

Birthday Gift-Giving Behaviour: A Comparison Between Malay and Chinese Consumers

Md. Nor Othman, University of Malaya

Anna T.M. Teng, University of Malaya

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to identify a broad set of birthday gift-giving behaviour amongst urban Malaysian consumers. Amongst other things, the study endeavoured to achieve the following objectives: (i) to find out the number of times birthday gifts is given in an average year, (ii) to identify the recipients of birthday gifts, and (iii) to examine types of birthday gifts given. In addition, a comparison between the birthday gift-giving behaviour of two major ethnic groups in Malaysia, namely the Malays and the Chinese, were made. The study found that the most popular recipient of birthday gift is the parent. The most popular types of gift are clothing, souvenir goods, and books. When the behaviour of the two ethnic groups were examined, significant differences were found.

Introduction

Gift-giving behaviour has been of interest to consumer researchers since the late 1970s (Belk 1979; Sherry 1983). However, very few research has been done on the cross-cultural differences of this behaviour. In addition, almost no research has been conducted specifically on birthday gift-giving behaviours.

Researchers have suggested that due to the differences in culture, the gift-giver has

to understand various cultural taboos before buying a gift. Arunthanes, Tansuhaj and Lemak (1994), found that due to historical animosity, it is a taboo to give gifts made in China to Koreans. In Latin America, the gift of a knife means the severing of a relationship. In Brazil, it is a taboo to give hand-made dolls as a gift, because they are associated with voodoo. Therefore, it is important for the giver to understand the cultural meanings attached to gifts.

In a multi-racial country like Malaysia, one may want to know whether different ethnic groups would prefer certain types of gift more than the other. Due to cultural differences, one would expect certain gifts to be preferred by some ethnic groups when compared to the others. For example, the Chinese will not give a clock to someone on his/her birthday because the pronunciation of "clock" in Mandarin is the same as "end", which means death (Ong 1990). However, due to the process of acculturation, members of different ethnic groups are exposed to the influences of the other ethnic groups. Therefore, it would not be surprising if a Chinese consumer actually gave a clock to someone on his/her birthday. The giver might want to convey a message to the recipient to value time.

Previous research on gift-giving behaviour between ethnic groups also show that there are differences with respect to this

