

The Influence of Cultural Values Towards Creativity Enhancement: The Case of Malaysian Fashion Designers

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian fashion designers face difficulties and challenges in competing in the fashion industry due to the emerging international brands that exist in the market. Cultural values have influenced fashion designers in the process of design concept and use of textiles over time. This paper attempts to analyse the influence of cultural values on Malaysian fashion designer creativity and the elements that provide for creativity enhancement. The scope of this study was based on fashion designers located around the Klang Valley area. A qualitative approach is adopted using semi structured questions in an in-depth interview to gain an understanding of participants' cultural values, the design flow process, and product identity during their creative process. Using purposive sampling and snowballing technique, a sample of eight Malaysian fashion designers with a minimum of two years of design experience were interviewed. Participants were asked about the development experience, design process, creativity process, inspiration, experience of flow and product identity. The data was analysed using a constant comparison process. The findings suggest that cultural values and work environment have an indirect influence towards Malaysian fashion designers' creative design process. This study indicates that fashion designers' experiences serve as sources of inspiration that could be linked to creative design ideas and creativity. During the development process, solutions to the problems faced by the designer tend to emerge and as a result of the workflow, creativity is enhanced. The findings of this study provide insight on the relationship between Malaysian fashion designers' cultural values and experiences towards creative enhancement and in creative flow development which can assist them to be better prepared to compete in the local and global fashion industry. This study, however, finds a lack of focus on brand identity building amongst Malaysian fashion designers thus making them unnoticeable in the market.

Keywords: *Cultural Values, Inspiration, Creativity, Development Process, Malaysian Fashion Designers*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural values have influenced fashion in the process of design concept and use of textiles over time. Cultural value in fashion represents an expression of culture of a designer embedded with the industry's culture and influenced by the social and design environment (Cho, 2009) architecture, fine arts, music, or anything surrounding the designer (Lawson, 1997). With the apparent global orientation in economics and

politics affecting businesses, including the fashion industry creates the need to study how cultural values influence designers' ideas with regards to their design work. Of importance, the fashion industry requires skilled human resources such as creative designers to act as cultural interpreters when designing products (Jin, 2004).

As for Malaysia which consists of multicultural and multi-ethnicity backgrounds and beliefs, we can assume that designers of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds bring out their own signature and oriental elements in the creative design. To understand how fashion designers integrate cultural values into their design practices, an investigation on the relationship between designer's cultural identity and elements behind the product design are important and timely. Fashion designer's creativity may be affected by cultural factors such as events, organisations, and groups (Fiore et al., 1996), whilst the characteristic of cultural value contributes significantly to the meaning of cultural design process (Westwood & Low, 2003).

Earlier studies mostly focused on how cultural values influence fashion designers whereas responding to the problem with an appropriate design process is considered as the most integral part in design (Lawson, 1997) which is why this study intends to seek. There is an indication that cultural values affect both on how learners perceive the information from the style and how to translate them into new output. Since cultural values tend to influence the designs, it could be beneficial to explore the relationship between cultural identity and the use of cultural elements, such as philosophy and environment that enable Malaysian designers to use creative design process to achieve their end designed product. Hence, investigating fashion designers' creative process, in particular as affected by the designers' cultural and personal experiences is justified to study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The section introduces cultural values and ideological aspects of Malaysia's culture and society. The idea is to better understand how Malaysian fashion designers work in the perspective of culture, industry and in understanding the values for creativity. The mixed background and cultural heritage of Malaysians contribute to a shared knowledge in values and beliefs. The review proceeds with some background on market demand for fashion, the growth of Malaysian fashion in the industry, as well as factors that influence the nature of design and their creativity. The flow theory in the design process linking to product identity is briefly reviewed.

Malaysian Culture, Fashion and Industry Competitiveness.

Cultural influence has affected people growing up within a particular culture such as on how individuals interact with each other. Since consumerism in fashion is part of lifestyle in any culture, it is important to understand the nature of the fashion business in Malaysia. Consumer taste and lifestyle amongst Malaysians are becoming more of an "East meet West" phenomenon, where the expectation is to have high quality products and a variety of choices (Chang et al., 2004). Brand names are increasingly important for Malaysian consumers when purchasing apparel because of the various cultural influences including how society assesses one's appearances. Chang et al. (2004) indicates that an individual's need and want may not be internally driven or self-reflected but through external elements. For the Malaysian consumer, brand name may be used as a symbol to demonstrate togetherness with a reference group. Thus, consumers from high end culture groups are more likely to spend more money on luxury fashion merchandise which among others represent wealth (Hwang, 2013). However, studies have shown that Bumiputera Small Medium Enterprise (SMEs) do not have a strong corporate brand and are thus left behind when competing in the market (Ragayah & Zulkifli, 1997). Lack of brand identity is linked to weak creative processes. This study hopes to uncover the influence of a strong creative process on positive brand identity.

Malaysian fashion designers face tough market competition from international brands partly because they lack competitive advantage in the fashion industry. Success in fashion designing requires creativity and originality to be translated in the communication of ideas and expression of designer's aesthetics in meeting consumer's needs. It has been shown that cultural values may have influenced fashion designer's creative and innovative process (Westwood & Low, 2003), capable of creating the appearance, use and meaning while claiming that designers are not just an artist but creators who use their imagination (Cho, 2009). In developing the design concept, fashion designers need to employ the design skills (Lau, 2007) to produce creativity and originality which would determine success. Of importance is the need for the study to establish the influence of cultural values towards the design creative process.

Cultural Values, Design and Creativity

Culture as defined by Khoza and Workman (2009) is learned and shared behaviour of members of society that allows individuals to understand the surrounding by providing a frame of references or perspectives. Values are standards that lead individuals to take positions on issues, ideologies, and self-worth and it influences how individuals evaluate, judge, and make comparisons. It is what is accepted by individuals and society based on certain ideas and beliefs or actions to preserve self-image, Erez and Earley (1993). As fashion designers' output is the product of their cultural experience, the creativity in the designs is influenced by their values regarding clothes, trends, aesthetic style, philosophy, and beliefs. The output of fashion designer's ideas is a translation of their understanding of factors that is built from their cultural values.

There seems to be a rapid expansion in the Malaysian luxury market because of the distinct consumption habits of Malaysians. Malaysia has become one of the most important markets for luxury fashion brands in industrialised countries. To Malaysians, fashion merchandise is considered as fulfilling their needs while differentiating themselves from others through perceived values. Global luxury brands available in the market represent high-end brands that most consumers find difficult to purchase which is determined by their socio-economic status. In addition, consumers who patronise luxury brand goods tend to be more concerned about their outlook rather than their ability to get recognition from others (Park, 2008). Consumer response towards fashion products would indicate identity and their behaviours are influenced by cultural and psychological factors, personalities, social aspects and possibly environment.

In meeting customers' needs which are interrelated with design problems and solutions (Sinha, 2002), fashion designers need to understand social, cultural, and economic elements. Designers are sets of individuals who are distinct from people within the occupation (Owen, 1998) are like artists while achieving their design skills throughout their practice rather than based on one off ideas (Yee, 2007). They are seen as being imaginative, unpredictable, and spontaneous (Lawson, 1997). As such, output of fashion designs depends on the designer's personal experience, as well on the garments that they produce (Stecker, 1996). Fortunately, more influential designers have been adopting a more conceptually progressive approach to share their creative concept by expressing and embedding their personal philosophies on their approach thus focusing on the relation of body, movement, and fabric (Bugg, 2009). This study therefore attempts to identify new ways for fashion designers to present their fashion designs and to communicate it through concept and context, instead of basing it entirely on market trends and commercial value.

The Flow Concept, Creative Process and Cultural Values

The link between creative process and cultural values is provided by a flow theory based on a person's psychological or philosophical perspective when the person is doing something of interest and enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). The concept of flow primarily creates a product whereby independent designers see clothing design as a process similar to an artist creating art pieces (Engel-Enright, 2007).

The optimal experience of flow involved during the design creative process exhibits characteristics such as uniqueness, innovation, and variation as well as producing inner satisfaction of creating and designing (Engel-Enright, 2007). Since designing involves a creative process in which designs can be both creative and elusive (Regan et al., 1997), fashion designers might have increasingly adopted a conceptual approach to sharing their creative concept whereby designers transform conceptual ideas into reality. Thus, studying the creative process amongst Malaysian fashion designers and how culture adds value to creativity enhancement is warranted.

Self-Concept, Identity and Role in Fashion Designing

Self-concept represents self-image and specifies the manner an individual consumer chooses products and brands. It refers to the perception others have of themselves as objects (Solomon, 1996). Thus, designers and marketers need to understand consumers' self-concept because it can influence their purchasing behaviour and action. It has been shown that an individual's self-concept interacts with the way people communicate, words or objects and the external environment to produce a stable feeling of the self which may influence how consumers view the advertisements and brand image (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987). It is therefore important for fashion designers to tap into consumer's direction of action once they perceive positivity towards designing.

Whereas for identity, Leung and Chiu (2010) observe that bicultural identity development anchors on cultural background, length of exposure to social and lifestyle in a multicultural setting which is engaged in group creativity. The link between identity and creativity comes about from the psychological impact of different experiences on diversity. As such, creativity resulting from multiple identities occurs when individuals have more than two identities that are different from one to the other. To be creative, people in practice such as designers are suggested to have two identities at any one time (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007).

The role of fashion designers has been explored together with other topics such as design, knowledge, and tools (Cross, 2006; Chun et al., 2017; Dorst, 2011; Kimbel, 2012; and Lawson, 2005) in which a few studies acknowledge the connection of roles with fashion design (Adam et al., 2011; Lawson, 2005; and Tonkinwise, 2011). These studies examine the diverse scope of professional fashion designers with elements of style and aesthetic in fashion design. This paper attempts to link professional roles in fashion designing using a designer approach which is considered critical during the design planning phase. In this phase, designers are expected to create a theme and construct their conceptual idea by utilising in-depth knowledge and artistic work experience (McRobbie, 2015) enabling creativity to flow freely.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach is adopted using semi structured questions in an in-depth interview to gain an understanding of participants' cultural values, the design flow process, and product identity during their creative process. The targeted population is limited to fashion designer entrepreneurs who run their own fashion business in Klang Valley which houses many of the designer's boutiques and showrooms. The researcher started with market observation on a suitable sample population before using random sampling techniques to select the appropriate respondents who must be Malaysian fashion designers in the industry. Using purposive sampling and snowballing technique, a sample of eight ($n=8$) Malaysian fashion designers with a minimum of two years of design experience were recruited. Based on the literature reviews, the initial survey questionnaire from Hwang (2013) was adopted.

Background information collected includes education and related experience that led them into the fashion industry, summary of fashion collections, how these become collections of the designer and their market response were asked at the start of the interview. Each designer respondents were asked to share their creative output such as sketches, fashion illustration, design work in progress, and their most

successful designs in order to understand their work. They were also asked to rank in order of importance the skills they apply when designing. In particular, the skills are market research, target market, customer demand, design concept, communication with team, sketch process, material (fabrication or textile), pattern making and final fitting.

Multiple data collection methods such as observations and informed conversation were integrated to enrich the findings, as noted, and conducted by Flick (2002). The recorded interview is transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents for analysis. A constant comparative method is used to code and analyse categories, concepts and ideas. The coding is structured and systematic to achieve relationship validation among the data in order to generate theory (Kolb, 2012). In addition, selective coding sampling was used throughout the duration of the study to gain additional insights from deep probing during in depth interviews. To increase trustworthiness of the data, the recordings and transcripts were reviewed several times. Data were finalised and carefully checked to ensure the objectives of the study are met.

FINDINGS

Among the eight designer respondents, six (75%) were female and two were male, (25%) with the age range from 25 to 51 years. In terms of tertiary education, five designers (62.5%) earned bachelor's degree, two (25%) had diploma and one (12.5%) had master's degree. Six fashion designers (75%) received their degrees in Malaysia, one (12.5%) earned from Australia while another (12.5%) received the degree from the United States of America. In terms of designing experience, those within the age of 25-30 years achieved 8 years, whereas those between 31 to 40 years in age seemed to have 5 years and the ones within 46 years and above had 30 years of experience. Their average work is approximately 30 – 40 hours per week, spending about 8 hours a day in designing. Interestingly, six females with an age range between 25 to 40 years old worked more hours (30-40 hours). Whereas for males, one with an age of 25-30 worked between 0–10-hour weeks compared to another male with an age 46 years and above, spent 50 hours and more in designing. The older designer seemed to work a lot more hours in designing compared to the younger ones.

When asked to rank in order of importance the skills they apply when designing, market research was named as most important followed by customer demand, design research, communication with teammates, target market, design concept, sketches process, material, patternmaking, and lastly final fitting. Fashion designers with less than four years' experience emphasised on the inspiration as well as the market research, however, for those with more than 5 years of design experience indicated that inspiration in relation to the design concept, garment construction, fabrication in addition to understanding target market.

From the in-depth interview six (6) themes emerged that affect the designer's cultural values on creativity. These are professional roles in creativity; creative design flow process; sources of inspiration based on experience; role of designer and brand identity; fashion as means of communication; and role of market research and brand identity. The findings from the in-depth interview are discussed below.

Professional Role in Creativity Development

During the interview, participants were asked, *"How do you define yourself as an apparel designer or fashion designer? And why?"* The response from designer participants on the roles anchors towards believing that fashion designers create garments based on the values, trends, style, and cultural adaption and most of them believe that fashion designer's production depends on their cultural inspiration. As reported by one of the participants that her apparel collection is a way to display her fashion as well as an expression of creative inspiration, projection of identity and design ideas:

"I am more of a creative director. I never studied designing before. Basically, my task is to come up with the concept and the brand. To work with the team and with ideas up to design stage", (Participant G).

Another participant believed that the role of fashion designer is about fitting in client's needs creatively.

"I think someone who rather consults. I really love to create a vision and imagination on what my client would be in it. So basically, that is my task as a fashion designer", (Participant H).

The second category from the data, the creative fashion design process can be grouped as (a) development process, which can create the product or collection, (b) creativity process with respect to the fashion designer's creation, and (c) the flow specifying the phases of the fashion designer's process up to design solution. The questions asked included, *"Could you please describe your current collection and your design process? How does your design move from sketches to the product?"*. The development process is linked to creativity in many aspects, especially on communication, sketching, design style or cut, material selection, preparing prototype and mass production. From the interview, the creative design and process was reported by fashion designers to occur simultaneously. This is testified in the following statement carrying three differing views:

"My current collection is about suits and classics since 2002. The first ever "songket" in Paris, partly the "pride to be there as heritage". My suit is mine "best and signature". My process is basically, understand what my client wants and get to know them. More communication and start developing the ideas for them. Routine normally sources of the fabrication. Then work with the prototype and study competitors' brands. As for me, it is like a game. It is a part of the process. Men wear very straight forward. More on the textile and material Men wear is all about the material. Basically, the design is very clean but plays roles in cutting and bold". (Participant B).

Here, understanding the clients and forming initial ideas until prototype while studying the competitors are part of the process to produce the targeted design.

"We are currently working on the Raya collection 2020. Our collection is more on modern twist of traditional interpretation. We will do our research, on the touch of "Kebaya Nyonya and Kurung Pahang" in those days. Basically, we want to bring back the traditional detailing and the styling, in the modern design. Normally we decide on the correct fabrication and enhance the fabric into the design. Again, enhance the detailing and the styling before we start on the production. We will sketch and look for the fabrication. Take the measurement and send for the production for the cutting and pattern making", (Participant D).

This considers the designer is inspired to research on traditional style and interpretation and the process starts with research on style and interpretation while choosing the correct fabric to enhance the design.

"Our best seller collection, which was at the Kuala Lumpur Fashion Week 2019 (KLFW), called "Sahara Desert". This collection is a mixture of the traditional with modern twist. Inspired from the cities of Abu Dhabi architecture and the culture. The ideas basically from the woman over there, the elegant and the architecture full of enhancement surrounding the cities. It is a bit challenging. KLFW means for Ready to wear (RTW)- a show of anticipate of wearing. From there we look for selling point. We try to plan 6 months early. As we get closer to the dates, sometimes we must tweet away from our competitors. So sometimes the quality is a bit different, need to encounter it. To do the sample to understand the process. Selling in Fashion Valet platform, we need to show them the prototype sample. Then the Fashion Valet will choose the design what suit for it to be sell online", (Participant G).

Inspired from different city's architecture and culture, the designing can be a process of mixing and incorporating local and international style with design elegance.

Creative Design Flow Process

Creative design process consists of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Yee, 2007) all of which contribute towards superior design solutions. Fashion designers need to analyse and exploit various ideas to be able to create alternative solutions to the problem which may involve numerous draft sketching whereas in synthesis, they need to create multiple solutions and choose only the best option. However, in evaluation, fashion designers should be doing the prototype and improving it at every stage of the process. Questions asked during the interview included:

What process do you use to solve problems?

What creative skills do you use when you design?

Do you have a team that is involved in the design process? If so, what do they do?

From the interview, the designer indicated that while analysing the situation, they might change the process according to the situation or the nature of the problem. Some began by looking at the problems and trying to solve using alternative designs. The following interview verbatim *synthesises* the design process by identifying problems and opportunities:

“Usually, our problem no 1 is the measurement. Slightly run a few inches. Normally we will tailor. Sometimes the fabric gets defects and shrinks. We will do the quality control (QC) to overcome the problem. To do the alteration to play safe. We normally will have 1st and the last fitting. You must be creative and imagine the style. Meaning, we will advise on what silhouette will suit the client based on the body. I have 2 designers that will help me enhance the input. And the other one will do the sketches and ideas and advise me on the silhouette. Before proceeding to the pattern cutter and production side”, (Participant D).

To create a successful collection, synthesis and evaluation should be employed and these are emphasised below by one of the designer participants:

“Back to the sampling, usually will have a simple photoshoot. To see if suitable or not before posting in the social media. Sometimes the colours are different from the actual product. We source our material from overseas. Sometime when it arrives, is different. So, need to do quality control (QC) to check and it takes time. Sometimes, we must source from Malaysia to make it like it or do less work. And sometime different tailor. Therefore, the cutter is different. The main cutter plays the biggest problem. That why we must plan 6 months. We are in small team. Need to work together as a team. Our team is all about the brand and the image portraits us. In design, must play along and tweet the design. Basically, need to make it work. We have fashion designer in house and marketing crew. We communicate and get the same ideas and through. Mainly is to set a goal in selling to our customer. We always need to be different from others. Sometimes we do take custom made order too. Not all we mass produce. For mass produce, we do same design and play in with different colours based on the demands in RTW”, (Participant G).

To understand fashion designer’s feelings such as joy, frustration, anxiety, and opportunities during the design process, the flow concept has been conceptualised to examine the fashion designer’s creation and the process leading to design solution. Based on the questions including, “*Do you enjoy working as a fashion designer and why?*”; asked during the in-depth interview, participants acknowledged what kept them going to solve the problem is their passion and joy for creating the product while all of them felt motivated to be a creative person because of the challenge in problem solving. Participant G emphasises the extent competition and obstacle help her to be creative in solving the problem:

“Yes, I do. Never learn in business and fashion. Malaysia itself is very competitive. To get to know the industry and people. But it is hard to enter the area, as myself is not a socialising person. But it kept me motivated in design. Clothing kept changing and learns more and expands it. It makes the brand grow and bring the identity to me”.

However, other participants felt the job of a designer is physically strained due to tight schedule and working conditions. On the positive side, Participant D feels the pressure from seasonal demand actually

enhances her creativity thoughts and the design flow process and this is supported by Participant A who feels that her passion for her work had also enhanced her creativity.

“I actually do. Actually, the motivation will be the money during festival and the bridal season. Other than that, proud to see the creation to be alive in the reality”, (Participant D).

“I do enjoy with my work right now as a fashion designer because it is what I am passion for. I really enjoy with what I am doing right now because I also assume myself and as an artist that express my arts in clothing form”, (Participant A).

Unfortunately, barriers to the creative flow could happen when designers worry about failure, problems, and lack of time management as stated by some participants when they felt that the job of designer is physically strained due to tight time schedules or working conditions in which case, their creativity enhancement process might be suppressed. When asked during the interview, *“Have you ever gotten lost direction during your work designing process?”*, these designers perceive that the common barrier to full engagement in the flow of the creative process is fear of failure (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Not getting adequate resources and support when they face difficulties may affect their creative activities as explained by participants G and B and how they could not achieve what they had planned:

“Yes, so many times. Sometimes we start with one direction. Then when there is a problem in production and staffing, sometimes you think it is nice. But yeah, lost for a while. But need to overcome it”, (Participant G).

“Yes. Many times. Not lost, being blurring. With the spirit Sometimes frustrated. I always take it as a challenge. Lost is nothing. With lost can take it as I like to replace. Not alter. The old product can be ready to wear”, (Participant B).

On the other hand, the flow concept can also provide fashion designers joy when creating something new since they are happy to do the work that they enjoy. As stated by Csikszentmihalyi (2008), experience is oriented towards a goal with rewards as a result of being involved with enjoyable activities. During the creative fashion design process, fashion designers would feel the joy of designing since they are involved in fashion activities which allow them to look for new ideas creatively while solving the problem. To the question, *“Can you tell me more about your favourite collection or design and why?”* Asked during the interview, they reported being happy when their collections receive recognitions and feedback from customers as indicated by one participant who felt satisfied with her traditional and vintage cultural designs:

“I would say on “sulam goyang”, our signature design. Sulam goyang is a type of technique in those days like to wear. Something very luxurious and none of the designer had done it before in these days. It gets more traditional and vintage style”, (Participant D).

Feeling of satisfaction and happiness can be contributed by buyers and members of the press. Participant E who worked with traditional batik motif and design is sharing her design inspiration which she received from international designers:

“My favourite will be the one during KLFW 2019. The batik that designs by me inspired from the African women motifs. A design that mainly emphasises colours and materials. A collection that combines the elements of “berkemban” traditional touch. Using type of silhouette that flow down naturally using drapes technique”, (Participant E).

Thus, we can assume that designers are like artists who work with abstract style yet inspired by elements or environments that exude some forms of challenges and new ways of looking at things or objects leaving them feeling happy and satisfied. Next is the analysis on how professional roles can help enhance designers' creativity.

Source of Inspiration and Designer's Experience

Fashion designers like any other individuals use daily experiences and surroundings to search for their own identity to produce new designs. They search for inspiration through modern and technology edged communication to bring connections between creative ideas and output. Participant C stated the role of inspiration as follows:

"I normally will look from books and Instagram to get more ideas. I like to play with the design, silhouette, and fabrication".

Sources of designer experience acquired from travelling, shopping, visiting art exhibitions and museums may influence their creative design process which is used to develop designer's inspiration. Participant A indicated the sources that inspired her could come from people and the surroundings including material elements such as books, art, phrase of words, music, architecture or even history besides from personal beliefs, values, and experiences as indicated by Participant E:

"My artwork is from my imaginary things and life. Which I take as a cartoonist character. But it is basically about people and my observation throughout everyday life. Therefore, I love to visit art gallery because it makes me inspired to do more things. For me I find myself unique and stay true with my authentic value".

"I am inspired from a singer called "Kerli Koiv". An Estonian singer and born as a songwriter. I like her character, wild and daring. She like to go all out, and the video make me kept the spirit and more ideas to play along. Most of my design are basically inspired from the music video. I like to go some places like the abandon hospital and buildings, to explore something new. Something very rare and daring to go with", (Participant E).

Although most of these participants had multiple sources of inspirations, Participant D however has a consistent source of inspiration for her identity refer to it as:

"I want to bring back the traditional era whereby everyone wants to go "vava voom" to modern twist. To being timeless. I like to see my grandma old photos. Those were classic and vintage style look. I like the colours, silhouette, and the details. But of course, I also use online such as Pinterest to get more ideas. I like to play along with the Malay ethnic culture".

Thus, sources of inspiration for designers could be influenced by cultural factors.

Role of Designer and Brand Identity

With the current economic, socio-political environment, at national or international level, Malaysian fashion designers need to play multiple roles within the fashion industry. Besides producing and marketing creative design output, the designers need to also plan the production process and market their brand. In other words, the designers are expected to be a researcher, entrepreneur, and problem solver. Assuming the role of a researcher, the designer will have to study the market and sales trends, know who the competitors are and how do they become successful and inspired. The participants in this study affirmed that it is necessary to research especially during the design development and production process in response to an open ended question, "How is the fashion system in Malaysia different from other fashion systems in Asia and international market?" which intends to connect designers to the role of a researcher. The need to engage in research role is indicated by the following statement:

"As someone very little and small, I don't have much experience in industry. But I observe in social media, I can guess the appreciation here in Malaysia are very little. If you are famous, then people care. But in international, they take every piece, and they appreciate it. Malaysia basically, if they see your creation is va-va-boom, they will use that design to go for these little designers to

duplicate the design. This is what I see in the current market and the demand but within their budget range”, (Participant H).

It is to be cautioned that this research role may differ at large international designing companies who could engage external consultants to research for them. As designers and entrepreneurs, their roles are multiple such as planning the design, marketing and managing the business which require them to identify pricing, prepare marketing plans and acquire capital. Participant B explained the dynamics of being a fashion designer engaging in running a business while relating his perception of being an entrepreneur in response to the interview question, “*Have you attempted to market your collection outside of Malaysia? If so, have you ever had any difficulties entering market?*”

“The trend now is pricing and of course, I still remember in 2006 in Milan Fashion show. Designer Dolce and Gabbana is like “mamamia” ... They were surprised seeing “songket”. It is something exotic and unique. But we as Malaysian, we are proud of our heritage”.

One of the participants who worked in formal men’s and women’s wear for the past 30 years shared being responsible in designing the garments, managing issues related to drawings and doing marketing for the business:

“We have our multi-racial. I take among the region, and I am proud of it. We have a lot of resources and have yet to explore like “songket”, and “tenun”. Songket is our elements and trade the Malaysian heritage. My famous signature collection is the creation and showcasing of songket in Milan and Paris fashion show back in 2006. To do something that people never done”. (Participant B)

For participant G, her work involves communication with supplies and customer demands:

“We had collaboration with Singapore. However, the new Asian market in Orchard Road, we as Malaysian to enter in it is hard. It took come conveniently. As our market is for the modest. But for Dubai are something similarity with Singapore. As we are modernism and modest. They we are loud and more daring. While for Dubai they prefer the traditional which is the “abaya style”. To supply it to them, we need to quality control before market it to them”.

To warrant success in the business, the designer entrepreneur must multitask and target for international market.

Fashion as Means of Communication

For fashion designers, the garments they produce are to communicate their creativity in terms of ideas, design philosophy and values to the customers (Barnard, 2002). Furthermore, fashion and communication represent aesthetic and designer intention. Thus, in this study, it is crucial to examine how communication in designing contributes to creativity enhancement and whether culture adds value to the design creative process. When designing a garment, visual elements exude aesthetic elements which can represent comfort as well as customers individual’s characteristic and outlook.

To the question asked during the interview, “*Do you have a philosophy when it comes to design?*” Participant F stated that she focused on aesthetic as the primary factor in her design process:

“Design must meet the form. It depends on the design. But mostly is the fabric, although it will be limited edition”, while Participant B quoted the following on how he communicates his ideas of beauty through design: “simplicity, bold and clean cut”.

Role of Market Research in Fashion Designing for Brand Identity

In fashion designing, brand identity is about the visibility and marketability of the garments in the market for the designer to maintain their business. The intention here is to stress the need to understand customer's needs, market research and brand's identity and how these elements relate to a designer's creative design process and ultimately creativity enhancement. For the purpose of our study, we will discuss market research and brand identity in relations to creative designing and creativity enhancement. Market research is the process of collecting background information relating to current design, and future trends in the fashion industry. It is partly to understand fashion concepts in the fashion industry, competing brands and customer needs which is important to gain a competitive edge over competitors and become successful in business. To the questions asked during the interview, "*Have you made any market survey to identify what your competitors or methods in performing their business?*", one participant (Participant F) used internal data on customer demands and request as part of market research while participant G uses external resources such as market survey to collect market information:

"No, I don't. We are among friends. So, I just focus on my collection and normally I can say is, we just do based on our data customer demands and request. We just improve and play along with the design, colours, and the style"., (Participant F). "We had done something like mentee. A platform that does market survey for us. They put us where we are and what the data, we have verse with our competitors. But I personally feel it really helps. So, we know what we need to be improve on", (Participant G).

Thus, for some Malaysian designers whose marketing are mainly for local customers, no formal market research is being done.

As for the brand identity, the questions asked during the interview were: "*Do you think that brand identity is important for enhancing business performance?*" And "*Do you think that brand identity can assist you in building resilient quality in your brand in the market?*" These questions seek to find out how brand entities add value to designing and how does the market functions to enhance creativity among designers.

Firstly, customers' perception of brand image and identity in the fashion industry are regarded as important by the designers. The importance of brand identity on garment designs and production is supported by Participant G who stated that brand identity indicates customer preferences which would provide recognition to the fashion designers. However, Participant G also believed her customers made a purchase based on design and style.

"Yes, it is important. At the end of the day, need to know your market. Basically, to know to whom you want to see too. Finding the right buyers. Personally, people shop with us is not because of the brand. They shop with us because of the design and style that they like", (Participant G).

Participant F believed that brand identity in garment collection is important to the business since the design provides for the brand image rather than portraying aspects of design and style. The following is the excerpt about the brand identity and image by Participant F:

"Yes, I do have my own style and brand. Meaning basically, it reflects my own self. Of course, I want it to grow. We had joined fashion show in the past. For the upcoming fashion show, we are inviting our customers to come, and be appreciated to them", (Participant F).

To summarise, the eight ($n=8$) fashion designer participants comprised six females and two males, with the age range between 25-51 years old, working an average of 30-40 hours weekly, eight hours a day in designing. Their designing experience varied with those within the age of 25-30 years achieved 8 years, whereas those between 31 to 40 years in age had 5 years and the one within 46 years and above age had 30 years of experience. They ranked market research as most important followed by customer demand, design research, fashion as means of communication, target market, design concept, sketches, material, patternmaking, and lastly final fitting. Participants' ranking showed that their target market is based on research and customer needs are their top priority.

The finding from qualitative analysis focused on discussing the six (6) themes that emerged and affected the designer's cultural values on creativity. These are professional roles in creativity; creative design flow process; sources of inspiration based on experience; role of designer and brand identity; fashion as means of communication; and role of market research and brand identity. The development process is linked to creativity in many aspects, especially on communication, sketching, design style or cut, material selection, preparing prototype and mass production while the creative design and process tend to occur simultaneously. They search for inspiration through modern and technology edged communication to bring connections between creative ideas and output. Sources of designer experience which can contribute to the creative process were acquired from participating and showcasing in art exhibitions and museums, academic and non-academic seminars nationally and at international level may influence their creative design process and inspiration. Understanding customer's needs was linked to market research and was ranked as most important to build on a brand's identity. Designer participants used internal and external resources to understand market dynamism in designing but also acknowledged that customers perceived brand identity as culturally influenced. Designers seemed to play multiple roles such as planning the design, managing the business, preparing marketing plans and acquiring capital. They are not just a fashion designer but a researcher, entrepreneur, and problem solver.

CONCLUSION

From the qualitative analysis, there is an indication that Malaysian designers' cultural values influence the fashion design process and creativity enhancement. Professional development roles seemed to have an impact on the creative process flow and creative success. However, the role of market research and brand identity towards creative output did not have much evidence which may create disadvantage to designers to reach a wider regional and international market. However, their rank on market research as most important followed by customer demand seemed to suggest their competitiveness in the design industry to reach international level. The influence of cultural values in the creativity design process is demonstrated by the design development process involving creative ideas for sketching, style, cut and material. In designing, they were involved with analysing the creative design, synthesising to find the best option and evaluating to produce the prototype and testing it. All these stages are part of the flow process influencing the creative process of fashion designers leaving designers feeling happy and joyous especially after getting recognition on their design output (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). As suggested by Westwood and Low (2003) culture affects analysis of creativity and the innovation process that generates creative product ideas. During the creative design process, fashion designers acknowledge that their designs are influenced by their customers, thus the traditional and current culture, taste, trends, colour preference and silhouette are embedded in the product. Designers acknowledge communication is important for the creative process to succeed while their role is to translate their own cultural ideas with that of consumers into concepts. As problem solvers, they looked for alternatives when faced with difficulties and as designer entrepreneurs, Malaysian fashion designers were motivated to achieve success which is driven by passion to create and produce. Although the designers considered themselves operating with a small brand name, this study observed that they were capable of multitasking starting with the design process to manufacture and to marketing of their collection. These designers are inspired from material culture such as art, books, and Instagrams or from audio such as songs while focusing on using local traditional designs, styles, or materials as testified by designers who have gone international. Among sources of inspiration, they sometimes sought for design philosophy, such as using simple, bold, and clean cut or another prefer to emphasise on heritage and look at Malay ethnic culture for ideas which will be translated into creative design and output. Mete (2006) noted that inspiration plays an important role in the fashion design process and these ideas may come from everywhere and everything. From the interview, fashion designers prefer to create their own brand identity suggesting they used creative process and experience as designer researcher, entrepreneur, and problem solver by focusing on self-identity or signature collections while some focus on their own style based on demand for Malay traditional style, colour, and stitching. To reach the wider market, all the designers agree that market research is important to build brand image and identity, however some did not do so because they focus only on a small customer segment. Thus, Malaysian designers as discussed above seemed to be culturally aligned and adaptive in meeting

customers' demands and needs. This is probably attributed by their inclination to play multiple roles as designer researcher, entrepreneur, and problem solver all of which are embedded in a flow concept using experience in the development process and creative designing.

For future research, the study could employ larger samples in which a comparison may be made on the design flow process by different customer types in terms of taste and preference due to socio economic factors. To gain better insight on cultural influence, design flow process and the brand identity, comparisons should be made between designers that work only within the local market and those that have made it globally. Lastly, incorporate a mix mode of data collection (quantitative and qualitative) method on designer national population from diverse ethnicity and gender so as would be more generalisable and capable of understanding in-depth the perception, beliefs, attitudes and practices as supported by qualitative methodology.

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