5.48	1.60	3.99	1.56
	Leads by example	5.29	1.50	4.02	1.56
	Sets a positive example for others to follow	5.44	1.46	4.12	1.52
	Exhibits the kind of work ethic and behavior that I try to imitate	5.17	1.35	4.07	1.51
	Acts as a role model for me	5.38	1.50	3.93	1.59
PI	Influence me to buy fewer products from certain companies	4.25	1.58	3.36	1.52
	Influence me to take some of my purchases to other businesses that offers better price	4.41	1.57	3.55	1.61
	Influence me to continue to do business with certain companies even if it increases its prices	3.60	1.42	3.26	1.48
	Influence me to pay more for products at one business even though I could buy them cheaper elsewhere	3.37	1.59	3.22	1.52
PB	Influence me on buying certain brands	3.85	1.56	3.61	1.61

RMI= role model influence, PI = purchase intention, PB = purchase behavior

Table 2 provides the item wise mean score for model influence and purchase intention and behavior scales. Two things become obvious by looking at the mean scores. First, the model influence scale has higher mean values as compared to purchase intention and behavior scale. This might reflect that despite admiring parents and celebrities as role models the younger generation is less influenced by them when it comes to purchase intention and buying behavior. Nevertheless by examining individual items of purchase intention and behavior, the young adults seem overwhelmingly agree with their parents as role model when the advice is bounded with price rationality.

Second, the mean score values of each item is higher for parents as compared to celebrities. Nevertheless the mean difference is greater for role model scale as compared to purchase intention and behavior scale.

The result of hypothesis 1 is presented in Table 3. Interestingly both types of role models direct (parents) and vicarious (celebrities) show significant effect on young adults purchasing intention ($P < .001$). However the standardized beta coefficient was much higher for vicarious role model (.630) as compared to direct role models (.211). Nevertheless the results confirm that the role models have significant effect on young adults purchase intention.

Table 3: Individual regression analysis: role model influence and young consumer purchase intention

Role model	Adjusted R^2 for model	Standardized beta coefficient	t-value	Significance
Parents	.041	.211	3.311	.001
Favorite Celebrities	.397	.630	12.448	.000

The results of hypothesis 2 are presented in Table 4. Both types of role model had significant influence on young adults purchasing behavior at 95% confidence level. Although we can see that the standardized beta coefficient for celebrity's role model (.548) was much higher as compared to parents (.176) as role model.

Table 4: Individual regression analysis: role model influence and young consumer purchase behavior

Role model	Adjusted R^2 for model	Standardized beta coefficient	t-value	Significance
Parents	.027	.176	2.741	.007
Favorite Celebrities	.298	.548	10.049	.000

Hypothesis 3 proposed that parents will have more influence as compared to celebrities on purchasing intention and behavior of young adults. However this was rejected and results were actually in opposite direction as shown in Table 3 and 4. For role model influence on purchase intention the results were significant (at 95% confidence interval) for both type of role models, but if we examine standardized beta coefficient, it shows that celebrities have much higher degree of influence on adolescent purchasing intention as compared to their parents. Same is the case for role model influence on purchasing behavior. The standardized beta coefficient was much high for celebrities as compared to the parents as role model.

Discussion

How young consumers are influenced by role models remains an important area in marketing researchers of western societies. However their findings could not be validated without fully or partially replicating the research in eastern context. This research initiates the process of

exploring and understanding the impact of role models on the younger society of eastern world.

The results reflect that both direct and vicarious role model influence the purchasing intentions and behavior of Malaysian youth. However, based on our findings we argue that vicarious role models play a more influential role than the direct role models on younger Malaysian in context of consumer behavior.

The result seems to be contradictory to the eastern values and culture deeply enriched in Malaysian society. Nevertheless, one could not ignore the effect of phenomenal economic growth that Malaysia has experienced in the last three decades. It appears that this industrialization and up to an extent westernization of Malaysian society somehow have affected the cultural values of younger consumers. However these changes are most probably limited to the consumption world only. It is possible that younger Malaysian consumers consider vicarious role models as more contemporary and thus more relevant to be adopted as consumption models as compared to their parents.

Although the findings suggest that parents and celebrities both are important role models for young consumers, it is clear that celebrities have greater influence on young consumer purchasing intention. Although parents and celebrities, have influence on young consumer purchasing intention and behavior, but it is also clear from the results that the celebrities have much greater influence as compared to parents. Therefore marketing managers targeting young consumers should consider using celebrities as models to communicate and endorse their products and brands.

The research has many limitations. First it is possible that a single item purchasing behavior measure might not be appropriate to fully capture the purchasing behavior of Malaysian youth. A multiple item purchasing behavior scale may yield different results. Secondly this research only explores the broader categories of role models. Further studies can explore the impact of specific role models like actors, sportsperson, singers and politician on Malaysian youth. Thirdly the role model influence might be subject to product categories. Further research can explore the influence of role model on different type of consumer products.

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Appendix A

Role Model Influence

My (insert role model) -----

1. Provides a good model for me to follow
2. Leads by example
3. Sets a positive example for others to follow
4. Exhibits the kind of work ethic and behavior that I try to imitate
5. Acts as a role model for me

Purchase intention

1. Influence me to buy fewer products from certain companies
2. Influence me to take some of my purchases to other businesses that offers better price
3. Influence me to continue to do business with certain companies even if it increases its prices
4. Influence me to pay more for products at one business even though I could buy them cheaper elsewhere

Purchase behavior

1. Influence me on buying certain brands

Appendix B

KMO and Bartlett's Test for Role model influence Scale

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		
		.907
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	2547.467
	df	10
	Sig.	.000

Exploratory Factor Analysis for Role model influence Scale

Variable	Component Role model influence
Provides a good model for me to follow	.934
Leads by Example	.929
Sets a positive example for others to follow	.925
Exhibits the kind of work ethic and behavior that I try to imitate	.895
Acts as a role model for me	.932

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 a 1 components extracted.

KMO and Bartlett's Test for Purchase intention Scale

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.752
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	758.730
	df	6
	Sig.	.000

Exploratory Factor Analysis for Purchase Intention Scale

Variable	Component Purchase intention
opinion influence me to buy fewer products from certain companies	.812
opinion influence me to take some of my purchases to other businesses that offers better price	.819
opinion influence me to continue to do business with certain companies even if it increases its prices	.850
opinion influence me to pay more for products at one business even though I could buy them cheaper elsewhere	.792

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 a 1 components extracted.