

Gender- and Ethnic-Subcultural Influences on Product Symbolism

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ABSTRACT

Interest in the sociological aspects of consumption has spurred a number of marketing researchers to examine more closely the phenomenon of product symbolism. This study attempts to understand the determinants of product symbolism by positing significant influences of ethnic and gender subcultures. In this study product symbolism refers to the conventional meaning of a product in the form of consumers' ascriptions of characteristics of a hypothetical user or owner of the product. Survey results among a sample of males and females of Malay and Chinese ethnic groups in Malaysia indicate a significant gender-subcultural influence but an insignificant ethnic-subcultural influence.

ABSTRAK

Peningkatan minat pengkaji-pengkaji pemasaran dalam sosiologi penggunaan telah mendorong beberapa penyelidikan mengenai simbolisme keluaran. Kajian ini telah menggorak langkah untuk memahami tentang fenomena tersebut dengan menguji keertian pengaruh sub-budaya etnik dan jantina. Dalam kajian ini simbolisme keluaran merujuk kepada maksud lazim keluaran yang dipegang oleh pengguna dalam bentuk ciri-ciri tertentu si pemilik atau si pengguna sesuatu keluaran. Hasil kajian, berdasarkan kepada satu sampel yang terdiri dari responden lelaki dan perempuan dari keturunan Melayu dan China di Malaysia, telah mendapati pengaruh bererti bagi sub-budaya jantina tetapi pengaruh tidak bererti bagi sub-budaya etnik.

INTRODUCTION

The perspective that products serve more than a utilitarian function has long been of interest to marketers. Levy (1959) suggests that consumer purchases goods not only for what they can do but also for what they mean. The symbolic or communicative properties of products have been the main focus of several conceptual (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967; Hirschman 1980; Holman 1981; Levy 1959; Mick 1986; Sirgy 1982; Solomon 1983) and empirical (Belk 1978; Belk 1980; Belk 1981; Belk, Bahn, & Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer,

& Bahn 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll 1984; Holman 1980; Midgley 1983) studies among marketing scholars. Interest in product symbolism has heightened in the 1980's because of the increasing need to understand the sociology of consumption. Further, other paradigms on consumption behavior have failed to provide explanation for some consumption patterns.

Product symbolism is an important phenomenon in marketing. New insights have been generated as a result of distinguishing between symbolic and nonsymbolic products. For example, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) have suggested the inclusion of the experiential view to consumer behavior to supplement the information processing approach in order to understand the symbolic meanings of consumption. Holbrook (1982) postulates that a symbolic unit tends to result in a presentational processing (simultaneous apprehension of a whole pattern) while a significate or a nonsymbolic unit results in a discursive processing (elements are dealt with separately and sequentially over time). Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) differentiate the requirement for brand concept management by whether the product is functional, symbolic, or experiential. Additionally, Midgley (1983) found support for a different pattern of interpersonal information seeking for the purchase of a symbolic product from a functional product. The importance of product symbolism has also been recognized by some authors of the newer texts in marketing (for example, Peter & Olson 1987).

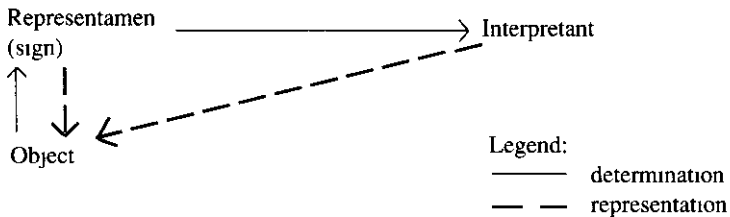
Although past investigators on product symbolism have contributed a great deal to marketing knowledge on product meanings, this research stream is relatively new with many questions remaining to be answered. One such question that has not been fully examined is the influence of gender and ethnicity on product symbolism. Belk, Mayer, and Bahn (1982) and Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) have found males to form stronger stereotypes than females for automobiles and houses but have not examined the extent of differences in product meanings due to gender. Similarly, previous studies have not explicitly studied differences in meaning ascriptions resulting from ethnicity.

The objective of this paper is to examine gender-and ethnic- subcultural influences on product symbolism. This paper posits the existence of differences in product meanings that are attributable to gender and ethnic differences. The next section of this paper describes the conceptualization of product symbolism and the theoretical bases for selecting the two antecedent variables.

CONCEPTUAL BACK GROUND

This study's conceptualization of product symbolism draws a great deal from the literature on semiotics. An especially important framework is Peirce's semiotic triad. According to Parmentier (1985), the triad consists of relationships

between object, representamen (sign), and interpretant as depicted in Figure 1. A sign is an expressive form which can be a word, a physical object, or an internal mental representation that functions as a means of communication and conveys meaning from one cognitive act to another. The object of the sign refers to what the expressive form stands for or denotes. The interpretant is a resulting mental effect by some interpreter. It represents not only an interpretation but also some interpreter's reaction to the sign-object relations (Mick 1986).



Source: Parmentier (1985)

FIGURE 1. Peirce's semiotic triad

Signs are distinguished in terms of their different relations with objects. According to Mertz (1985, p.3), a sign can refer to an object by reason of a physical resemblance (icon), contextual reference between sign and object (index), or by reason of a conventional understanding that allows sign and object to be interpreted as related (symbol). An example of an icon is a portrait of an individual. The portrait represents the living and breathing individual because of the similarity of its characteristics to the individual. A sign that functions as an icon can be understood by an interpreter apart from its object. An index, on the other hand, cannot be comprehended apart from the object or the context in which it occurs. For example, if one were to point a finger at a distant object, an interpreter will not understand the designated meaning to the pointed finger (the specific reference to an object) unless he or she looks in the specific direction.

A symbol differs from either an icon or an index because it relates to its object in an entirely conventional manner (Mick 1986). When a product is said to function as a symbol, it conjures up a specific meaning other than the product's physical attributes. For example, Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) found that sixth graders tended to associate a grandfather with the ownership of a Chevrolet Caprice two-door coupe. Similarly, Holman (1980) found certain clothing ensembles to communicate femininity and sophistication about their owners. Thus, a symbol can be defined as a sign that relates to its object not on the basis of context nor on physical resemblance but rather on the basis of conventional understanding.

Summarizing the semiotics perspective, the degree of symbolism in a product is determined by the meaning and reaction of an interpreter. That is, a product symbol influences an interpretant in Peirce's semiotic triad since an interpretant conveys as interpreter's meaning and reaction based on perceptions of symbol-object relations. Product symbolism, then, captures the conventional meaning of a product in the form of consumers' ascriptions of characteristics of a hypothetical user or owner of the product. This definition is not unique to this study but is consistent with previous investigations on product symbolism (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Bahn 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll 1984; Holman 1980).

GENDER-AND ETHNIC-SUBCULTURAL INFLUENCES ON PRODUCT SYMBOLISM

An imperative for studying product symbolism is the understanding of the social arena in which conventional symbols develop. Both the semiotic and symbolic interactionism perspectives recognize the importance of people, social institutions, and culture in fostering the development of symbols (Blumer 1967; Mertz 1985; Mick 1986; Solomon 1983). For example, Mick (1986:199) acknowledges this point when he states:

a point-of-purchase display for wine depicting a young couple lounging by a fireplace may represent "the good life" or decadence, love or licentiousness, depending on the codes of the interpreter's background.

Symbols acquire such meanings when agreement exists between at least two individuals on what the objects connote. Initially, the correspondence between object and meaning may be vague but through human interaction over time the correspondence will become more pronounced (Stryker 1967).

If a product functions as a symbol, it should be identified by a group or social organization with which the individual is associated and should communicate similar meaning to all within the group (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967; Solomon 1983). The impact of social organization (such as culture, subculture, social system, or families) on product symbolism can be explained from the standpoint of symbolic interaction. According to Blumer (1967), social organization serves as a framework inside which individuals develop and execute their actions. Social organization is important to the extent that it shapes situations in which people act and the extent that it supplies sets of symbols that people use in interpreting their situations.

Product symbols can emerge at various levels of social organization. An object such as a family heirloom can have substantial significance to a family unit but possess no momentous value to others outside the unit. On the other hand, automobiles have been found in many studies (Belk, Bahn & Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Bahn 1982; Munson & Spivey 1980) to function as a more generalized symbol.

In this study, the level of social organization being examined is that of a subculture. A subculture, according to Assael (1987), consists of individuals with homogeneous values and customs that distinguish them from society as a whole. Ethnic, age, gender, or geographic groupings may be subcultures because of differences in norms, beliefs, and behavior (Assael 1987; Hirschman 1982; Peter & Olson 1987). This paper focuses on gender-and ethnic-subcultural influences on product symbolism.

Several of the previous studies have found gender to influence the consistency of product meaning ascriptions (Belk 1978; Belk, Bahn, & Mayer 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Bahn 1982; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll 1984). Depending on the products being examined, males were sometimes found to make more consistent consumption-based inferences than females, while at other times females were found to be more sensitive to consumption cues. For automobiles and houses, Belk, Mayer, and Bahn (1982) and Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) found males to form stronger stereotypes than females. However, for items such as man's wallet, woman's leather shoulder bag, football tickets, and lipstick, Belk (1978) found females to form a more consistent impression than males. He reported higher average proportions of explained variance in eighteen different demographic and adjectival scales for female subjects (for example, 0.47 versus 0.38) than for males. However, in another study Belk, Bahn, & Mayer (1982) reported very high correlations (0.90 and above) between male and females ascriptions indicating that gender effect size is likely small. There is also a tendency for an object to be most fully stereotyped by the gender most likely to own the object (Belk, Mayer & Driscoll 1984).

An individual's identification with a specific ethnic group implicitly recognizes that the nuances of the group influence his values, attitudes, and behaviours. It is a recognition that the individual shares something in common with other members of the group and one of those things can be his or her perceptions of products and their owners or users. That differences exist in consumption patterns between ethnic subcultures have been quite well established in the marketing literature (Hirschman 1983; Reilly & Wallendorf 1987). For example, consumption of clothing & food items may be expressive of a particular characteristic of the ethnic group. High consumption of rice, for instance, may typify an Asian heritage while a high consumption of tortillas may be typical of Mexican-Americans. As such, the meaning attributed to a product may differ by ethnicity possibly because of the differences in product centrality and usage situation in the different groups.

Hypotheses

The preceding discussion implies two specific hypotheses to be tested in this paper. These hypotheses are:

H1: An individual's gender will influence his or her ascription of product meanings.

H2: An individual's ethnicity will influence his or her ascription of product meanings.

The next section will describe the methodology used to verify the hypotheses.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted in several residential areas in the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, and the states of Selangor and Negri Sembilan. Utilising a non-probabilistic sampling procedure, only one adult subject (above the age of 17) per household was selected depending on who was available at the time of the interview. When several household members were available, respondent selection was based on the necessity to equate between the number of male and female subjects. Only Malay and Chinese households were canvassed for the purpose of this study.

Twelve student interviewers from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia were hired to collect the data. They were selected on the bases of their ethnicity and proficiencies in Malay, English, and/or Chinese languages. A structured bilingual questionnaire (Malay and English) was utilised in the interview. The survey resulted in a total of 203 interviews being conducted. Of the total number of subjects, eighty one are Malays and one hundred and twenty two are Chinese.

CONCEPT OPERATIONALIZATION

Product symbolism was measured by asking respondents to provide general impressions of someone wearing a specific branded product. Levi Strauss jeans was selected because previous studies have found clothing in general and jeans in particular to convey symbolic meanings about user characteristic (Belk 1980; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll 1984; Holman 1980). Further, jeans appear to meet the requisites for a symbolic product. They are conspicuous, available in wide variety, are relatively high in cost in Malaysia. From the pretest, the brand Levi Strauss resulted in variations in respondents' ascriptions of product meanings.

In this study, product symbolism was measured by asking respondents the question, "What general impression do you have of someone wearing Levi jeans? Would you say he or she is ___?" Twenty descriptors such as sophisticated, successful, and wealthy were provided as fillers to the above question. For each descriptor, the respondent would indicate the extent of his or her agreement with the descriptor by providing a number from 1 to 9, where 1 would indicate very strong disagreement with the descriptor and 9 as very strong agreement

with it. This form of measurement is very similar to the one used by Belk (1980).

Ethnicity was measured by the method prescribed by Cohen (1978). He suggests that self-labeling is the only valid indicator of ethnicity because it represents internal beliefs of an individual of his or her affiliation with the ethnic group. By allowing individuals to identify their own cultural identity, there is less bias involved possibly from preconceived perceptions of the researcher who can be tainted by ethnocentrism. Reported ethnicity captures the subjective facet of ethnicity by allowing the individual to relate to his sense of identity and feelings of solidarity or "peoplehood" (Berry 1979). Additionally, it avoids the problem of defining ethnicity based purely on biological descent.

DATA ANALYSIS

Because of the multi-item measure of product symbolism and the discrete measures for the independent variables, a MANOVA analysis was utilised for testing of the hypotheses. MANOVA results in the best linear combination of all measurement items for product symbolism and provides an assessment of the main effects of gender and ethnicity as well as the interaction effect between gender and ethnicity. Before the MANOVA analysis, a reliability analysis using the internal consistency approach was performed on the items for product symbolism to ensure acceptability of the measure.

RESULTS

Findings of this study will be discussed in three separate parts. The first part discusses sample characteristics on variables such as gender, age, marital status and income. The second part reports findings on the reliability analysis while the final part provides empirical evidence for the test of hypotheses.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

As stated earlier, the survey resulted in 203 interviews in which 81 respondents are Malays and 122 are Chinese. Of the eighty one Malays, 56.8% are males. Their mean age is 26.5 years. Among Malay respondents 61.7% are single, 35.8% married, and the remaining widowed or divorced. About 60% of them have annual household income of \$20,000 or less.

Among Chinese respondents, 49.2% are males. Their mean age is 29.6 years. Composition of marital status among Chinese is very similar to the Malays, i.e. 60.7% are single, 37.7% married, and the remaining are divorced. About 55% of them have annual household income of \$20,000 or less.

Although there are some differences in characteristics of Malay and Chinese samples, they are not too different on these characteristics as to create problems for the purpose of intergroup comparison.

SCALE RELIABILITY

The twenty-item scale for product symbolism yields a reliability coefficient of 0.85 as measured by Cronbach's alpha. This value far exceeds the standard set by Nunnally (1978) of 0.70 for most basic research and thus implies a more than acceptable level of consistency for the measure. It is important to meet the reliability requirement because it constitutes a necessary though insufficient condition for validity.

Table 1 provides several statistics for each item in the scale. As evident from the table, each item displays a relatively high squared multiple correlation indicating a consistent contribution of each item to the total score. The twenty-item scale has a mean of 79.65 with a standard deviation of 21.73 implying a sufficient variability within the scale.

TABLE 1. Some statistics for the scale of product symbolism

Item	Mean	Std.Dev	Item-Total Corr
Sophisticated	3.801	2.072	0.296
Successful	3.265	1.887	0.541
Wealthy	2.984	1.758	0.465
Someone who works hard for his money	3.898	2.214	0.496
Someone who likes to show off his/her wealth	3.179	1.882	0.362
Happy	3.944	2.158	0.545
Westernized	5.413	2.338	0.398
Likeable	4.240	2.193	0.563
Fashionable	5.245	2.260	0.473
Someone who has forgotten his/her traditional values	3.270	2.182	0.161
Someone who is mean	2.689	1.812	0.434
A snob	2.607	1.634	0.374
Religious	2.648	1.830	0.313
Traditional oriented	2.719	1.721	0.429
Adventurous	4.959	2.383	0.580
Impulsive	3.561	2.102	0.407
Carefree	4.725	2.559	0.474
Exciting	5.056	2.285	0.575
Active	6.015	2.197	0.486
Masculine	5.429	2.388	0.435

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

Results from MANOVA analysis is shown in Table 2. A factorial design was utilised to check the existence of an interaction effect besides the main effects of gender and ethnicity. With an insignificant interaction effect, interpretation of the findings is simpler because the effect of one independent variable does not depend on the level of another independent variable. A p value of less than 0.05 is utilised for the tests of hypotheses.

As evident from Table 2, the interaction between gender and ethnicity is insignificant because the value of p exceeds 0.05. As such, the ensuing discussion will focus on results for main effects.

H1 postulates that an individual's gender will influence his or her ascription of product meanings. To test this hypothesis, Pillais' Criterion is utilised for evaluating significance of the multivariate F because of unequal sample sizes between groups (Tabachnick and Fidell 1983). From Table 2, the multivariate F test for Pillais' Criterion yields a significant gender main effect on product symbolism. The result shows that males and females tend to differ in their ascriptions of product meanings as a whole over the twenty-item measure of product symbolism. However, univariate test of significance on each item indicates insignificant values of F for all items with the exception of the item on wealth. Males tend to ascribe a more negative meaning than females on this dimension. The effect of gender on product symbolism as measured by one minus lambda is 0.18 signifying that 18% of the variation in product meaning ascriptions can be attributed to gender.

H2 postulates that an individual's ethnicity will influence his or her ascription of product meanings. The multivariate F test for Pillais' Criterion is insignificant at p value of 0.152. As a result, H2 has to be rejected because this study fails to establish that ethnicity creates differences in ascribed product meanings. Univariate F tests on each item of product symbolism yield significant differences on two items, adventuresomeness and impulsiveness. Chinese perceived Levi jeans users as more adventurous than Malays. On the trait impulsiveness, Malays perceived Levi jeans users as less impulsive than Chinese. Although there are two significant differences in the univariate tests, these differences are not sufficient to create distinctive meanings by ethnicity when product symbolism is treated in a multivariate form.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the importance of social organization in explaining differences in ascribed product meanings is substantiated for gender subcultural but not for ethnic subculture. Overall, males and females tended to differ in the meanings they ascribed to Levi jeans. Gender subculture, as such, has created a framework inside which individuals form their perceptions based on product consumption

TABLE 2. Results of MANOVA analysis

Effect	MV measure	Item	UV F	p
Gender*Ethnicity	1. 0.161			0.053
	2. 0.839			0.053
Gender	1. 0.179			0.020
	2. 0.821			0.020
		1	3.245	0.073
		2	1.101	0.295
		3	10.521	0.001
		4	0.084	0.722
		5	0.881	0.349
		6	0.300	0.584
		7	2.407	0.123
		8	0.217	0.642
		9	0.906	0.343
		10	0.580	0.447
		11	0.436	0.510
		12	1.887	0.171
		13	0.294	0.588
		14	0.012	0.913
		15	2.641	0.106
		16	0.500	0.480
		17	0.146	0.703
		18	0.115	0.735
		19	1.288	0.258
		20	0.014	0.906
Ethnicity	1. 0.138			0.152
	2. 0.862			0.152
		1	2.948	0.088
		2	1.543	0.216
		3	0.074	0.786
		4	0.010	0.921
		5	2.565	0.111
		6	0.074	0.786
		7	1.543	0.216
		8	1.322	0.252
		9	0.788	0.376
		10	0.314	0.576
		11	0.016	0.900
		12	0.175	0.676
		13	0.440	0.508
		14	0.246	0.621
		15	4.941	0.027
		16	8.929	0.003
		17	2.418	0.122
		18	0.012	0.913
		19	0.609	0.436
		20	1.046	0.308

Note: MV measure 1 is by Pillais' Criterion and 2 is by Wilks' lambda.

or usage. The meaning to a product symbol is therefore dependent on whether the interpreter is a male or a female. This finding is not surprising because it is consistent with that of Belk (1978), and Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll (1984).

The influence of ethnic subculture on product symbolism has been found to be insignificant. Ascribed product meanings between Malays and Chinese do not differ sufficiently as to create distinctive meanings for the Levi jeans users. This finding is surprising because the theoretical perspectives on semiotic and symbolic interactionism strongly suggest the importance of social framework in the development of symbols. However, the influence of ethnic subculture could be small that this study fails to detect its presence due to the small sample size. Although the multivariate test fails to distinguished patterns of ascribed product meanings between the ethnic groups, some differences appear to exist from the univariate tests. However, the interpretation is different because univariate tests examine the influence of ethnicity on each item in isolation from other items.

It should be noted that the non-probabilistic sampling procedure used in the study places a limitation on the generalizability of the findings. Future research might attempt to corroborate this study findings by obtaining a representative sample of Malay and Chinese subjects. Future work might also concentrate on the other individual characteristics and product influences that moderate or mediate the relationships investigated in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

The study findings suggest that consumers tended to ascribe meanings to the tested product symbol on the basis of their gender identification. Overall, distinct product meanings have been identified between male and female responses on twenty descriptors utilised to measure product symbolism. However, the importance of ethnic subculture in influencing product symbolism is not substantiated.

In general, results of this study provide support for the importance of looking at the sociology of consumption. According to this paradigm, consumers tend to generate meanings from experiences with the situation or context of product usage. This study has contributed to the research stream by looking at the importance of gender and ethnic identification in influencing patterns of ascribed product meanings and therefore has established to some extent the significance of social organization in development of product symbols.

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