

Wooden Furniture Purchase Attributes: A Malaysian Consumers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Consumers evaluate a product based on various attributes when making a purchase decision. In this paper, the types of attributes important to Malaysian consumers when purchasing wooden living room furniture were investigated. Data were gathered from a questionnaire survey of 115 mall-intercepted adult respondents on the perceived importance of five products- and two store-related attributes. It was found that (in rank order) quality, design, and price of the wooden furniture were important product-related purchase attributes for Malaysian consumers. These consumers are expected to limit their purchase to neighbourhood outlets as the location of retail outlets is perceived as an important store-related attribute. Demographic characteristics of the respondents have an influence on the perceived importance of the attributes.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour-evaluative criteria-furniture-wood product

INTRODUCTION

Consumers make various purchase decisions daily. Some of these decisions, at one end of the continuum, are made quickly and with little mental effort especially when purchasing low-priced, frequently bought goods. While on the other end, consumers would normally go through an extensive decision-making process as considerable time and effort are spent in searching information about the product, seeking alternatives, and then to finally decide which of the more expensive and less-frequently bought product to purchase (Mowen and Minor, 2001). Faced with a multitude of products, deciding on a purchase may sometimes not be a simple matter to the consumer. How would the consumer then choose from the many available alternatives?

Consumers would normally evaluate the alternatives based on a myriad of attributes like price, brand name, country of origin, quality and design. These attributes, with different importance in the consumer's mind (Wickliffe and Pysarchik, 2001) form the selection criteria

in purchase decision-making (Gustav *et al.*, 1999; Williams, 2002; Zhiming *et al.*, 2002). It is through this alternative evaluation that consumers gain the information needed to make a final choice. Usually, consumers would compare less-frequently purchased goods like furniture, based on suitability, quality, price, style and functionality (Armstrong and Kotler, 2003).

Several empirical studies on attributes of wooden furniture that are important to consumers in making a purchase decision are available in the literature. Kozak *et al.* (2004), for example, reported that consumers in Western Canada would consider attributes like quality, design and price when deciding on the purchase of value-added wood products including furniture. While similar attributes are mentioned by consumers in British Columbia, price is the second most important after quality (Forsyth *et al.*, 1999). Pakarinen and Asikainen (2001) concluded that quality and design are important attributes for the Finnish wooden household furniture market. The consumers in Croatia and Slovakia would pay more attention to quality

Received: 28 November 2007

Accepted: 21 July 2008

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and price when buying furniture items (Motik *et al.*, 2003). While quality, durability, functionality and comfort are the main concerns to consumers in the European Union (Anon., 2000).

New Zealanders buying wooden outdoor furniture were most interested in the origin, source and management status of the wood material and length of the warranty period (Bigsby and Ozanne, 2002). Even though price is noted as least important, some of the respondents in their survey consider it as the key attribute in making a purchase decision. Based on a study of advertisements placed in newspapers and distributed by furniture stores, Karki (2000) concluded that consumers in southern Germany perceived design, wood species and price as important purchase attributes. Meanwhile, Jen-lan *et al.* (2000) reported a totally different set of attributes are of importance to consumers in Taipei City, Taiwan - namely comfort, durability and size.

The various studies mentioned above shows that some purchase attributes are common to consumers worldwide. While there are common (and different) attributes used in making a wooden furniture purchase decision, the importance placed on each attribute by consumers could vary in different markets. In this context, this study seeks to identify the choice criteria used by Malaysian consumers when purchasing wooden household furniture.

METHOD

The type of wooden furniture considered in this study is wooden living room furniture. Based on a preliminary survey, five product-related attributes were identified, which are believed to be of concern to Malaysian consumers when deciding on the purchase of furniture items. These attributes are quality, design, price, origin of the product and brand name. Two store-related attributes, namely location of the retail outlet and availability of credit terms, were also included as the respondents frequently mentioned these attributes during the survey.

A questionnaire was then designed, which sought to obtain data on the perceived importance of the attributes. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each of the attributes were important in their purchase of wooden living room furniture based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all important to 5 = very important. Demographic information was

also collected, whereby the respondents were asked to indicate their gender, age, ethnic group and monthly gross household income at the time of completing the questionnaire.

The self-administered questionnaire was distributed to systematically sampled adults in a shopping mall. These adults were selected randomly based on a pre-determined criterion - every fifth adult who passed the interviewer was to be solicited. However, only those who indicated their willingness to participate in the survey were given the questionnaire. In addition, only those who are 20 years of age and above were included in the survey with the assumption that they are or would be buyers of furniture items. One hundred and fifteen completed and usable questionnaires were obtained at the end of the survey period. A summary of the respondents' characteristics are presented in Table 1.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relative Importance of the Attributes

The following analysis concerns the evaluation of relative importance of the seven attributes based on their mean scores. As the scale used in this study ranges from 1 to 5, a score above 3 (the midpoint) indicates that the attribute is important, while a score below it indicates that the attribute is not important. Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the scores for the attributes for all respondents.

The respondents placed an importance on three product-related attributes when deciding on a purchase of wooden living room furniture. These attributes (in rank order) are quality, design, and price. The mean scores of the three attributes are above 4, which mean that they are highly important to all respondents. There is also less variation in opinions on the importance of these attributes, with the largest standard deviation being 0.72, when compared with other attributes.

The importance of quality in a purchase decision of a product was not only emphasised by the respondents in this study but also in others. Hult *et al.* (2002) concluded that the Malaysian consumers indicated that quality is of utmost importance when deciding on purchases of groceries, clothing and automobiles. It has also been reported that Malaysian consumers have a strong preference for quality when choosing banking services (Dusuki and Abdullah, 2007). Respondents in a study conducted by

TABLE 1
Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variables	Frequency (%) (n = 115)
Gender:	
Male	47.0
Female	53.0
Age:	
20 – 29 years	30.4
30 – 39 years	33.0
40 – 49 years	27.6
50 years and above	9.6
Ethnic group:	
Malay	43.5
Chinese	39.1
Indian	17.4
Monthly gross household income:	
Less than RM1,000	7.0
RM1,000 – RM2,999	39.1
RM3,000 – RM4,999	38.3
RM5,000 and above	15.7

TABLE 2
Distribution of respondents' response and relative importance of
wooden living room and store attributes

	Level of importance					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Product-related attributes:							
Quality	0	0	3	36	76	4.63	.53
Design	0	1	12	44	58	4.38	.71
Price	1	1	10	59	44	4.25	.72
Origin of product	8	33	46	24	4	2.85	.95
Brand name	14	62	23	13	3	2.38	.93
Store-related attributes:							
Location of outlet	4	20	45	34	14	3.29	1.01
Availability of credit terms	24	28	28	26	9	2.72	1.25

Note: The scale used was 1 = "not at all important" to 5 = "very important"

Ong and Phillips (2007) on older consumers in Malaysia placed a very high importance on quality (and durability) in their purchase decision making. While the notion of quality differs in these situations as they involve different products or services, these findings provide evidence that quality is an important purchase criterion for consumers in Malaysia.

Design or appearance of the product has a propounding influence on consumer evaluation and choice (Creusen and Schoormans, 2005).

Consumers in north-eastern United States of America, for example, are reported to be willing to purchase wooden furniture made from low-grade hardwoods provided they are well-designed (Wang *et al.*, 2004). In general, the respondents of the study placed design as a second most important attribute in deciding on a purchase. However, it is not possible to determine the design of wooden living room furniture preferred from the data collected in this study.

It is rather surprising that price was relatively less important than quality and design. Consumers in developing countries are expected to place a relatively higher importance on price than other product attributes (Zhang *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, the furniture retailers seem to perceive that price is the most important factor in consumers' purchase decision as the many advertisements placed by these retailers have almost always emphasised on price, with minimal details on other attributes of the wooden furniture items advertised. The most probable explanation is that the respondents may have been reluctant to admit that they are price-sensitive thus understating the importance of price in their responses.

Of the two store attributes included in this study, the respondents perceived the location of stores as the only important factor. Most furniture outlets in Malaysia are located in the business section of a residential area or in the proximity of several residential areas, especially the larger outlets. In areas where households are more interspersed, furniture outlets are usually situated in town centres which are readily accessible by

most consumers. As location of the store outlet is important to the respondents, it is expected that they would limit the purchase to outlets within their neighbourhood as studies have shown that the likelihood for a consumer to shop in a location declines as distance increases (e.g. Davies, 1995; Darley and Lim, 1999; Baltas and Papastathopoulou, 2003).

Impacts of demographic factors on the importance of the attributes

Household furniture consumption has been found to be determined by demographic and economic characteristics of the population (International Trade Centre UNCTAD/GATT, 1982). As the above discussion was based on the entire sample, further analyses using ANOVA tests or independent *t*-tests were done to determine the impact of selected demographic variables of the respondents on the importance of the attributes.

The mean importance scores by demographic variables are shown in Table 3, and the results of the statistical tests are summarised in Table 4.

TABLE 3
Mean importance score for wooden living room furniture and store attributes

	Product-related attributes					Store-related attributes	
	Quality	Design	Price	Origin of product	Brand name	Location of outlet	Availability of credit terms
Gender:							
Male	4.57	4.17	4.28	2.81	2.41	3.26	2.78
Female	4.69	4.57	4.23	2.89	2.36	3.33	2.67
Age:							
20 – 29 years	4.71	4.46	4.26	2.86	2.34	3.20	2.89
30 – 39 years	4.66	4.21	4.21	3.05	2.34	3.26	3.08
40 – 49 years	4.55	4.42	4.45	2.61	2.13	3.55	2.42
50 years and above	4.55	4.64	3.82	2.85	3.36	3.00	1.82
Ethnic group:							
Malay	4.68	4.26	4.20	3.00	2.44	3.30	3.06
Chinese	4.58	4.49	4.18	2.56	2.62	3.29	2.13
Indian	4.65	4.45	4.55	3.15	1.70	3.30	3.20
Monthly gross household income:							
Less than RM1,000	4.75	3.88	4.88	3.50	2.13	3.88	3.63
RM1,000 – RM2,999	4.69	4.38	4.27	3.00	2.29	3.29	2.98
RM3,000 – RM4,999	4.57	4.36	4.27	2.77	2.27	3.16	2.52
RM5,000 and above	4.61	4.67	3.89	2.39	3.00	3.39	2.17

Note: The scale used was 1 = "not at all important" to 5 = "very important"

TABLE 4
Impacts of demographic variables on the importance of attributes

	Product-related attributes					Store-related attributes	
	Quality	Design	Price	Origin of product	Brand name	Location of outlet	Availability of credit terms
Gender	ns	*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Age	ns	ns	ns	ns	*	ns	*
Ethnic group	ns	ns	ns	*	*	ns	*
Monthly gross household income	ns	ns	ns	*	*	ns	*

Note: *Significant at $p < 0.05$ level, ns = not significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Gender: The only significant impact of gender is on design. In general, women placed a significantly higher importance on design of the wooden furniture item than men. Similarly, a study on older consumers (55 years and older) in Malaysia showed that women placed higher importance on design than men (Ong and Phillips, 2007). Women tend to place emphasis on design (in this case for appearance/style) when evaluating and choosing a variety of products including living room furniture (William and Slama, 1995) and design-related elements like style, appearance and colour for apparels (Williams, 2002; Zhang *et al.*, 2002).

Age: Age of the respondents has significant impacts on the perceived importance of brand name and availability of credit terms. The respondents aged 50 years and above perceived brand name an important criteria in their purchase decision but not for the others. Moschis (2003) suggested that matured consumers (aged 55 years and above) tend to prefer hassle-free products that can be obtained by purchasing familiar or reputable brands or by patronising a well-established or well-known retail outlet. The younger aged respondents, most probably with lower income than the other groups, placed a higher importance on the availability of credit terms. As purchase of household furniture would normally require a substantial amount of expenditure, the ability to purchase on credit would be attractive to this group of consumers.

Ethnicity: Ethnicity has significant impacts on the perceived importance of origin of the product and availability of credit terms. In general, the Malays and Indians put some degree of

importance on these product-related attributes but not the Chinese. While the impact of ethnicity on origin of product is hard to ascertain, the importance of credit terms can be attributed to the general economic well-being of the three ethnic groups in Malaysia. With an average monthly household income higher than other ethnic groups, the Chinese would have not perceived availability of credit terms very important compared to the Malays and Indians in deciding on the purchase of household furniture. In 2001, for example, the Chinese households were earning an average of RM3456 per month, while the Indian and Malay households were earning RM2704 and RM1984 respectively (Peng, 2002).

Household income: Household income has significant impacts on the importance of origin of product, brand name and availability of credit terms. Generally, respondents in the lower income group (monthly gross household income of RM2999 and less) placed a significantly higher emphasis on origin of the product and availability of credit terms. As discussed above, the ability to pay on credit for high expenditure consumer durables like furniture would be attractive for low income earners. It is not possible to explain, with the existing data, the importance of the product's origin to this group of respondents. Those in the higher income (monthly gross income of RM5000 and more) are concerned about brand name in making wooden household furniture purchase decision. Consumers with higher income have been reported to place a higher importance on brand name than lower income earners (Dickson *et al.*, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the importance of product- and store-related attributes in wooden household furniture purchase decision was investigated. The survey revealed that quality, design and price of the wooden household furniture matters to all consumers. Location of the retail outlet is the only store-related attribute perceived important by the consumers. In addition, there exist highly significant differences in perceived importance of the attributes by demographic variables which are useful when promoting wooden household furniture to specific segments of the population.

Considerations of how representative samples are must be kept in mind when evaluating the broader implications of the findings of this study. This study holds true only for the patrons of the mall where the study was carried out. The number of respondents was limited and may not be representative of the Malaysian population. Even so, this study should still be useful for manufacturers and retailers of wooden household furniture. There are also opportunities for further research in understanding consumer preferences for wooden household furniture based on the findings of this study. For example, while quality is important to the consumers, its meaning and measurement from the consumers' perspective is relatively unknown. The impact of a product's country of origin on consumer purchase decision also warrants further research. After a thorough understanding of the needs and desires of the consumers, marketing of wooden household furniture to a very diverse market will be successful.

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