

# **DEVELOPMENT OF BRANDING CONCEPT AND PHILOSOPHY IN ESTABLISHING MALAYSIAN FASHION DESIGNERS AT THE GLOBAL MARKET**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on the development of brand concept and philosophy for the purpose of enabling Malaysian fashion designers to penetrate and establish themselves in the international fashion markets. The problem of the research is the lack of new Malaysian brands in the global market besides the few designers (Jimmy Choo and Zang Toi) who are already aging. The objective of the study is to produce a guideline or module that can be used by local fashion designers in preparing and developing their brands to the potential of establishing themselves in the international fashion scene. By identifying the factors affecting brand development and the segmentation of the global market, it is hoped that local designers will be able to focus their efforts to a specific target. The research methodology employs a qualitative data collection through interviews. Data analysis is carried out using Content Analysis. The conceptual framework is based on Healey's Theory of Branding that includes five components that are positioning, storytelling, design, price and customer relationship. The expected result includes a database of local fashion designers, the identification of fashion trends in international markets, and determining the marketing strategies to venture into the global market. Benefits of the study include identifying the factors that affect Malaysian fashion designers from venturing into the fashion retailing business at international levels and the association of the demographic profile to the intention of venturing into the fashion business in Malaysia and at the global market.

## **Keywords:**

Fashion designer, trend, brand/branding, international fashion market, apparel

## **INTRODUCTION**

The rich and famous often make their public appearances decked out in branded attires and accessories. Brands such as Emporio Armani, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Dior, Gucci, Chanel and Louis Vuitton are among the most famous favourite by the wealthy and celebrated segment of society. The clothes, shoes and handbags made by these famed designers add a touch of glamour and opulence to the wearer. The desire to adorn branded items is not confined only to those who can afford them. The less well-to-do too covets products of these brands and will scrimp and save to own at least one item of the branded goods. This passion for wearing clothes and accessories produced by renowned designers is that what drives the fashion industry to thrive all over the world. Since the 1990's, Malaysian designers Jimmy Choo and Zang Toi are often mentioned in the same breath as the well-known brands above. Jimmy Choo became a celebrated designer when the late Princess Diana started wearing his shoes in 1990. He had established his shoe-making business in North London since 1986. Zang Toi on the other hand, was based in New York, where he won the Mouton-Cadet Young Designers Award in 1991. He specialised in designing feminine and romantic styles for women and count many celebrities and Hollywood actresses as his clients. Another Malaysian designer, Bernard Chandran, has also begun to leave his mark in the international fashion scene. After well establishing himself in the local fashion industry in the 90's, he showcased his first Autumn/Winter 2006 Ready-To-Wear collection at the London Fashion Weekend In 2005. Since then,

Bernard Chandran pieces have caught the eye of celebrities including the likes of Lady Gaga and Estelle. Other Malaysian designers such as Melinda Looi and Farah Khan have also ventured into the international fashion markets but achieved limited success. They are not considered as equals to the top-tier designers whose brands reached the far corners of the world. This begs the question of why are there no new Malaysian designers in the international fashion scene. Do we lack the talent and creativity to penetrate the global market? Does this mean that the local fashion industry is also waning? Official figures, however, showed otherwise. The Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) reported that in 2011, exports of textiles and apparel & clothing totalled RM10.81 billion from RM9.32 billion for the same period in 2010, an increase of 15.9 per cent where apparels and clothing accounted for 37.8 per cent share valued at RM4.08 billion [1]. In addition, the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) reported that in 2013, the textiles and textile products industry was the ninth largest export earner with RM10.3 billion, contributing approximately 1.4 percent of Malaysia's total exports of manufactured goods [2]. This means that the Malaysian fashion industry is generally thriving where increases in exports are reported year after year. Thus, the scarcity of Malaysian designers in the international fashion scene is baffling. Here, the researcher suggests that the main problem faced by our local designers is branding. In this study, the focus is on the understanding and development of branding concepts and philosophy. The main objective of the research is to produce theories or guidelines on how to establish local brands in the global fashion market. It is mainly targeted for new and young designers in Malaysia. In this study, the central problem is the lack of new Malaysian designers in the international fashion scene, despite the progress made by senior designers as mentioned above. The researcher suggests three possible causes that are firstly, the lack of identity among young Malaysian designers. Secondly is the lack of knowledge in international market demands. Thirdly, the lack of support from the local market as well as the authorities. These causes are further elaborated in the problem statement. Following the problem stated above, the objective of the study includes to identify concepts and philosophy of branding relevant to Malaysian fashion designers in order to establish them in international fashion markets. Another objective is to identify specific aspects in the international fashion markets that can help Malaysian fashion designers make their entrance. Thirdly, the objective is to produce a guideline to assist Malaysian fashion designers establish their identity for the local as well as international fashion market.

Generally, fashion design falls into three main types that are haute couture (French for high-sewing) or made-to-measure, ready-to-wear (pret-a-porter) and mass market. However, these may be divided into additional, more specific categories. An haute-couture garment is made specifically for an individual according to his/her body measurements and requirements. Often, high quality and expensive fabrics are used with the sewing extremely focused in detail and finish. Sometimes, the garment is completely hand sewn that consumes a lot of time. It is no surprise that this type of garment is costly and, usually, offers little direct profit for the fashion house. More importantly, it is produced for the prestige and publicity, especially if it is worn by a celebrity. If haute-couture represents an extreme part in fashion, the mass market type represents the other extreme. The mass market caters for a wide range of customers, producing ready-to-wear garments using trends set by the famous names in fashion. Usually, it lags a season behind the pret-a-porter clothes to ensure that a particular style introduced by the high-end fashion industry has become popular before producing their own versions of the original look. Cheaper fabrics and simplified sewing techniques using machines are employed to produce a large quantity of the garments so that it can be sold much more cheaply. The pret-a-porter clothes are a cross between haute couture and mass market. They are not made for individual customers, but great care is taken in the choice and cut of the fabric. Clothes are made in small quantities to guarantee exclusivity, so they are rather expensive. Pret-a-porter collections are usually presented by fashion houses each season during a period known as Fashion Week. This takes place on a city-wide basis and occurs twice a year. The main seasons of Fashion Week include, spring/summer, fall/winter, resort and swimwear. Undoubtedly, some may view the

fashion business as superfluous and frivolous especially the exorbitant prices of haute-couture. Nonetheless, the creativity exhibited in high-end fashion invariably influences our decision in choosing the style, type and colour of the clothes we wear, even at the mass-market level. In this, branding plays a heavy influence in the consumers' decision on what clothes, shoes, bags and other accessories to buy. Well-known international brands as mentioned above are instantly recognisable and accepted by the public. Consumers, whether rightly or wrongly, immediately assumes that products that carried these labels are of good quality, reliable and possess high aesthetics. These products are also believed to add prestige and stature to the users. Thus, the high prices paid to own them are justified by the tangible and intangible benefits that is associated with the brands. After all, no one doubts the time and expenses spent by the fashion house in establishing a particular brand. The talent and creativity as well as the research and development employed is something that the user indirectly buys and pays for.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Matthew Healey (2008, pgs 6-8)[3], a brand is an unwritten promise of satisfaction between the manufacturer and consumer/user. Branding is the process of continuous struggle between producers and customers to identify that promise and meaning. Brands thrive when the economy is good, but falter in economic downturns. He further said that in current practices, it involves five components that are positioning, storytelling, design, price and customer relationship. In fashion, branding is often associated with a personality, whether it's the designer or the person wearing the dress, such as movie stars, supermodels or other celebrities (Tungate, 2004)[4]. Some designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and Tom Ford became more successful when they worked for other fashion houses. Whilst, depending on the era, supermodels became brands of their own, regardless of whose dress they are wearing. Sometimes, it is the clothing store that fronted a brand as in the case of London's Asprey, Selfridges and Harvey Nichols. Yurchisin and Johnson (2010)[5] explained that fashion goes through a process that is called the "fashion cycle". This means that in order for a style to become fashionable, it must first be introduced, accepted and ultimately, rejected by the majority in a group to make way for the next innovation or new style. This cycle can be illustrated by the "Innovation Adoption Curve", a bell-shaped curve showing the movement of sales against time. The earliest part of the curve shows the introduction phase. The middle and highest part is when the fashion is at its most accepted level. Then, the latest part shows the low level of interest of consumers as they move on to other new products. Fashion forecasting in the modern world is vital for a brand to survive and prosper. Usually, fashion houses employ fashion forecasting companies to anticipate trends. These companies conduct market research to monitor changes in society, culture, the economy and technology because fashion trends are often influenced by such changes. They also conduct consumer analysis to examine patterns in consumer characteristics and behaviours. Once data are gathered and analysed, they develop a general direction for a specific season and target markets such as women's, men's and preteen's (Kim et.al, 2011)[6]. According to Posner (2011)[7], establishing a brand is a long-term and costly business. Once a brand is recognized and valued by consumers, its name and identity can be capitalized and leveraged to take the brand forward. Often, two strategies are used that are brand extension and brand licensing. Brand extension allows a company to launch new products in a broadly similar market. Meanwhile, brand licensing allows the company to sell its name to another company that can develop, manufacture and market specified branded merchandise under license. It gains payment in royalty while reducing the capital investment required in producing, distributing or marketing the licensed product. Based on Healey's Theory that branding consists of five components namely positioning, storytelling, design, price and customer relationship, a conceptual framework for this study is developed as in Figure 1. In Fig. 1 branding is the central subject made of the five components. All five components are related to each other in a cyclical way. Positioning means defining the customer's mind what the brand stands for and its comparison with competing brands. In storytelling, customers want to be a part of a good story. Meanwhile, design refers to all aspects of how a thing is crafted. Pricing is vital and not

necessarily cheap. It has been constantly proven that customer will buy the more expensive of two similar products. Lastly, building an emotional bond with the buyer will ensure good customer relationship. These concepts are relevant for Malaysian fashion designers in order for them to develop their brands that are capable of penetrating the international markets.

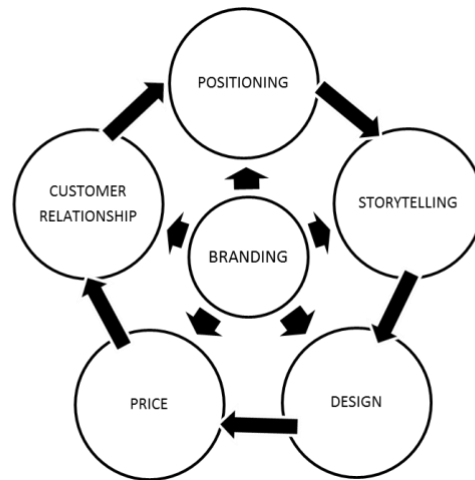


Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework

### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Aside of the names mentioned above, very few Malaysian designers have managed to establish themselves in the international fashion markets. Jimmy Choo is in his late 60's while Zang Toi is in his 50's. Bernard Chandran and Melinda Looi are also in their late 40's. Thus, the dearth of young Malaysian fashion designers in the international scene presents a worrisome problem that needs to be studied. Are there no more talented Malaysian youths that can be presented into the global fashion world? Do they lack the creativity and ability to penetrate the distinguished circle of feted international fashion designers? In this study, the researcher offers several possible causes that contribute towards the failure of young Malaysian designers to launch themselves into the global fashion market. Firstly is the lack of identity. Malaysian designers face problems in projecting a distinctive identity of their self and products. Most local designers tend to follow trends in fashion and thus, fail to establish an enduring feature, or essence that can be immediately related to them. This problem is further compounded when trying to promote themselves in international markets when a clear Malaysian identity has not been defined due to multiculturalism and multireligiosity locally. Secondly, the lack of knowledge in international market demands. Local fashion designers tend to be parochial in terms of meeting customers need. Most are content to fulfil orders for the festive seasons (Hari Raya etc.), wedding ceremonies and local celebrities' functions (awards, gala etc.). They prefer not to venture into the international fashion market due to perceived risks and uncertainties. The third cause is the lack of support. Firstly, the local market is not vibrant enough to support the majority of designers. Secondly, promotional efforts of the authorities and relevant organizations are also lacking.

### OBJECTIVES

In regards to the problems stated earlier, it is imperative that solutions are found to address them. It is important to develop Malaysian fashion designers, especially the young and up-and-coming, to prepare themselves for the challenges ahead. As such the objectives of this study are as follows;

1. To identify concepts and philosophy of branding relevant to Malaysian fashion designers in order to establish them in international fashion markets. In identifying and understanding the

relevant concepts the designers would be able to develop their brands according to international standards. This will assist them in preparing their brand's entrance into the global market.

2. To identify specific aspects in the international fashion markets that can help Malaysian fashion designers make their entrance. Here, the objective is to identify the global fashion market segments and its requirements. This knowledge is important in helping Malaysian designers target specific segments of the market. It provides a focus that is suited to the brands quality and ability.

3. To produce a guideline to assist Malaysian fashion designers establish their identity for the local as well as international fashion market. The theories and guidelines produced in this study will help prepare Malaysian designers to develop their talent and creativity to meet the requirements of the global market.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Phases of the Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method divided into three phases. The first phase is a case study involving 10 well-recognised international fashion brands. Various aspects are taken into consideration such as its history, brand development and the strategies employed in establishing the brand. Data are mainly collected via literature review that includes books, magazines, newspaper articles, the Internet and other publications. This is to identify the common and specialised factors that contribute towards their success. Here, the focus is on foreign designers who have established themselves in the international market. The second phase involves interviews with Malaysian designers who have made it into the international level. Three designers are suggested for this case study. They are Jimmy Choo, Zang Toi and Bernard Chandran. Data on these designers are collected through literature review and personal interviews whenever possible. The interviews are conducted to obtain in-depth opinions and recommendations. In Phase 3, 20 respondents are involved consisting designers, critics, government officials and others relevant to the fashion industry. The purpose of this survey is to collect first-hand and valid data for analysis. Here, the interview method is used to collect data to form a database as well as expert opinions and recommendations that will be used to formulate the guidelines on how to penetrate the international markets.

**Table 1:** The Three Phases of Research Methodology

| Phase | Description   | Purpose  | Method  |
|-------|---|--|---|
| 1     | Case study involving several famous international fashion brands.   | To identify the factors that contribute towards a brand's success.                     | Literature review.  |
| 2     | Case study involving three Malaysian designers who have been successful in international fashion. Subjects suggested are Jimmy Choo, Zang Toi and Bernard Chandran. | To identify the factors that contribute towards a brand's success.                     | Literature review and interviews.   |
| 3     | Survey on Malaysian designers, fashion critics, government officials and others relevant to the   | To collect data on Malaysian designers and identify those who have the potential to be | Interviews. Research questions based on the five components of Healey's Theory will |

|  |                |  |   |
|--|----------------|--|---|
|  | fashion scene. | developed into an international fashion brand. | help to group responses for analysis. Opinions and recommendations from respondents will provide indepth data valuable for forming conclusions. |
|--|----------------|--|---|

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data is collected via literature review and interview surveys. Data collected from the literature review is considered as secondary data. The knowledge gained from the literature review is used to formulate the research framework. The research framework is based on Healey’s Theory of Branding that includes five components that are positioning, storytelling, design, price and customer relationship. The data collected from interview surveys are considered as the primary data. This is analysed using Content Analysis method. Keywords are identified and responses are grouped together according to the interview questions. The findings from the analysis of primary data will be used to form the conclusions of this study. There are four theretical constructs namely local fashion designers, apparel, branding and establish to global market. In terms of the local designers, data on the segmentation of their collection is collected through interviews and case study. The data is analysed using Content Analysis and validated by the Annual Sale Report (whenever available). The purpose is to identify their strengths and weaknesses. As for the apparel section, the data collection and analysis is to identify the demands or trends in the market. Meanwhile, branding refers the study on brand strategy via interviews. Lastly, the establish to global market is a survey where the findings are used to form a theory or module on how to establish Malaysian fashion designers in the global market.

**Table 2:** Data Collection and Analysis

| Theoretical Construct      | Source of Data   | What Data to Collect             | What Value to Measure    | How to Collect           | How to Analyse               | How to Validate                      | Expected Outcome                                  |
|----------------------------|--|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Local Fashion Designer     | Local Fashion Designer<br><br>*Malaysian Textile Manufacturer Association (MTMA)<br>*Malaysian Fashion Industry Association (MFIA) | Segmentation of their collection | Saleable/On demand items | Interview and case study | Content analysis             | Annual sale report                   | Identify the strengths and weaknesses             |
| Apparel                    | Local departmental stores  | Trend/demand on buying           | Consumer/buyer demand    | Interview and survey     | Content analysis             | Annual sale report                   | Identify segment of apparel on demand/style/trend |
| Branding                   | Literature review and interview  | International brand strategy     | Consumer buying power    | Interview and survey     | Interview                    | Interview                            | Identify established brand strategy               |
| Establish to Global Market | Literature review and survey   | Global demand                    | Global needs (consumer)  | Survey                   | Literature review and survey | Annual report (Global fashion trend) | Theory/Module to establish global market          |

## **DISCUSSION AND COCLUSION**

Since this study is still in the initial stage (literature review), no primary data has been collected. The intended surveys and interviews have not been performed. As such, the conclusions cannot be drawn as this time. However, several aspects can be discussed such as the expected results, expected knowledge contribution and the benefits of the study. Among the expected results are;

- a) Identify local identity for local fashion designers.
- b) Identify fashion trends in international market demands.
- c) Identify marketing strategies to venture into international market.
- d) Theory or module to establish local brand in the global market.

Meanwhile, the expected knowledge contribution are as follows;

- a) Develop local identity for local fashion designers.
- b) Guideline for local fashion designers in producing a collection.
- c) Develop marketing strategies to venture into international markets.
- d) Introduce theory/module to establish local brand in the global market.

There are several benefits of the study. Firstly, the findings will identify the factors that affect Malaysian fashion designers from venturing into the fashion retailing business at international levels. Secondly, the study will reveal the association of the demographic profile to the intention of venturing into the fashion business in Malaysia and at the global market. Thirdly, the guideline or module produced from this study can be used by Malaysian fashion designers who have the intention to break into the international fashion scene.

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