The Attributes of Commonly Used Cultural Artefacts and their Relations to Diverse Cultural Practices

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Abstract

Cultural artefacts are the identity of a culture and are important sources for creating novel design images. Malaysian design professionals face difficulties in creating designs that are novel and locally preferred. This is due to the plural and the autonomous cultural systems in Malaysia. As such this study aims to identify the commonly used cultural artefacts and the reason for their preferences. The nominal group technique (NGT) was used in this study to identify the commonly used cultural artefacts. NGT is a qualitative data collection technique based on discussions among various categories of stakeholders and multi-ethnic group members. The results from this study revealed the existence of 23 commonly used cultural artefacts and 18 attributes of these cultural, based on its appropriate function, convenient to use, simple structure, aesthetically pleasing and safe attributes. The findings in this study can help designers and design stakeholders to identify common cultural artefacts which can be their point of reference in creating multi-ethnically preferred design images.

Keywords: *Culture, Cultural Artefact, Common Cultural Artefact, Cultural Attributes*

1. Introduction

Culture is not static. It gradually undergoes adaptations and merges with other cultures and portrays ways of life (Ahmad, 2011; Xue, 2008). As culture is integrated in our daily lives, it helps to pave the ways for interactions, routines and norms which influence our behavior (Schein, 2004). Malaysia has been exposed to the influx of various cultures and cultural practices. It has been a migration hub for immigrants from China, India and Middle East countries and hence celebrates diverse cultural practices. However, certain level of similarities in cultural preferences exist due to common cultural practices from the colonial times (Rizal, 2010). Cultural diversity becomes a challenge in creating a national culture (Abidin, Othman, Shamsuddin, Samsudin, & Hassan, 2015; Ani, Mohamed, & Rahman, 2012).

Culture also plays an important role in the world of designs and it often inter-relates with aesthetics (Bennett, 2015; Spencer-oatey, 2012). Culture centered designs influence the extent of the use of products and perceptions of their users (Hsu, Lin & Lin, 2012). Cultural artefacts can project the identity of a culture. It has become an important idea in creating images with novel designs (Hauf, 2015). For example articles in folk-art on horses have become an inspiration in the design of the famous Hitsuishijlma Bridge (Ohta, Takahashi, & Yamane, 1987). In Malaysian, due to the diversity in cultural practices, it is difficult to create novel designs that are preferred in a multi-ethnic society based on culture alone (Abidin et al., 2015). This leads to the question of whether it is possible to identify the commonly used cultural artefacts and the attributes of these cultural artefacts as revealed by the multi ethnic groups.

2. Method

This study attempts to identify commonly used cultural artefacts and their attributes among Malays, Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia. Although NGT and Delphi techniques are consensus methods used in research that are directed at problem-solving, idea-generation, or determining priorities, NGT is applied in the current study. It is because the Delphi technique is commonly used to develop guidelines, but the NGT technique has been used to explore the consumer and stakeholder views (Delbecq, A. L. Van de Ven, A. H., Gustafson, 1975; McMillan, King, & Tully, 2016). Thus data was collected using the NGT method that was recognized as a valid process of achival data collection (Potter, 2004; Prabowo, 2014). The NGT provides an opportunity to achieve a substantial amount of data in a reasonably short time by putting forward a single research question (Hofstede, 2011; Potter, 2004; Prabowo, 2014). The NGT method is recognized as an useful research method and valid data collection process in identifying commonly used cultural artefacts and their attributes. However the participants in the NGT method should have some basic knowledge of the subject matter, or at least 5 years of experience or exposure in a related research area (Prabowo, 2014).

This study was conducted with 6 participants who were selected through the snowball or network sampling method (Merriam, 2016). Among the participants, two were designers, two were historians, and the last two were experts in cultural. The participants had at least 5 years of working experience in the field of either design, history or culture. They were Malaysians namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. The discussions were conducted at the University of Malaya library, Kuala Lumpur. There were two main activities in the research, as recommended by Potter (2004):

2.1. Activity 1:

The first activity was to select artefacts related to food. The participants were asked on the commonly used food related cultural artefacts by the major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. The participants were asked to answer the questions for activity 1 based on their experiences.

2.2. Activity 2:

The participants were asked for their opinions on the attributes of the commonly used food related cultural artefacts by the major ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. Activities 1 and 2 were guided by open ended questions. Activities 1 and 2 were conducted by following the steps shown in the Figure 1.0.
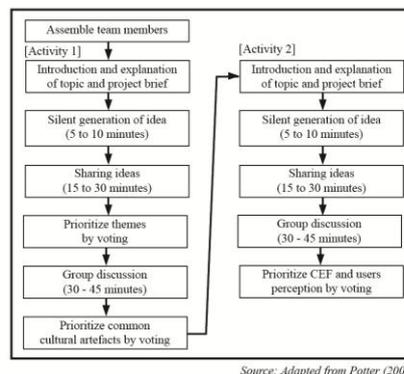
Source: Adapted from Potter (2004)

Fig 1. Flow of Nominal Group Technique

However to perform activity 2, the participants should be equipped with clear understanding of the attributes of the cultural explanatory factors and users' perceptions. The information provided should be based on the ideas of experts on the area of interest (Arokiasamy, Abdullah, & Ismail, 2014). Thus, to ensure a common understanding among the participants about the explanatory factors and users' perceptions, a brief explanation on the subject matter was given to the participants before the session began.

3. Result: Activity 1

The participants in this study listed the names of 40 cultural artefacts.

Table 1: Mean ranking of commonly used cultural artefacts

Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Artefacts	Total Vote	Mean Ranking
Mortar Set	9	**1.50**	Basket	65	**10.8**	Chicken Chop	100	**16.7**
Coconut Grater	10	**1.67**	Tiffin Carrier	65	**10.8**	Wooden Bushel	104	**17.3**
Wok	17	**2.83**	Earthenware Pitcher	75	**12.5**	Rice Winnow	107	**17.8**
Plate	38	**6.33**	Rice Grinder	79	**13.1**	Steamer	107	**17.8**
Food Cover	40	**6.67**	Coconut Milk Filter	80	**13.3**	Wooden Tray	115	**19.1**
Ceramic Bowl	43	**7.16**	Jug	85	**14.1**	Betel Leaf Box	115	**19.1**
Drinking Set	45	**7.5**	Putu Mold	88	**14.6**	Spatula	125	**20.8**
Large Tray (Talam)	47	**7.83**	Wooden Mortar	95	**15.8**			

Items rated on a scale of 1 to 23 (1=most common to 23= least common

Through filtering, names of repeated artefacts were omitted, leaving only 23 artefacts that were used commonly. These 23 artefacts were commonly used by the three major ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese and Indians. The mortar set was accepted as the most common artefact and the mean score was 1.50, as shown in Table 1.0. It was universally used by human beings, and was also used among Malaysians without the boundary of ethnicity.

3.1. Activity 2

At the beginning of this activity, the researcher projected the image of the mortar set on the LCD screen. It was to ensure the participants had similar understanding and imagination about the mortar set. 15 flip cards were distributed to each participant and the participants were asked to write the attributes of the mortar set. Attributes were finalized by following the steps shown in the Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Ranking of Attributes

Attributes	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Attributes	Total Vote	Mean Ranking	Attributes	Total Vote	Mean Ranking
Easy to use	27	**4.50**	Pleasure of owning	34	**5.60**	Good finishing	85	**14.1**
Functionally appropriate	27	**4.50**	Novel design	35	**5.83**	Easy to match surroundings	87	**14.5**
Pleasing aesthetic	27	**4.50**	Compact	73	**12.1**	Create meaning	89	**14.8**
Understandable structure	27	**4.50**	Useful Design	75	**12.5**	Chicken chop	90	**15.0**
Feeling of safety	27	**4.50**	Good proportion	78	**13.0**	Ancestor's creativity	100	**16.6**
Motivating design	33	**5.50**	Comfortable artefacts	79	**13.1**			

Items rated on a scale of 1 to 18 (1=most common to 18= least common

The participants listed a total of 50 attributes which were classified as the reasons for the commonly used cultural artefacts. However, almost half of the attributes were repeated and were found to be irrelevant and hence were removed from the list with the agreement of the participants. After the filtering process, 18 attributes remained as commonly used cultural artefacts, as shown in Table 2.0. The mean score for five attributes; easy to use, appropriate function, understandable structure or structurally sound, safe and pleasing aesthetics was 4.50. Hence these five attributes were considered as the most related to the commonly used cultural artefacts among Malays, Chinese and Indians.

4. Discussion

The finding showed that the commonly used cultural artefacts were divided into five groups namely artefacts that were used in the preparation for cooking, cooking, serving, consuming and artefacts used after having meals as at Figure 1.
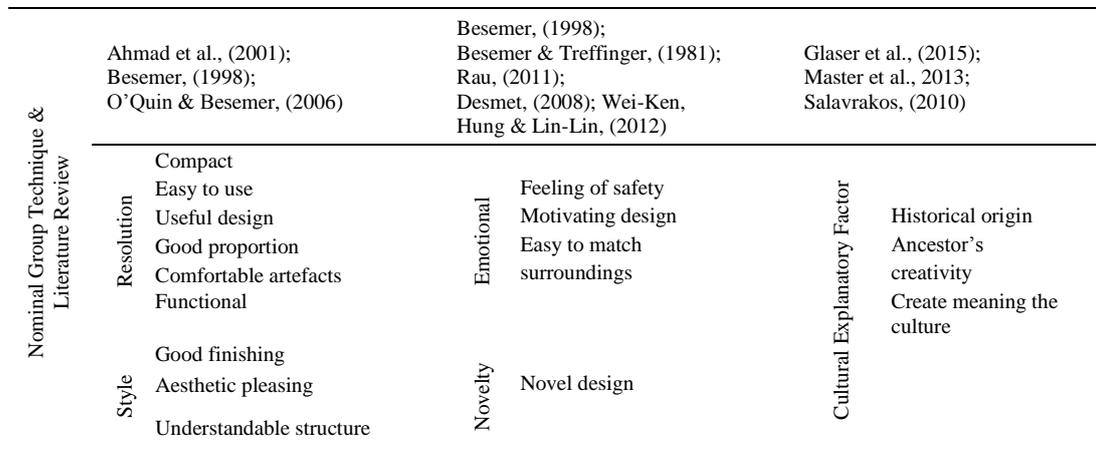

Figure 1: Attributes From NGT Discussion and Literature Review

The research study also highlighted strong relationship with common cultural practices among the Malays, Chinese and Indians in their preparation and consumption of food traditions. Parallel to this scholars believe that a good form of integration and interaction among the ethnic groups namely Malays, Chinese and Indians for centuries, resulted in their preferences to try food other than their own (Radzi, Murad, & Bakar, 2009). There were various attributes listed in the NGT discussion. These attributes could be grouped to create terms such as resolution, emotions, novel, style and cultural exploratory factors (Besemer, 1998; Salavrakos, 2010).

5. Conclusion

A culture evolves and results in the absorption of various cultures and customs (Demircan, 2005; Spencer-oatey, 2012). The culture in Malaysia is unique due to the borrowing, adaptation and acceptance of multi-cultural values (Ismail, Masron, & Ahmad, 2014). This study showed that common attributes do exist in the use of common cultural artefacts among the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. The author recognizes the importance of studying the common attributes among cultural artefacts to preserve the design and its values in the process of 'form giving'. If the common attributes are not preserved, their uniqueness will vanish over time with the fast changing practices in modern society (Ohta et al., 1987; Velu, Rahman, Raja, Sharizal, & Santhidran, 2015).

Acknowledgements

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