

Malaysian Product Design Identity: Review on the 'Keywords'

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Abstract

Considering Malaysia as a multi-ethnic country, it is difficult to determine and define the cultural identity to represent Malaysia (Mun, Fern, & Chin, 2015), and use it as a characteristic in designing a product. This has been a challenging issue for most Malaysian local designers to design a Malaysia-look product based on a national identity characteristic. There is no proof that the product characteristic can be summed up or generalized based on the understanding of multi-ethnic agreement decision-making (Zainal, Othman, & Samsudin, 2015). With regards to Malaysia, the primary issue is about the national identity identification for product design. This issue then prompted to the question that would Malaysian designers be able to establish a Malaysian product with a national identity by looking at this multi-ethnic society? This research reviews the literature concerning Malaysian identity based on articles and visuals. It aims at getting the general keywords related to the components in culture and yet to be incorporated with the design characteristics at the beginning of ideation process. The basis of this study is referring to the dominant culture study by Edensor (2002), cultural identity components evaluation by Ibrahim (2015), and culture and identity 'key issues' by Clarke (2011). By understanding the cultural component within the society, pulling out the keywords, and validating the chosen keywords by conducting a survey, these keywords will act as the guidance in visualising a characteristic; and there will be greater chances for Malaysian designer to success in developing products with strong Malaysian identities.

Keywords: Cultural components, Malaysian identities, Product design characteristics

1. Introduction

As design charms in diverse styles, it must be defined that it also has a particular function and existed in the boundless regime of processes – industrial, architectural, engineering, interior, fashion, etc. It does not always construe itself in isolation, but rather in a state of participatory and collaborative assistant to the method of processes, bringing about unique and diverse functionalities, often pursuing their imaginative agendas, depending on their directions, interests and goals. To begin with, Malaysia is well endowed with good taste and living, constitutionally matched by plenty of design diversities. In this respect, design plays a crucial role in the understanding of the essence of its people; living lives multiculturally in harmony and peace. Malaysia, a perfect place, because of arts in designing, grows lavishly in such a sanctuary and space, to stimulate thinking, ideas and innovations.

In its journey to exceed in design-based products business, amongst other things, Malaysian needs to see itself relative and definitive plain with other countries, which progress well in this. Malaysia can look in particular like the Norway and Denmark - a design driven country, the US - well-known of their streamline design, or Singapore - their universal design standard; if Malaysia chooses to advance its ambitions in the creative industry. As industrialisation and manufacturing businesses are at peak, Malaysia needs to have determined designers, in all disciplines, to meet innovative challenges, and to fill its high ambitions. This call is in-line with the national vision 2020, one of the components that aiming at Malaysian products will excel for the world's market share (Shamsuddin, 2015). One of the essential factors that the designer should know is, a good design brings together the identity of the products and it deals with new public perception (British Design Council, 2013). Since the exposing of the vagaries of forms to the modern society, e.g., bright lights, media and colour, to

respond to as the community evolves - as opposed to the rural societies who have to cope and adapt to the sudden changes of visual values in designed form, which are entirely different, unlike traditional or craft-arts.

It is important to understand the matter within the culture in Malaysian society. The identified issues then will form the basis of its identity, and then the designer can take an inspiration from there to create a Malaysian product with Malaysian identity. Marzuki (2007) stated that, debates in national identity are a very controversial topic to be discussed, given that Malaysia is a multi-ethnicity country. Malaysia is one of the examples of a highly pluralistic country with more than 80 ethnic groups. They practice different religions, traditions and speak various languages (W. Husin, 2012). Because of this difference, to avoid disharmonies and to build an effort towards unification of cultural and arts, the Malaysian government introduced the National Cultural Policy in 1971. This policy is a basis for interpreting the identity in a context that can be adopted by all the people in Malaysia (JKNN, 2016). The National Cultural Policy was formulated by considering the facts of the orientations of Malaysia, regional history and its position as a centre of civilisation's meetings and trade over the past two thousand years ago.

2.0 Contemporary Malaysian Product Design Identity issues

The effort to show the Malaysian identity in design are already there in certain products, such as the buildings, gates, statues, lamp posts, craft items such as pewter and jewelry (M. Ibrahim, 2007). Malaysian can see on the architectural for example; the MARA building is one of the symbolic of Malaysian identity with a blend of several elements. With Malay boat-shaped podium block, and the outside mural influenced by *pucuk rebung*¹; this motif was embroidered with a variety of woven *songket*² that symbolises the identity of Malays in Malaysia. The National Library, which is located in Jalan Tun Razak, was a concept influenced from the Malay headdress or *tengkolok*³. While in Klang and Selangor, there are sculpture and statue crafted based on the shape of the *keris*⁴ and *tengkolok*. *Tengkolok* or headdress symbolises the monarchy while the *keris* act as a symbol of power and strength of the Malays. *Wau*⁵ or kite, the Malay traditional game is also a symbol for Malaysia Airlines, the lamppost design in Putrajaya influenced by the arabesque motifs blending with Malay traditional weapons which are the *keris* and Malay dagger. All of them clearly shows the height of elegance and the art of Malay people which indirectly accentuate the Malaysian identity.

In the context of product design, especially when it comes to mass production, Malaysian identity has never been prioritised due to the manufacturer are more concerned towards the profitability of the company (M. Ibrahim, 2007). Identity in product design is important. Application of Malaysian identity in product design can offer lots of advantages, especially with changes in technology and market forces.

A daily bulletin for marketers by warc.com discussed the issues about the branding of Malaysian products (warc, 2015). They believe that brands can help in building the Malaysian identity. They consider that brands play a significant role in promoting the sense of national unity, according to the study conducted by them among 18-35 years old respondents in Kuala Lumpur, Klang and Kuching. They found out that the Malaysians have the feels to want to see the brands that can reflect the country's multiculturalism society. The study carried by warc.com also stated that the diverse ethnicity and other practice mix have all contributed to the effort of strengthening the Malaysian identity. Though more than half of the respondents from the study recognises themselves as Malaysians before their particular ethnicity, they were conscious of how these social components of religion and ethnicity will create a fragmented sense of the national identity.

3.0 Malaysian Identity: An Overview

Before this research discuss the keywords within the social components in Malaysian society, it is important first to understand the orientation of Malaysia itself based on its general identification; i.e., Geographically, demographically, affiliations, etc. This identification guides this paper to narrow down the search and look extensively in selected aspects

1 **Pucuk Rebung**, is an original Malay motif that had been used for long time ago and still applying it as a traditional Malay Motif.

2 **Songket** is a fabric that belongs to the brocade family of textiles of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. It is hand-woven in silk or cotton, and intricately patterned with gold or silver threads

3 **Tengkolok** is a type of headdress used since the period of Malay Sultanate. In Negeri Sembilan, Tengkolok is widely known as 'Destar'. The arts skills and creativity of the folder known as 'Tukang Lipat' gives variation in designing the Destar.

4 **Keris**, is an asymmetrical dagger with distinctive blade-patterning achieved through alternating laminations of iron and nickelous iron

5 **Wau** is an intricately designed Malaysian moon-kite (normally with floral motifs) that is traditionally flown by men in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. It is one of Malaysia's national symbols

that are major as identification towards Malaysian identity, in visuals and keywords. This research then looks into related theories in the field and will pull out the most vibrant components to elaborate the next process of discussions.

3.1 Malaysia: The Orientation

Malaysia, a bustling melting pot of religions and races where Malays, Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups live together in harmony. Malaysian multicultural society has yielded a gastronomical utopia and is home to various festivals. One of the key attractions is its extreme contrasts, which add up to a theme of diversity. Modern buildings and skyscrapers look down on wooden houses built on stilts, and five-star hotels are just a few metres from the ancient reef. Most people often mistakenly use the term “Malay” to refer to Malaysian, but Malay refers to only one of the many ethnic groups that make up modern Malaysian society. The national culture is more accurately referred to as ‘Malaysian Culture’ or ‘*Kebudayaan Malaysia*’ in the national language (Shamsul, 1996).

In Malaysian society, the various ethnic groups have their own distinctive cultures; they include Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian as well as various indigenous groups living on the peninsular and in nearby Sabah and Sarawak. A unified Malaysian culture is something that is still developing in the country. There are several initiatives being taken by all parties in order to achieve this unity. And various avenues are being used. One of the proven successes is via a government programme known as the *1 Malaysia Project*. At the national level, two distinct groups can be discerned: first, the elite among Malays who dominate the country’s politics, and second, the Chinese who help develop the country economically (J. Chin, 2015). The Malay and Chinese are the two ethnic groups that are most prominent in building the nation. They are sometimes competing, but their complementary influences are now shaping the culture as a whole. To date, North Borneo, where the two states of Sabah and Sarawak are located, has been less influential in shaping the national culture, and their extremely vibrant ethnic culture are shrouded by the wealthier, and much larger peninsular society (Gom, Jiony, Tanakinjal, & Siganal, 2015).



Figure 1: Malaysia map taken from Malaysia Administrative Divisions

Looking at the geography, Malaysia is split between eastern and western parts that were united into one country in 1963 (Ireland, 1963). The western region usually referred to as the Malay peninsular, stretches from the border of Thailand to the island of Singapore. Sabah and Sarawak, in the north of Borneo and separated by the country of Brunei, is referred to as the Eastern part of Malaysia. The Peninsular is divided by the central mountain range called ‘Banjaran Titiwangsa’. The east coast is more agrarian; less populated and demographically has more Malays. The western region of the peninsular is industrial and more urban, and is the region where the majority of immigrants live and work (Gale, 2007). The capital city of Malaysia is Kuala Lumpur, located in the middle of the western immigrant belt. The federal government administration is located in Putrajaya, some 30kms south of the city.

Demographically, there are thirty-one million people in Malaysia, and throughout its history the territory has been sparsely populated relative to its territorial region. Only twenty-percent of the population lives in Sabah and Sarawak, the rest is on the peninsular (Gale, 2007). Demographically, 61% are Malays, 24% Chinese decent, 10% of Indian descent, and 5% others. These figures have a great deal of significance in the history of the peninsular. The country of Malaysia country, because of its colonial history, was created with this diverse demography in mind. There have been discussions about curbing immigration, in the 1930s and 1940s, Malay leaders organized their community to discuss this. Malaysia as it is today was created after independence in 1957, when the Borneo together with its substantial population of indigenous people was added to Malaya; i.e. added to the peninsular (Ireland, 1963).

With respect to language, Malay is Malaysia's sole national language and became the official language in 1967; this became normalized without fanfare. There is an illustrious history of this Austronesian language as the lingua franca throughout the region. However, English is also widely used, not least because it was the administrative language of the British colonizers (Ying, Heng, & Abdullah, 2015). Nowadays, along with Malay and English, there are some other popular languages spoken, such as a combination of Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese by the Malaysian Chinese. Most of the Malaysian Indians speak Tamil, and various other languages and dialects flourish among aboriginal groups, especially in Sabah and Sarawak. This multilingualism society is well acknowledged by the Malaysian government, and this research can see it through several media such as televisions broadcasting and radios, where the stations are using multiple languages particularly in their news channels (Firdaus, 2006). Given the Malaysian people are so linguistically heterogeneous, they tend to be adept at learning other languages; many of them know multiple languages. The rapid industrialization in Malaysia since the 1980's has tended to maintain the importance of English and this has become the language of business (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

Given the diversity in identities, based on religious beliefs, demography, and linguistic affiliation, the selection of cultural symbols can be a source of tension (Haque, 2003). In this diverse society, any selected national emblem risks privileging one group over another. For example, the king is not just the symbol of the state, but it is also a symbol of the Malay political hegemony. To avoid the misperception in symbolism, the society tends to choose, or often emphasizes, natural features like the sea turtle, the orangutan or the hibiscus (Independenceday.com, 1997). In terms of economics and business, products also have nationally represented logos, such as the national car manufacturer Proton, Malaysia Airlines, and the Petronas Towers, which is the world's highest twin tower, have somehow symbolize the modern days of Malaysia. Looking at the other context, the government slogan of 'Malaysia Boleh' (Malaysia Can!) is a way to encourage a greater accomplishments in every aspects, the slogan of 'Malaysia Truly Asia' is seems to be a successful effort within its program as it attracts tourist to come to this diverse ethnicity of Asian culture in Malaysia (Ismail, 2017).

3.2 Selection of Cultural Components

Dominant theories of the national identities are concerning the nation history and political economy, and the elements in culture usually refer to be either in the area of high culture, the ceremonies or invented traditions, or folk culture. These are reified concepts of culture, which are relevant because they are the part of the cultural matrix surrounding the nation. Concerning this research, where it tends to review the broad national product design identity keywords, it was supported by Edensor, stating that, the attempt made to establish the national identity meaning cannot incorporate the whole cultural matrix; i.e., cultural, social or political (2002, p. 8). Edensor then continues by stating that it should concentrate on symbolic dimensions, and a few selective to suit the purposes of the intended studies.

This research then further looks at the different theories of culture and identity, from a broad view and the personal aspect. Several components of culture and identity described by Clarke (2011) and several identification variables outlined by Ibrahim (2015) that is more focused on the person's identity; which also reflected the national identity from psychological perspectives. It is important to review these available theories to have a strong ground in selecting the suitable components for evaluations. This research then drew a framework to put the theories and understanding together to pull out the keywords from there. The basis of the selected keywords are from the discussion within the theories (figure 2), and later was supported by the literature from Malaysian perspectives. Eight components were chosen, which are the religions, fashion, food, festive season, architectural, arts and craft, and traditional sports and games.

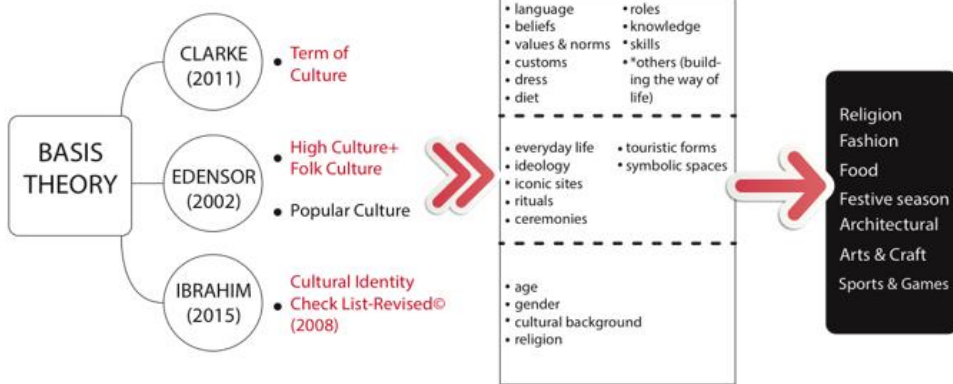


Figure 2: Theory review approaching the cultural components

3.3 Review on the selected components

The first impressions of the foreign culture can seem literally and figuratively incomprehensible when the tourist arrived in any country that they are visiting. They will experience an array of different traditions, societal norms, languages, all of which offered beautiful and rewarding sensory experiences. As a tourist, they begin to put together the unfamiliar aspects surrounding them and create a rudimentary understanding of what Malaysia is like when they start to interact with the locals. As soon as they enter Malaysia, they will understand it through its delightful street food, sounds of calls to prayer, and its artistic decorated religious places feasting a multiplicity of traditions in religions. This scenario brought to the understanding towards one of the Malaysia's most amazing aspects - the diversity of its people. Comprising various ethnicity including Malays, Chinese, and Indians and other minorities, Malaysia is distinctly multicultural.

While reviewing the selected social elements within Malaysian societies, this study will highlight the relevant keywords associated with each component.

3.3.3.1 Religions

One of the unique Malaysian aspects is the mixture of religions that live together, despite the country often being identified as an Islamic country. Each of the **diverse** societies derives from equally different religious traditions (W. N. W. Husin & Ibrahim, 2016; Malaysian Government, 2014; Yaacob, 2011). Calling for prayer adhan of the mosque are blended with scents of burning incense; women in hijab walk next to women wearing the saris; storefronts sells wooden carvings of Ganesh next to sculptures of the Buddha. By experiencing these traditions, the tourist sensory experiences changes into a broader context of culture, which will enrich their everyday lives.



Figure 3: The diversity of religion in Malaysia

Malaysia recognises the right to practice religion but also places boundaries on this right with the stated goal of fostering social **harmony** and protecting Islam as the main religion of the country (Malaysian Government, 2014). The government of Malaysia, which monitors Islamic religious activities, promotes Sunni Islam above all other religions. Malaysia maintains a parallel legal system, with several civil cases covered by Sharia for Muslims. Ibrahim (2013) stated that religious freedom and tolerance in Malaysia is acknowledged by many and argued by few. He then added saying that one of the common factors devoted to Malaysian economic growth and development is the presence and maintaining of religious tolerance and harmony among Malaysian multiracial and multi-religious citizens.

Each of the ethnic groups maintains its identification culturally - tradition, religion and language, making Malaysia not just multi-ethnic, but **multi-religious**. In Malaysia, people can meet all the major religions around the world: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. Referring to the Population Census in 2010, 60% of Malaysians are Muslims, 19% are Buddhists, 6.3% Hindus, 9.1% Christians, and 5.6% were of other religious (Yaacob, 2011). In Malaysia, religious groups tend to reflect with ethnicity. Malays usually described as Muslims. Islam has been recognised as a reference to identity that shaped Malay of today. Nevertheless, Islam, as practised by Malays, has also included some factors of pre-Islamic Malay called '**adat**' (Williamson, 2017; Yaacob, 2011). Most Chinese are Buddhists. Buddhism, as practised by them from school, is deeply inspired by Taoism, Confucianism, other old beliefs and worship to the ancestor. The majority of Indians are Hindus, although some Indians are also Muslims and Christians. Most of the Bumis in Sabah and Sarawak are Christians, although there are also Muslims and animists amongst them. '*Orang Asli*' of Malay Peninsula practised some forms of animism, but an increasing number of them have converted to either Islam or Christianity in recent time (Yaacob, 2011).

3.3.3.2 Traditional Dresses: The Fashion Statement

The diversity and richness of traditional Malaysian dresses can be seen throughout the country. There is a variety of beautiful and **colourful** clothes which vary in style and design from one state to another (Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010; Mun et al., 2015). The appear of modern Malaysia in the early 1960s extends to add further of the fascinating collection of traditional dresses. Malaysian clothes include the Borneo of Sabah and Sarawak, also rich in culture and tradition from its **diverse** ethnicity and indigenous people, contributed further to the Malaysian fashion heritage (Thomas Williamson, 2011).

Today, Malaysian are the most fortunate to see the precious legacy of traditional dresses of different ethnic groups and societies in Malaysia as their cultural identity that can make them proud. The traditional Malaysian clothes become a **kaleidoscope of colours, vibrant and a visual delight** to everyone (Thomas Williamson, 2011).



Figure 4: The Malaysian traditional dresses

Malaysia Tourism Ministry webpage did describe the scenario and history of Malaysian traditional attire. From a beautiful tribal head-feathers with bark body-covers to antique gold-woven royal '**songket**' fabric, the fashion of Malaysia's traditional textiles and dresses are **colourful** and **diverse**. In the ancient years, the indigenous tribes wore **nature** made bark clothes and beads. With the arrival of the ancient kingdoms, the Malay rulers and the Royals used hand-loomed beautiful textiles

1 **Adat** is a customary law of the indigenous peoples of Malaysia and Indonesia. It was the unwritten, traditional code governing all aspects of personal conduct from birth to death

and **sophisticated** Malay *batik*¹. As foreign trade grew, textiles and costumes such as Indian 'pulicat' or plaid 'sarong', Chinese silk, and the Arabian jubah a robe with loose sleeves introduced to the people. Today, traditional attire such as the *Baju Melayu*, *baju kebaya*, Chinese *cheongsam* and Indian *saree* are still widely worn (Tourism Malaysia, 2017).

3.3.3.3 Malaysian cuisines

The culture of one ethnicity can be seen through several ways and one of the most distinct forms through the cuisine or food. Md. Nor (2012) stated that food or traditional cuisine had a profound influence on cultural identity through ethnicity and some elements in the food preparations, as well as the consumption, are part of the ethnic identity.

Malaysian foods and cookery consists of cuisine traditions and practices discovered in Malaysia and indicates the multiethnicity society of its people. As a result of foreign powers colonisations, historical migrations and its geographical positions within the Asia Pacific region, Malaysia's food and culinary style today is primarily an assortment of traditions from its diverse ethnicity society (Hamzah, Karim, Othman, & Hamzah, 2013; Ramli, Suhaimi, Salehuddin, Zahari, & Abdul, 2015; Yoshino, 2010), the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bornean ethnic people. Malaysian food also is highly influenced by the style of cooking from the Middle East, Indian, Europe, China and Indonesia; this is because the peninsula used to be the trade centre over the centuries (SBS Food, 2015). The mixture of influence then resulted in a harmony of tastes, making Malaysian dishes incredibly complex and different.



Figure 5: The variety of Malaysian traditional food

In general, Malaysian food can be considered **spicy**. The foods are not usually included the chilli on each ingredient, but there will at least be a chilli-based or sambal as part of the servings (SBS Food, 2015). Malay cookery often using the traditional herbs from South-east Asian, spices originating from India and China, and the Middle East cuisine also influences some of them (Nor et al., 2012; Yoshino, 2010). Those combinations are leading to the **aromatic** blends of cumin and coriander which are the basis of most Malay curries, with lemongrass, fenugreek, cardamom and kaffir lime leaves (Nor et al., 2012). Most places in Asia, rice is an essential staple and usually, serves in most courses. Thai or local rice is the most common, but in biryani dishes, they are using the Indian basmati. 'Nasi lemak' or coconut rice, a speciality of rice steamed with coconut milk and served together with dried Anchovies or 'Ikan Bilis', hard boiled eggs, cucumber, peanuts and 'sambal'; it is considered Malaysia's traditional cuisine. Nasi lemak often served with curries or a hot spicy meat stew known as 'rendang'. Noodles are another favourite starch staple, as are Indian meals such as 'chapati', 'tosei' and 'roti canai', which are commonly eaten with breakfast.

Through the early migration during the colonisation, local Malay often married the early Chinese settler, which gave rise to a generation of '**Peranakan**', a mixed of Malay-Chinese. The Malay title '**nonya**', a term of respect towards older women, has become familiar with the characteristic of a Malay-Chinese cooking technique of the *Peranakans* (SBS Food, 2015; Traveller, 2013; Yoshino, 2010). Looking at the Malaysian desserts, they are amazingly **creative** and **colourful** (Yoong &

¹ **Batik**, the art or method of producing coloured design on textiles by dyeing them, Malaysian and Indonesia share the same history of Batik.

Lim, 2014), the dessert or '*kuih*', commonly served during high tea and can be easily found in any road-side food stall selling breakfast in the morning.

3.3.3.4 Malaysian festive season

Malaysia is a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-racial society (Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010). Malaysia also is one of the places in the world where people can experience a **multitude** of cultural festivals and celebrations (Soh, 2012). The community is made up of three main races, which are the Malays, Chinese Indians, and several other ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Given with the ethnic culture of different roots and origins, Malaysia is a nation that **tolerates** the tradition of various religious beliefs and cultural festivals (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 2013). Traditional and modern celebrations of each ethnic group picture the treasured **legacy** that help them to continue exist until today (Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010, p. 13). The government acknowledges them, and in fact, holds particular dates as official public holidays for the celebration. Malaysian government and its people realise that, as one of the effort to maintain the **harmony** and peace within the society, festivals and celebrations of each ethnicity must be allowed to continue as of how they should be (O. C. Abdullah, 2012). Holidays, festivals and celebrations are important, as they are the foundation of **mutual respect** and understanding for all the ethnicity. Besides, there are provisions and outlines in the law that protects the heritage and identity of all Malaysians. By a strong synergy within the Malaysian society, Malaysia has made much improvement socially since its independence in 1957 (Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010). Finally, the understanding and cognitive respect among Malaysians towards other religious and cultural observances have reached somewhat a high level of harmony within the Malaysian society.

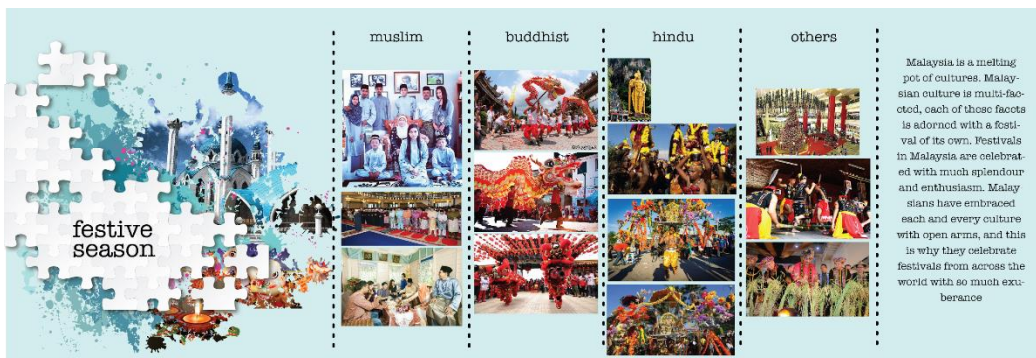


Figure 6: Malaysia festivals and celebrations. The festivals in Malaysia usually reflected the religions of the society celebrating it, while at the same time Malaysian do celebrate other types of festivities such as the food festivals, lights festivals etc.

Malaysia hosts various festival celebrations of different cultures and religions, such as *Hari Raya Aidilfitri* which comes after the holy month of Ramadhan, *Hari Raya Haji* for the Muslim, for the Chinese, the Mid-Autumn Festival and Chinese New year, *Deepavali*, *Wesak* and *Thaipusam* for the Indians and Christmas for the Christians. There are also the Harvest festival or *Gawai Dayak* and *Tadau Kaamatan* for the aborigines ethnics in Sabah and Sarawak. In Malaysia, everyone is welcome to participate in any of the celebrations regardless of any religion they are because they believe in **togetherness** in everything (Toumi, 2017), and Malaysian people always open their doors for people to come and celebrate the occasion together.

3.3.3.5 Malaysian Architecture

The evolution of Malaysian styles in architecture is one of the greatest achievements of the local architectural design history. The history of Malaysian architecture was critically discussed by Ho (2005) and Finch (2015, p. 4), it shows that even though there are lots of influences from foreign countries, the style of design still showing the identity of this region. In the 5th century AD, merchants from China and India used the trade route in the East-west Malay peninsula and stopped at *Tanjung Dawai* before they continue their journey. The sailors or merchants travelling between China and India sees *Tanjung Dawai* as a perfect destination to get a rest while waiting for the changing of monsoons. At the same time, they

spread their culture and religion while they were doing the trades. This cultural-spread activity is evident during early Hindu-Buddhist culture in *Tanjung Dawai*, Kedah - they had left their marks in the form of tomb temples known as 'candi' at Bujang Valley or 'Lembah Bujang'. Later centuries, Kedah became a place of Sri Vijaya, the Sumatran kingdom. The origin of the Indian Kingdom's architectural styles could be discovered in the early construction of Majapahit and Sri Vijaya Empires, dated from the 7th to the 14th centuries. Eventually, Malacca's port was established as an important meeting point, where it became an important trading centre for transportation route between India and China. The merchants or traders brought along their customs and cultures, which had influenced the existing local's culture.

Malaysian architectural styles have been classified according to the design of the buildings according to Heritage of Malaysia Trust. The structural consists several influences by the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Europeans sources which are a mixture of various styles, and modified to suit the Malaysian environment. The Malaysian architectural styles also can be summed up in a timeline by referring to the next figure.

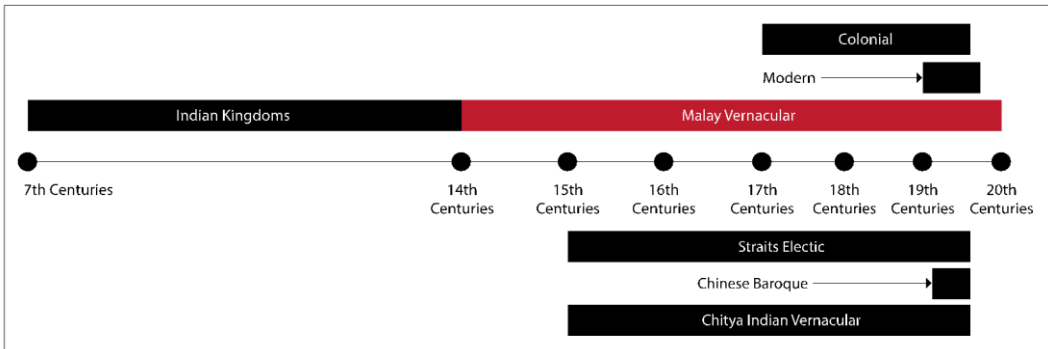
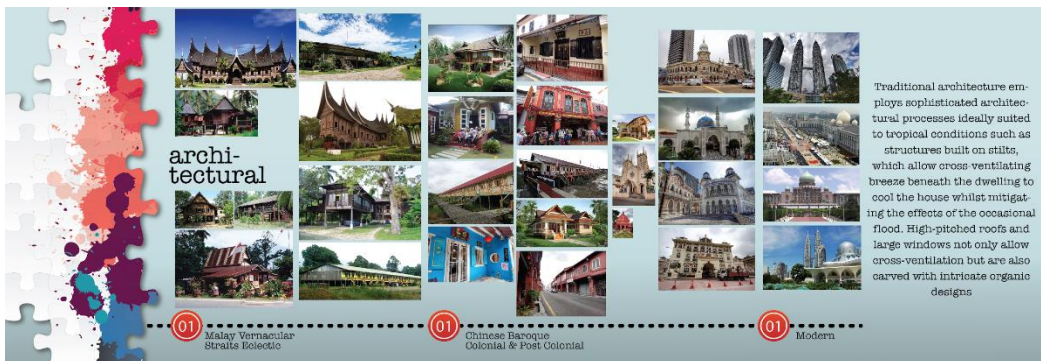


Figure 7: Malaysian architectural influences timeline

The European forms have long influenced the Malaysian architectural styles even before the Second World War. These are evident when looking at the buildings in most west coast peninsula cities such as in Perak, Penang, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur. These styles has been highly modified to suit the tropical climate while combining the form of Malay, Chinese, classical Portuguese and English architecture. In the 15th Century, when the Chinese traders came to the Malacca Straits Settlement places, they had brought the 'Straight Eclectic' styles when constructing their buildings. Later after that, when the British came and modernisation era approaching, the shop houses and terrace houses have created a unique style in urban buildings with the combination influences from the Dutch, Portuguese and English. This urban architecture also has been altered to cope with the tropical climate of Malaysia, making it unique in its own style.



1 **Straits Eclectic** is a form of architectural style prevalent in vernacular shop houses in George Town from the early 20th century

Figure 8: Images of most Malaysian architecture, which holds the identity of the people in the region

After looking briefly at the history and influences towards Malaysian architecture, this research is then looking at each ethnicity in particular. Traditional Malay homes or buildings employ **sophisticated** architectural processes to suit the **tropical** conditions (Surat et al., 2010). This technique can be seen through most of the buildings was built on stilts (to cool the house by allowing the **cross-ventilating** breeze beneath the dwelling) while at the same time lessening the effects of flooding which occur every end of the year. Today, most Malay or Islamic buildings incorporated the element of **Moorish** design and can be seen at the Islamic Art Museum, several government buildings in Putrajaya, and most of the mosques design throughout the country (Rasdi, 2010).

The Chinese architecture has two distinct types, the traditional and **Baba-Nyonya**. The traditional buildings of Chinese culture can be seen on the temples found throughout the country (Ahmad, 1994). The Baba-Nyonya styles, especially in houses architecture can be seen in Penang and Malacca, this kind of houses was built with an **indoor courtyard**, decorated beautifully with **colourful** tiles. Looking at the Indian style of buildings, local Hindu temples exhibit the colourful and exciting architecture of Southern India, since most of the Indians in Malaysia coming from there (Anjum, 2007). The most elaborate and ornate Hindu temple in Malaysia is the Sri Mahamariamman in Kuala Lumpur, which built in the late 19th century. The temple's decorative aspects included sophisticated **carvings**, lots of **gold ornaments**, hand-painted motifs and various exquisite tiles from Spain and Italy (Tourism Malaysia, 2011).

Two unique and distinct architectural highlights of the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak are **water villages** and **longhouses** (Finch, 2015; Ho K. C., Hasan A. S., 2005). Longhouses are traditional community homes to the **riverine tribes**. These stilted and **elongated structures**, often roofed with **thatched leaves** or **woven 'atap'**, tied with creeper fibre and built of axe-hewn timber. Longhouses can accommodate between 20 to 100 families. Rural water villages built on stilts are also usually located along seafronts and riverbanks. The houses linked by plank walkways with boats anchored on the sides. The people often travel by 'sampan' or 'canoe' to move around the village.

3.3.3.6 Traditional arts and craft

Given that foreign countries historically have influenced Malaysia, there are significant steps taken by the artisans and creative people to preserve their traditional art and forms (S. Abdullah, 2010). For example, until today, in the main occasions, '*Mak Yong*¹', the traditional form of *Malay drama* still played in the opening ceremonies (Yusof, 1990). This genre of an act where they combine dance and sings and play out the **heroic** tales about the beloved **king** and **princess** of 'Tanah Melayu'. This show performance then followed by '*Gamelan*²', an orchestra performance consisting metal percussion instruments including drums, gongs and xylophones (UNESCO, 2008).

Other traditional artistic and musical form is '*Wayang kulit*³' - an old famous theatre art-form using **shadow play** and **puppets** to tell the epic tales of the Ramayana (Randhawa, Puah, & Loone, 2005; Yusof, 1990). Garland Making or '*Bunga Malai*' is an essential part of the artistic heritage of Malaysian Indians for religious and spiritual occasions like moving house, welcoming important guest and most of them played during the weddings. The Malay martial art - *Silat*, with '*keris*' or '*tombak*' as the weapon, is the traditional Malay art of self-defense combines various supple movements, which help people to defend themselves under any provocation (Nizam, Shapie, & Elias, 2015). *Silat* has been thought in most schools in Malaysia as part of the curricular activities. For the indigenous people, the 'Orang Asli' and various other ethnicities in Sabah and Sarawak, the use of '*sumpit*' or blowpipe help them during hunting, and it is also an integral part of the martial art of their people (Gomes, 2004).

1 **Mak yong** or **mak yung** is a traditional form of dance-drama from northern Malaysia, particularly the state of Kelantan.

2 The **Malay Gamelan** which exist today in Malaysia is basically from the courts of Riau-Lingga, Terengganu and Pahang state in Malaysia. Even it is said to be originated from the land of Indonesia, the Javanese, Malays Gamelan has developed a distinct identity compared to the Balinese (Bali province in Indonesia), Javanese (Jawa province in eastern Indonesia), and Sundanese (The 'Sunda' ethnic in Indonesia). Malays Gamelan usually played at royal and traditional occasions during the Pahang Sultanate, Sultan Ahmad (1882-1914) and Sultan Sulaiman, Terengganu (1920-1942).

3



Figure 9: Malaysian traditional arts and crafts (most of them in the picture are souvenirs). Some of the craft arts are usually daily use items, but the Malaysian artisans realised that these products hold a significant value towards their ethnicity identity and make them as souvenirs for the tourists

Malaysian arts and craft are as **vibrant** and **colourful** as its multicultural background (Ashbee, 2014). Most Malaysian arts and crafts influenced by **nature** such as **leaves, flowers and animals**, and most craft arts in Malaysia is **hand-made** which resulting in an emotional value towards the product (Haron, Yusof, Taha, & Mutalib, 2014; Hays, 2013). From arts and expression on clothes to kites, Malaysian artisans use various media to express their intentions. The internationally renowned Malaysian crafts and arts are pewter products from the Royal Selangor Company (Ashbee, 2014). Each state in Malaysia have their kind of products as artistic work, made the souvenirs from Malaysia unique, colourful and vibrant in its ways.

Batik, a traditional technique of hand-dyeing fabrics, and also refer to **decorative-classic nature motifs**, is a favourite souvenir from the east coast states in Peninsula, Kelantan and Terengganu (Legino, 2012; Tourism Malaysia, 2017). **Songket** is another popular Malaysian fabric, made by weaving silver and gold threads together with fabric threads to create an exquisite design. Textiles and fabrics sometimes give deeper spiritual significance. The method of **weaving** the '*pua kumbu*', a sacred ceremonial textile, for instance, represents a socio-religious and spiritual job for the Iban women in Sarawak. Another traditional handicraft item is '*labu sayong*', a black coloured and glossy clay jar. Every gourd-shaped jar needs days to be formed and this usually did in manual, engraving, firing, and then drying. The most genuine *labu sayong* can be found in Kampung Sayong in Perak. The Malay traditional game, '**Wau**' or a kite, is one of the Malaysian heritage arts and craft (Zaki & Azhari, 2016). The '*wau*' has been translated into a symbol and can be found as an airline logo for Malaysia airline (MAS). Wau's frame was made from a bamboo, while the motifs and patterns drawn on rice paper are carefully glued on the wau piece by piece.

In expanding to its handicraft market and value, Malaysia's modern art scene is turning their views and starting to discuss how to move forward. Malaysian arts and craft was considered as relevant and dynamic, and some of the work from Malaysian contemporary artisans has been auctioned at record prices in international level, establishing visionary and imaginary Malaysian artists as a drive to be recognised (S. Abdullah, 2010).

3.3.3.7 Malaysian Traditional Sports and games

Malaysia in History has been colonised by the British, Japanese, Dutch and Portuguese before eventually, they gained independence from the British in 1957 (Williamson, 2017; Yaacob, 2011). The colonisation by the British has given the greatest impact on total strata of the country (Omar, Majid, & Puteh, 2006). During the occupation by the British, they brought Indian and Chinese to work in the mining industry and rubber estate plantations. This historical migration brought along with them their customs, beliefs, religion, rituals, and also their preferences in sporting activities.

Omar (2006) had discussed the Malaysian sports until today, and he has divided the discussions of traditional Malaysian games into three different times, before, during and after the colonisation. Before the conquest by foreign powers, Malaysian traditional games and sports were mainly influence by animism, a belief where a vital force does exist in human and animated objects. Some of the examples are:

Silat - martial arts and a form of self-defence which involves a belief in spiritual powers and requires meditation.

Kite flying - it was believed that initially kites were flown as a magical rite in connection with the harvesting of the rice at paddy fields.

Cock-fighting - required the shaman master who was seen to chant and blow incantation to the birds or the trained chickens for blessing and sprinkled over them the 'charmed water'.

During the colonisation, the British have managed to establish the colonial education, which gave the most pervasive influence on the evolution of plays and traditional sports culture in Malaysia. Colonial education and learning also reconstructed certain traditional values and also affected the mindset of the younger generation who practised Western values. The introduction to western sports such as rugby, cricket and soccer spread fast among Malaysian societies. In 1957, Malaysia gained independence from the British government. The separation or the 'divide and rule' of the different races during the colonisation era, resulted in every race practising their sporting activity lacking in the integration of any other races. Sports and games in Malaysia after independence, acted as a means to develop the spirit of national integration and nationalism among the Malaysian societies.

Malaysian traditional games have significant value in shaping the culture of the ethnicity in Malaysia (Omar et al., 2006). It is not just a game or activities; it is a cultural heritage that should be preserved by the Malaysian, as it is an essential part of the nation identity. Looking at the tourism promotion brochure to promote Malaysia, they are focusing on promoting the tourism hotspots, culture, or food, but, traditional games in Malaysian culture seem to be forgotten even though these unique activities can attract international and local tourists (Shah, Chyan, & Hisham, 2014).



Figure 10: Several images showing the traditional game played and what they are using. The children play most of the game during their free time

Leong (2009) discussed the scenario of Malaysian traditional games in Malaysia. He stated that now, people can watch the traditional game being played in the **rural** areas. Most of the games are **simple** and just using the **nature** such as catching the spider to pit against another spider, red saga seeds as marbles, walking on stilts made of coconut shells, 'baling selipar' or throwing sandals in a formation; these are the games or activities that often hold spectators in awe. To conclude, Malaysians' great sense of society is exhibited in most of their traditional games and **pastimes**. These games are still played by local children during their free times and are also a popular activity during festivities such as the weddings or during the harvest season.

4.0 The 'Keywords'

After reviewing the cultural components of the Malaysian society, this research conducts a questionnaire to select the most vibrant keywords, which are related to each element. More than 200 participants involved in this questionnaire, which helps to strengthen the chosen keywords. The results of the survey are shown in the tables below:

Table 1: Survey on keyword: Religious and Beliefs

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Religions and Beliefs	Diverse	(W. N. W. Husin & Ibrahim, 2016), (Malaysian Government, 2014), (Yaacob, 2011)	12.6%
	Harmony	(Malaysian Government, 2014)	32.1%
	Multi-religious	(Yaacob, 2011)	10.4%
	Tolerance	(Ammar Fadzil, 2011), (Bakar, 2011)	27.6%
	Adat	(Williamson, 2017)	17.3%

Table 2: Survey on keyword: Traditional Dresses - The Fashion statement

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Traditional Dresses: The Fashion Statement	Diverse	(Hanisa Hassan, Zaman, & Santosa, 2015)	10.1%
	Colourful	(Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010; Mun et al., 2015)	28.2%
	Sophisticated	(Mohamad, 2001)	9.6%
	Songket	(S. Abdullah, 2010; Ashbee, 2014; Haron et al., 2014)	25.7%
	Batik	(Legino, 2012; Thomas Williamson, 2011; Tourism Malaysia, 2017)	26.4%

Table 3: Survey on keyword: Malaysian Cuisines

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Malaysian Cuisines	Spicy	(SBS Food, 2015)	33.7%
	Aromatic	(Nor et al., 2012)	22.4%
	Peranakan	(SBS Food, 2015; Traveller, 2013; Yoshino, 2010)	8.2%
	Nyonya	(SBS Food, 2015; Traveller, 2013; Yoshino, 2010)	11.8%
	Creative and Colourful	(Yoong & Lim, 2014)	23.9%

Table 4: Survey on keyword: Festive seasons and celebrations

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Festive Seasons and Celebrations	Multitude	(Soh, 2012)	3.2%
	Tolerates	(Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 2013)	23.7%
	Legacy	(Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010, p. 13)	6.3%
	Mutual Respect	(Mohd Shuhaimi Ishak, 2010, p. 13)	35.2%
	Togetherness	(Toumi, 2017)	31.6%

Table 5: Survey on keyword: Malaysian Architecture

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Malaysian Architecture	Sophisticated	(Surat et al., 2010)	9.7%
	Cross-ventilating	(Rasdi, 2010).	11.4%
	Moorish	(Rasdi, 2010).	0.4%
	Baba-Nyonya	(Ahmad, 1994)	3.9%
	Indoor-courtyard	(Anjum, 2007)	1.7%
	Colourful	(Anjum, 2007)	11.6%
	Carvings	(Tourism Malaysia, 2011)	15.2%
	Gold Ornaments	(Tourism Malaysia, 2011)	1.7%
	Tatched Leaves	(Finch, 2015; Ho K. C., Hasan A. S., 2005)	12.2%
	Wooven	(Finch, 2015; Ho K. C., Hasan A. S., 2005)	13.9%
	Tropical Climate	(Surat et al., 2010)	18.3%

Table 6: Survey on keyword: Traditional Arts and Crafts

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Traditional Arts and Crafts	Makyong	(Ismail, 2017; Tourism Malaysia, 2011; Yousof, 1990)	0.8%
	Gamelan	(Ashbee, 2014; Tourism Malaysia, 2011, 2016b)	0.5%
	Heroic	(UNESCO, 2008)	7.9%
	Kings and Princess	(UNESCO, 2008)	0.2
	Silat	(Hays, 2013; Nizam et al., 2015; Omar et al., 2006)	0.2
	Keris	(M. Ibrahim, 2007; Independenceday.com, 1997; Zaki & Azhari, 2016)	7.6%
	Tombak	(M. Ibrahim, 2007)	0.7%
	Sumpit	(Gomes, 2004)	1.4%
	Vibrant	(Ashbee, 2014)	6.7%
	Colourful	(Ashbee, 2014)	4.1%
	Nature Influences	(Haron et al., 2014; Hays, 2013)	21.8%
	Batik	(Legino, 2012; Thomas Willamson, 2011; Tourism Malaysia, 2017)	12.2%
	Decorative Classic	(Legino, 2012; Tourism Malaysia, 2017)	11.8%
	Songket	(S. Abdullah, 2010; Ashbee, 2014; Haron et al., 2014)	8.7%
	Weaving	(S. Abdullah, 2010; Legino, 2012)	6.3%
Wau	(Hanita Hassan, 2014; M. Ibrahim, 2007)	9.1%	

Table 7: Survey on keyword: Traditional Sports and Games

Cultural Components	Keywords	Citations	Responses
Traditional Sports and Games	Pastimes	(Ewe, 2009)	41.9%
	Nature	(Khairi, 2009; Tourism Malaysia, 2016a)	33.2%
	Simple	(Khairi, 2009; Tourism Malaysia, 2016a)	24.9%

Based on the outcome of the survey, this research has selected 3-5 most selected keywords to represent each cultural element. This process of filtering the result of the literature lead to more reasonable keywords for each component.

Referring to the article discussing Malaysian identity, Malaysian should look into several elements, which are the National Principle, the Constitution and Vision 2020. The other important aspect when the research is looking for Malaysian identity is the National Cultural Policy. Extracting the elements from those four components in searching for the national identity should not change the rights of the bumiputras, national language, free culture, the special rights of Malay kings, and religious practice by all races.

This research aiming at finding the keywords within the Malaysian identity, to establish suitable keywords, which will be incorporated into the Malaysian product design. After the process of discussing the related theories in cultural studies, reviewing the cultural components within the Malaysian society, and conducting a survey to support the discussions, this research have come out with several relevant keywords to be incorporated with the Malaysian product design identity.

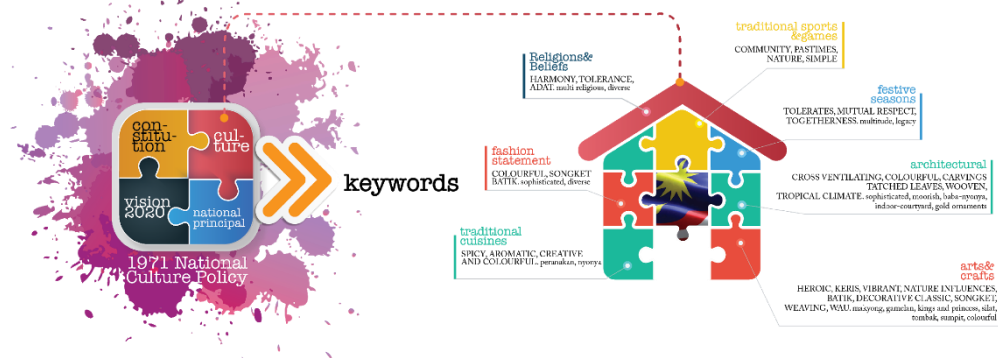


Figure 11: The most suitable keywords that represent each cultural elements within Malaysian society to be incorporated into Malaysia design products

5.0 Discussions

The 'keywords' selected to be incorporated into Malaysian product design were summarised in the next table.

Table 8: Malaysian Product Design Identity 'Keywords' based on the selected cultural components within Malaysian society after conducting a survey

	Cultural Components	Keywords	Unpopular keywords
1	Religions and Beliefs	Harmony, Tolerance, Adat	Multi-religious, Diverse
2	Traditional Dress	Colourful, Songket, Batik	Sophisticated, Diverse
3	Malaysian Cuisines	Spicy, Aromatic, Creative and Colourful	Peranakan, Nyonya
4	Festive Season	Tolerates, Mutual Respect, Togetherness	Multitude, Legacy

5	Architecture	Cross-ventilating, Colourful, Carvings, Thatched Leaves, Woven, Tropical Climate	Sophisticated, Moorish, Baba-Nyonya, Indoor-Courtyard, Gold Ornaments
6	Arts and Crafts	Heroic, Keris, Vibrant, Nature Influences, Batik, Decorative Classic, Songket	Makyong, Gamelan, Kings and Princess, Silat, Tombak, Sumpit, Colourful
7	Traditional Sports and Games	Community, Pastimes, Nature, Simple	

However, there are several issues maybe occur which trigger the confusion among the respondents related to the keyword given. The issues are:

Keywords will work on just within the cultural components:

The aim of this research is to identify the relevant keywords within the Malaysian society. To determine the suitable elements of Malaysian culture, this study reviews the current related theories in cultural studies, then selecting the suitable components to represent Malaysia identity product-related. The outcome of this research, which is the 'keywords', is suitable to be used in various kind of product design; because they were extracted from the Malaysian cultural components that are suitable to represent Malaysian products. For example, the keyword of 'songket' should not just be a reference or influence in designing Malaysian attires, but it also can be applied into the motifs of automotive interior design, graphic in SME food packaging, etc. Those are the example of the possible confusions occurred among respondents when selecting the most vibrant keywords in each cultural elements.

Some keywords might be too general for them and should not represent the items in the selected cultural attributes:

This study evaluated the findings from the survey and examined some of the unpopular keywords among respondents. There are several keywords might be too general for them, for example, the word 'diverse', 'multi-religious', 'sophisticated', and 'colourful'; even though those keywords asserted in most article discussing Malaysian identity. Based on the comments given at the end of the survey, some of them said that those keywords are too broad to be incorporated into the cultural elements, and some of them saying that it is a general understanding of the country and less necessary to be added in a product design characteristic.

Keywords maybe using the unfamiliar term which drives the respondents feeling it is not suitable:

The using of several keywords such as 'Moorish' and 'multitude' might lead to confusion from the respondents. These are the strange and unfamiliar words, which they did not use, in everyday discussion. Based on the comment given, the respondent stated that the word looks interesting but it is wrong to select them without having proper knowledge about it.

5.1 Conclusion

The idea of developing a Malaysian product to be recognised around the world, to stand a level with major companies, is a good vision and it assured is challenging. Given that, it is logical and possible yet relevant seems Malaysia is aiming at becoming a developed country by 2020, it is a significant step to bring together the creative industry as it is helping the economy (Shamsuddin, 2015). Concerning to that, Malaysian creative industry which producing a product to be marketed worldwide should look into embedding the national identity to become more successful and help in establishing the Malaysian image to the world (B. Chin & Ling, 2013). Malaysian product, without a distinct identity, is hard to differentiate with the product from neighbouring countries (Razali & Hands, 2016).

The successful design products usually speak for itself and hold significant values to the users. These are when this study talks about identity and image of the product, whereby these two elements are the active components in determining the successful of each product and the brands they hold. In developing the identity, every element within the product surrounding plays an important role to mirror the user, as discussed in Kapferer (2009) brand identity prism; gestures, picture or even language are all the communicating images that the designer should come to understand and accept as it does mean certain things. If people look at London Black cab, they will conjure up different visuals representing the London city, the Londoners, and how good the services are. If the people are given the Apple products, the direct association of individuals is 'trust', 'safety' and 'loyalty and love'. Those are the two examples of strong identity products that are successful

in the market, but Malaysia does not quite have that since the manufacturers are too concern about the profitability of their companies (Marzuki, 2002).

All the successful products in the world possess a significant meaning as the image trigger something in our psyche. Not just a product which is functional, they represent some deep intuitive wisdom which defies expression. Since our ancestors started painting on the cave walls, an image does stir us as nothing else does. There is always something behind the images and identity of the pictures. It encapsulates a society, culture, status, philosophy, prestige and power visually through various ways such as logos, emblems, flags, etc. - pictorial illustrations that provoke a response in people's mind.

This study has come out with a suggestion of keywords, which are relevant to be included into Malaysian design products where it is suitable. These keywords will guide the designer to make the decision when they are starting to create a Malaysian product with Malaysian identity. This research has applied the method by reviewing the literature and conducting a survey to obtain the final suitable keywords. This research also suggests that in the future, carrying out interviews with the expertise or authorities in each cultural element seems to be a good option in strengthening the validity of the keywords. Visualising and incorporating the keywords with a selected product also appears to be a good step in getting the suitable ways to apply the keywords.

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