Nurturing Mother and Wife: Re-Examining the Concept of Lifestyle in the Context of Non-Western Consumer Culture.

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12518/gender/v08/GCB-08

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ABSTRACT
The concept of lifestyle and values has received much attention in the literature (e.g. Rokeach, 1973, Kahle, 1983 and Schwartz, 1994) but it can be argued that analysis of lifestyle from a non-western perspective is a much neglected area and existing studies in non-western cultures borrow lifestyle frameworks or typologies from the West (e.g. Tai and Tam, 1996, Tai and Tam, 1998), despite calls for lifestyle to be considered within a cultural framework (Holt, 1997; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, little work has been done on gender effects and lifestyle. This paper seeks to redress the balance, albeit in a small way, by arguing for exploration of the concept of lifestyle within a cultural context and presenting a pilot case study to illustrate why this cultural context and gender is so important.

INTRODUCTION
Research regarding social patterns of consumption and their connection with lifestyle has been the domain of interest from researchers from diverse disciplines ranging from sociologists (e.g. Veblen [1899] 1994; Bourdieu 1984) to market and consumer researchers (e.g. Holt 1997; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001). In marketing, social consumption patterns have received much attention because they serve as a foundation for market segmentation which is referred to as lifestyle/psychographic research (Ziff 1971; Wells 1975; Gunter and Furnham 1992; Vyncke 2002). However this particular approach has been criticized by researchers for not being able to successfully explicate the differences in consumption patterns, consequently alternative frameworks for conducting lifestyle research are offered (Holt 1995, 1997; Thompson and Troester 2002). As a result there has been a growing amount of research which uses alternative frameworks to analyze consumer consumption patterns and lifestyles (e.g. Thompson et.al 1990; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Thompson and Troester 2002).

Despite such developments, however, it can be argued that analysis of lifestyle from a non-western perspective is a much neglected area. Exploration of the extant literature shows that even though there were some lifestyle studies using the traditional frameworks in non-western countries, these studies were carried out borrowing lifestyle frameworks or typologies from the West (e.g. Tai and Tam 1996; Tam and Tai 1998). Further to this, the literature also reflects a need for research into the gendered nature of consumption phenomena and also a consumer research which will represent women fully and fairly, avoiding masculine ideologies and gender biases (e.g. Bristor
and Fischer, 1993; Woodruffe, 1996). However, developments in marketing and consumer research still frequently present works which are based on masculine ideologies and fail to represent women completely (Catterall et al. 2000). Consequently, for consumer research to contribute to more valuable and accurate knowledge, Bristor and Fischer (1993) assert that “the discipline must be highly sensitive to sex and gender including issues such as race, class, culture and sexual orientation, therefore it must support a plurality of approaches capable of capturing rich and complex consumption phenomena, as well as engage in ongoing and critical self-reflection” (p. 533). In a similar vein, there have been calls for marketers and consumer researchers to not only conduct their research for the marketer or business interests (Holbrook, 1987) but to place the ‘voice of the customer’ or to benefit the interest of the consumer from their research (Griffin and Hauser, 1993; Olander 1993).

Building on these gaps in the literature, the current research aims to contribute to the current body of knowledge by re-examining the concept of lifestyle in the context of non-western consumer culture through analysis of the lifestyle of women in Malaysia and their lived experience of consumption. In this paper, we present an overview of the literature on the concept of lifestyle and argue for the (re-)inclusion of cultural frameworks in understanding lifestyle; to this end we present an in depth case study of Malay women based on a phenomenological interview conducted from a feminist perspective (which at this stage breaks from the boundaries of a value-neutral approach) to illustrate and support our position. The longer term objective of the research, then, will be to construct a lifestyle typology from the consumption experience of Malaysian women in order to redress the balance somewhat between traditional western lifestyle concepts and alternative cultural frameworks.

**A FEMINIST APPROACH – THE ‘OTHER’ PERSPECTIVE**

In the context of exploring consumers’ lifestyle, a new framework or approach must be adopted for the resulting knowledge to lead to meaningful structures of lifestyle and generate real insights. Consequently, a feminist perspective can offer researchers alternative ways of doing research which embrace experiential aspects of consumption and free the researcher from the inadequacy of traditional approaches (Woodruffe, 1997).

In adopting this perspective however, the researcher will attempt to avoid a Western universalism of feminism as proposed by Karim (1995) in which she cautions researchers not to apply Western feminist perspectives when researching gender from non-Western culture in which she posits that ‘the assumption that one should begin with the premise of unequal power generating gender hierarchies is not necessarily relevant in non-Western civilizations in Southeast Asia, which derive theory of knowledge from concepts and values of bilateralism: the need to maintain social relationships through rules of complementarity and similarity rather than hierarchy and opposition, and the need to reduce imbalances in power through mutual responsibility and cooperation rather than oppression and force’ (p. 16). Nagata (1995) further extends this stance by emphasizing that ‘to avoid a brand of cultural hegemony in the form of Western scientific analysis there must be a niche for more than one kind of feminism, allowing for culturally appropriate interpretations, and informed by the views of the subjects themselves, thus
becoming the product of an interactive exercise’ (p. 102).

Accordingly a feminist perspective which is adopted will also contribute to methodological pluralism in consumer research within which Woodruffe (1996) succinctly explains that ‘...the researcher must be personally involved with the subject, must experience the subject, if humanly possible...and the research must be emancipatory in nature and must take in the individual’s perspective.’ (p. 333) As co-researchers, we represent two diverse voices; Western and non-Western. However, as women and feminists we approach our research from a unified perspective. Reflexively, we recognize how our role shapes and influences the nature of the research and, in particular, western and non-western interpretations of feminism and women’s roles and we believe this is an important dimension of our research.

MALAYSIAN WOMEN – CONSUMPTION AND LIFESTYLES

In order to examine the lifestyle of Malay women it is first useful to introduce a brief background of women consumers in Malaysia and further link it to the broader aspect of lifestyle research in the light of existing literature. Traditionally, women have been related to consumption through their role as caretakers in the family. Women were acknowledged as playing a prominent role in influencing the purchase on household goods. However, significant changes in women’s role and status in the economy and society have shown that women can no longer be seen as the secondary consumer to their male counterpart.

The contemporary situation in Malaysia is that the female market is increasing in terms of independence and spending power and hence attracts significantly more interest from marketers than previously. The 2000 Population Census indicates that half of Malaysia’s total population (49.1%) or 11.4 million of the total population were women. After close to fifty years of Independence, profound changes in women’s roles and status such as rising affluence and education levels have brought about changes in their consumption patterns and practices. Generally, purchasing power and the standard of living is higher and there is heightened consumerism and materialism. As social and structural changes affect women and their consumption patterns, it is anticipated they will also influence the lifestyle of women.

THE CONCEPT OF LIFESTYLE – A REVIEW

The subject of lifestyle has received widespread attention within the literature, with various approaches to the concept of lifestyle arising from different disciplines and research traditions. Ironically, one of the most common features of lifestyle in the literature is that there seems to be no clear consensus about the definition of the term ‘lifestyle’.

The usage of the concept of lifestyle emerged from the interest of sociology researchers to understand how consumption relates and reproduces social groups and institutions within societies (Holt, 1995). According to Trigg (2001, p. 110) there is evidence of the existence of the concept of ‘style of life’ or lifestyle in the writings of Veblen ([1899] 1994) in which he posits that ‘although he may have not have used the word ‘lifestyle’...he came very close, however, referring to ‘changing styles’
Meanwhile Bourdieu (1984) uses the concepts of cultural capital and habitus to define a theoretical framework of lifestyles. Habitust explains how lifestyle exists through particular principles that influence the behavior of individuals, meanwhile different types of lifestyles are related with particular combinations of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu cited in Trigg 2001). Anderson and Golden (1988) credit psychologist Alfred Adler as ‘playing a major role in developing the lifestyle concept and integrating it into our idiom and thought’. Adler’s concept of lifestyle is: ‘The organismic ideas of the individual as an actor rather than a re-actor; ...the purposiveness, goal directedness, unity, self-consistency and uniqueness of the individual; and...the ultimately subjective determination of his actions’ (Ansbacher, 1967, p. 191, cited from Anderson and Golden (1988).

Generally within the consumer and market research, the ‘lifestyles’ concept is usually linked with the concept of psychographics and values with the exception of Holt (1997) who examines lifestyle within a cultural framework and Arnould and Thompson (2005) who broadened the cultural framework further in his discussion. The term ‘lifestyle’ has been linked with psychographics in the literature, and with much confusion still exists between the two terms within the marketing literature. Anderson and Golden (1984) in their critical review and recommendation on lifestyle and psychographics criticize the lack of clarity between the two terms. They argued that much of the literature has variously defined the term ‘psychographics’ and has included ‘lifestyle’ as part of psychographic variables or at least did not attempt to distinguish the term ‘lifestyle’ and psychographic.

The concept of lifestyle patterns and their relationship to marketing was introduced by Lazer (1963) and this definition is one of the most widely used and accepted (Lawson and Todd 2002) which is; ‘Lifestyle is a systems concept. It refers to the distinctive or characteristic mode of living, in its aggregative and broadest sense, a whole society or a segment thereof. It is concerned with those unique ingredients or qualities which describe the style of life of some culture or group, and distinguish it from others. It embodies the patterns that develop and emerge from the dynamics of living in a society. Lifestyle, therefore is the result of such forces as culture, values, resources, symbols, license and sanctions’ (p. 130). Lazer (1963) also proposed a lifestyle hierarchy (see Figure 1), which shows that the concept of lifestyle is linked to other concepts such as values which are derived from a broad cultural and society framework. Referring to the figure, it can be said that lifestyle patterns and values emerge from group and individual expectations and values. Consequently this lifestyle pattern and values then will determine purchase decisions and market reactions. The figure also shows that this connection is reciprocal in which market reactions of consumers can also have an influence on purchase decisions and on lifestyle pattern and values. (See Figure I here.)

Apart from linking the lifestyle concept to a broader framework, Lazer (1963) emphasizes the importance of lifestyle as a concept which is significant in understanding and investigating consumer behavior and also a point of combining marketing and other disciplines as he aptly states ‘Lifestyle therefore, is a major behavioral concept for understanding, explaining and predicting consumer and business behavior. It is a more generalized concept than existing concepts of consumer
behavior that have been advanced in marketing. Such topics as mobility, leisure, social class, lifecycle, status, conformity, mass and the family as a consuming unit are all part of the life-style fabric. As a result, life-style study could foster the unification of findings and theories related to consumer behavior. In fact, life-style is a point of interdisciplinary convergence among sociology, social and cultural anthropology, psychology, demography and social psychology’ (p. 132).

In our opinion, the definition given by Lazer is the most appropriate because it captures the essence of what lifestyle is about; surprisingly much of the work done (with reference to previous lifestyle approach e.g personality/values and object significant research) on lifestyle since this definition from over 40 years ago seems to have overlooked the two important elements of culture and dynamics of living.

Preliminary Study of Lifestyle in Malaysia

Malaysia society consists of a population of mixed ethnic background comprising of three main groups which are the Malays (65.1%), Chinese (26%) and Indians (7.7%), the remaining 1.2% are other races (Department of Statistics, 2002). The Malays are usually Muslim by religion, which is also the official religion of the country. Meanwhile other ethnics practise other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Bahasa Malaysia is the official language in Malaysia, however English is widely spoken. Other languages spoken are Mandarin, Cantonese, other Chinese dialect, Tamil and Punjabi. The reason for studying Malay women consumers (as opposed to Chinese or Indian people living in Malaysia) is because this ethnic group represent the largest percentage of women in Malaysia hence this group has been chosen as the focus for our research in developing underlying insights of their consumption experience and thus lifestyle themes.

This case study is based on an in-depth interview which was carried out in the UK with a Malaysian woman consumer in her late 30’s whose ethnicity is a Malay and who will be referred to as Zaima (a pseudonym) hereafter. Zaima is currently doing her PhD (hence is living in the UK just for the duration of her studies) and is married with 5 children. Her family are here in the UK with her. Most of the field work for the research is actually being conducted in Malaysia among women from diverse social backgrounds and across a wide age range; Zaima is, in fact, the first woman to be interviewed and represents the pilot interview in our study. She is a personal acquaintance of Haslinda and is clearly in a similar situation as a Malay PhD student studying in the UK and living here with her family; from a reflexive point of view, Haslinda acknowledged from the outset that there existed a closeness and empathy between herself and Zaima and this was welcomed in the context of seeking rich descriptions of Zaima’s lived experience of consumption.

Zaima’s Story and Discussion

One important cultural theme emerging from the consumption patterns of Zaima is a lifestyle around the framework of nurturing or caring. This category of lifestyle theme was also identified by Holt (1997) and Thompson (1996) in which the nurturing or
caring consumer consumption or lifestyle revolves around the house. In Zaima’s case, most of the time she refers to the act of consumption which is centered in the home and focused in buying for the household, pleasing the children or husband. The nurturing or caring theme in Zaima’s life can be seen emerging in her description below where she repeatedly linked shopping with/for her husband, children or for the house in general.

I am not a type of person who loves shopping ok….i….shop when I feel that I need something, I need to look for something and that is since Malaysia ok and urmmm….and of course when you have the fund to shop and yeah like I said because you need something then I’ll go I’ll go shopping and I will decide on a date to go…and usually urmmm my husband will come along as well. Its like when I want to go shopping…urm (laughing a bit) its always because…even when I go shopping sometimes with my friends….but ‘jarang’ (not all the time). I go shopping with my husband just because its like he can give me ideas of whatever and usually things that I buy is not…its always things for the house or things for the kids or things for…..me I still need him to..let say ok…if I want to look for clothing urmm I still need him to say eeh I want to go and look for this one then my husband will say…oooo ok lets go and look for it.

In Malaysia ok… if I go shopping for ex….sometimes I wait shopping for …where if I want something that’s not urgent…I just ok..for the house…I see that duvet covers needs changing or to have spares so I’ll wait for the sales so when the sales comes ok I’ll tell my husband that we need some duvet covers. My husband will say ok let’s go and look for it, then we’ll go together but will not bring the kids. You know what shopping Is like in when sales in Malaysia. So that’s the shopping I would not take my kids..definitely.

Another view shows Zaima as a caring mother in which she mostly runs and manage the household, although in Malaysia a paid helper who usually lives with the family is a commonly used resource for women juggling between career and home roles.

In a traditional Malay household, although women’s responsibilities are mostly domestic while men’s are mostly public (Strange 1981; Karim 1992) it would be a mistake to assume that women are without power or influence (Raybeck, 1974) (cited in Stimpfl 2000; p. 170). In her description about the decision to hire a helper, the excerpts shows that the decision was influenced by both Zaima and her husband, where she repeatedly used the term ‘we’;
Ok, so let’s start with that because I have four kids right and they all have grown up, I have relied on maids before this...and we both me and my husband we understand some people think that they don’t want a maid because it invades their privacy which can be true, but me and my husband have our priority is that our children come back to their own house, when they go to school and our priority is not to wake them up in the morning when they’re sleeping, when they were babies we both agreed we had to live with this until the kids are grown up. So as much as I don’t like to have a maid or whatever but my husband you know just told me we have to tolerate this because he feels that he doesn’t want the children to be babysit elsewhere, he wants the children to come back from school, to sleep in their own beds, to eat in their own house and to be comfortable. So we have decided that we have to have a maid alright. And umm...if you ask me whether I like to have a maid because not everybody likes to have a maid but a maid does help except that for you will have another person in the house right.

So I have to live with that, we both decide we both don’t like to have a maid as much because it invades our privacy right, but at the same time you can’t actually cope with a lot of things because your house will be sooo in a mess. When you go to work, both of you...its like so much in a mess and its so soothing to come back and knowing that somebody is taking care of that you know that’s one thing. But both of us understand that when the kids grow up we don’t have to have maids anymore.

Much of Zaima’s narrative focuses on how there are certain chores which she definitely thinks should not be done by her husband in public and also there are chores her husband would not let her do in public but this would conversely be acceptable if they were undertaken in a private situation (which to her means invisible from the public eye or in a totally different country outside Malaysia). This can be identified and linked with the Malay culture and gender social interaction which reinforces the view put forward by Karim (1995) that in Southeast Asia in particular (including the Malay society), women allow men to dominate religious and political life in formal and public activity but continue to uphold important areas of decision making in the informal sphere Karim (1995).

Of course you always want to feel...that...if you don’t have a maid definitely you’ll need your husband’s support to help you around at least with little little things but I have this thing about the things that my husband can help me out with these are things which I.....like in Malaysia wouldn’t imagine him.....ok.....this is me I don’t know about others but I can’t imagine him hanging the clothes outside like he can’t imagine me washing the car (right-H). These are things...I don’t know whether it’s the pride or whatever but you know my husband wouldn’t like I seeing me washing the car you know .like don’t do it and I wouldn’t ask my husband to hang clothes outside with the neighbours looking and things like that. Its what’s kept in the house is in the house. You know you don’t reveal
this kind of things. Personally I don’t find me washing the car is a problem but I realize he doesn’t like it when I wash the car, its like I won’t ask him to hang the clothes but in the house I can see things like cooking or hoovering which I don’t mind him doing (yeah-H), maybe just because like you have men chef so that kind of thinking.

In the above excerpt, Zaima views washing a car as a masculine responsibility while hanging out the washing is a more feminine task and therefore thinks it would ruin her husband’s image as the leading man of the house or her own image alternatively as the lady of the house. Zaima views could be linked to the Malay cultural background of Zaima which holds that man is the head of the house. Zaima views her husband’s act of hanging out the washing for the household as degrading her husband’s ‘masculine’ role as per the excerpt below.

I think..ok my concern is that actually between me and my husband it won’t be a problem because we understand and its nothing...ummm its not something...a crime that you do it but maybe it’s the culture in Malaysia that you just don’t want you, you feel that your husband portrays the man of the house and you just don’t want to let other neighbours for example say ‘hey his doing the house chores, its like he’s being control by the wife or something like that’. I think that’s the main thing and the same thing when he doesn’t let me wash the car its like it to be a macho task not a lady’s job. And a woman washing the car is a bit too tough isn’t it, a bit tough right. Mean he doesn’t want other man for example or other ladies (starts laughing) to see me doing it. But yeah you just do it behind close doors right.

From the interview there also emerges an important theme of custom or ‘adat’ which Zaima says influences her behaviour to a certain extent and which underlines the importance of gender roles in the daily life of Malaysian women. The example of car washing is not directly related to consumption but one of the areas we hope to explore further in our research is the extent to which these gender role influences do impact on consumption behaviours as well as other social behaviours as we feel this is very likely due to the powerful influence of Islam and ‘adat’ in Malay life. According to (Omar 2003), “…‘adat’ or custom control norms, values and behaviours, and Islam institutionalized these behaviours’ Adat is defined as custom and tradition which include accepted ways of doing things by the Malays.” Further to this it is seen as a basis for appropriate behavior that all Malaysians should follow (Ong 1987; Karim 1992).
People might think and that’s in my mind, people might think that he’s being controlled or whatever and going back to your question whether I do things because of religion, religious reason yeah urmm if you ask me, that…I strongly believe.

Another theme emerging is between balancing the importance of Islam as a religion and also doing things, living life to the very best, in which Zaima explains the importance in the excerpt below. This theme can be linked with the middle road of Islamisation advocate by the State as explained by Karim (1995) where she elaborates that ‘conceptually and metaphorically, this middle road oscillates between the practical working arrangement of Malay custom (adapt) in everyday family and social life..the middle road is again expressive of the bilateralism in Muslim in Southeast Asia which means doing things in the Malay..way rather than the Arab or Western way’ (Karim, 1995, pg 41).

You know what I think religious believes in Islam, being a muslim you have extremist practicing Muslim just like Christians right...you have to the left wing, to the right wing or to the centre. So I believe in that terms that we have to be in the centre but......more....improve yourself as you go. (try to be a good practicing muslim you mean?-H) yeah try to be a good practicing one which means you move towards that, not going in the centre going to the negative side, so you go into the right side and that I feel that....and then because of that you can perhaps enjoy life because you must understand that people give up this interesting part of life just to be very strongly practicing ...Muslim

for example. So they let go lots of things, but if you ask me I’m not saying you shouldn’t.. I think we can balanced it up...yeah balanced it up.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS
AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has presented an overview of some of the literature relating to lifestyle and has argued the importance of exploring the concept of lifestyle within a cultural context and recognizing cultural difference when seeking to understand lifestyle. The case study has shown how narrative – life stories - can depict many constructions of lifestyle from an individual’s lived experience and, equally, it demonstrates how important the influence of culture – and cultural difference – can be when interpreting what the concept of lifestyle means in a non-western context. Although the ‘nurturing’ lifestyle that emerges from the narrative (and discussion) seems common to any lifestyle of a married working women, the lifestyle of this particular Malay women shows how the meaning of these experiences such as shopping, housework and other aspects of life are constructed from different values and cultural factors. This particular woman has accommodated her life to maintain the balance of her Malay and Islamic values in where she holds strongly to her role as the dutiful and caring wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds an important position in her career.

The longer term research project from which this paper is drawn has specific objectives regarding the concept of lifestyle and gender and future research is planned to construct a framework of lifestyle from non-western women’s consumption experience. Within
this, our goals are to examine the values desires, motivation and self-concept of women in the realm of consumption activities and experience; to examine the symbolic meaning of consumption experiences in the context of women’s life goals and other priorities; in particular, to examine the socio-cultural context that stimulates the consumption experience and influences lifestyle.

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Figure 1: Lifestyle Hierarchy

Source: Lazer, 1963; pg 131