Up Scaling Malaysian Aboriginal Handicrafts of the Mah Meri Through Packaging Design

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Abstract

The growing number of foreign tourist coming to Malaysia in some ways has increased the sales of Malaysian handicrafts such as earthen ware, wood crafts, metal crafts hand-woven craft, textiles and jewelry. Hence, this study attempts to look into the handicrafts made by Malaysian aborigines called the Mah Meri. Through visual assessment on the aboriginal handicrafts which are being displayed at two tourist centers, it has been discovered that majority of the handicrafts are poorly packed and labeled. We argue that improper packaging design will dissuade tourist from making purchasing decision. In order to improve this situation, we believe that the packaging design of the aboriginal handicrafts should adopt the VIEW model that includes visibility, information, emotional appeal and workability. This study will also include visual analysis (observation) on packaging design from other countries to learn how they perform in regards to visual perception. The selected handicrafts packaging design concept are extracted for the implementation on the Peninsular Malaysia Aboriginal’s packaging design. It is hoped that this study will improve packaging design of Mah Meri handicrafts thus promote Malaysia to the outside world.

Keywords: Aboriginal handicrafts, packaging design, tourism Malaysia

Introduction

Tourism is a lucrative and fast growing industry which is known to generate income for many countries (Sulaiman, M. Z., 2009). Due to the affordability and accessibility of transportsations mode (sea, land and air), people from various income levels begin to travel to foreign destinations to experience exotic culture, foods, nature and hospitality of the locals. In spite of this, there are
security and safety issues that need to be considered. For instance, a website hosted by the Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S Department of States, stated that it would issue a Travel Warnings to American citizens to reconsider from visiting countries that are facing internal issues that include unstable government, civil war, ongoing intense crime or violence, or frequent terrorist attacks (U.S Passport and International Travel, 2014). Regardless of whatever threats or challenges that maybe, tourism industry is said to perform very well as long there are people who have desire and means to travel.

The United Nations World Tourism Organizations (UNWTO), ranked Malaysia as 10 most visited countries, with the arrival of 24.6 million international tourist in the year 2010 (Anonymous, 2012). The fact and figure from the Tourism Malaysia Corporate has shown that the numbers of international tourist arrivals and receipts has increased since 1998 to 2013. In 2013, the international tourist arrivals has reached 25.27 million receiving RM 65.44 billion of receipts (Tourism Malaysia Corporate, 2014).

Among the various classification of tourism, ecotourism involves travels to destinations to appreciate flora, fauna and cultural heritage. With its large area under equatorial rainforest Malaysia a unique multicultural society offers a perfect destination for ecotourism. Living in the rainforest, there are different tribes of aborigines with unique distinctive cultures and skills. The specialized skills of these aboriginal people produce exotic tribal handicrafts, which provide a means of livelihood.

It is of concern that the handicrafts are currently inadequately remunerative. They are being competed with modern technology oriented products - machine made goods and substitution of plastics and other manmade materials. This allays fear that the generation laid down activity of handicraft may fade into obscurity.

For sustainability of the aboriginal handicrafts it is imperative to undertake a study to boost their demand in sales focused on the presentation of the handicrafts on the competitive shelve market by having the combination of the new trend of marketing strategy – packaging design.

**Aborigines Handicraft**

In Peninsular Malaysia, there are three major ethnical of aborigines. In 2011, the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) stated the majority percentage are Senoi ethnic, 55%, while Proto Malay 42% and Negrito only 3% of the total aborigines’ population. However, the aborigines are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia (Nicholas, C., 1997).

One of the aboriginal traditions lifestyle is creating unique handicrafts. Handicrafts are one of the potential tourism products which provide opportunity to considerable numbers of the Peninsular Malaysia Aborigines elderly for being self-employed. This opportunity pertaining to craftsmanship many generate income and relieve the aborigines from destitution. The attainable of raw substantial materials from nature, the forest and other forms of recyclable materials, handmade items are possible in supporting the development of handicraft among the aborigines. The handicrafts beget both income and employment opportunities to the aboriginal settlements (Mulup, A., 2014).

Primarily, the aboriginal handicrafts sales are to promote the heritage and helping the culture to stay alive. Generally, the common handicrafts which tourists interested are potteries, woodcarvings, baskets, blankets, clothing, fabrics, leather goods and jewelries (Timothy, 2005).
The aborigines’ handicrafts represent one of their traditional culture lifestyle. It emblematizes the aboriginal settlement where tourists are interested to visit. The good grade of handicrafts will stir the interest of the visiting tourists who buys for remembrance of the visitation of the place.

Craving handicrafts using raw substances in the surrounding jungle and forming unique tribal items requires manual skill passed down through generations within the aborigine tribe. The art preserves the culture and heritage the jungle people.

The handicrafts crafted by the aborigines take the form of many interesting various items. The following is a brief description of handicrafts crafted by the Peninsular Malaysia aborigines:

Woodcarving: A manual skill of craving on wood to form objects of sacred figurine or statue and mask. The statue and figurine are sculptured and engraved using wood from trees which are resilient to rot and could stand the test of time. These woods are categorize as hard wood namely: Nyireh Batu, Merebau, Meranti, Rengas, Chengal, Sena, Kemuning and Rui. The making of exotic masks however uses softer wood which facilitates engraving easier (Muzium Nasional, 1976). Motives of Goddess, flora and fauna are used in the engraving of the woodcrafts (Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan, 2010).

Weaving: Strips of tree leaves from plant scrubs ie pandan, mengkuang, from tree barks and bamboo are used. This produces products such as floor mats, hats, bags, baskets, wall hanging decorations, coasters and costume jewelries. Some of these products are bland and thus artificially colour dyed to stimulate the products presentation.

Beading: Small beads made from wood and seeds from trees in the jungle and are shaped into a round forms. The beads are laced in combination in the string interspaced attractively with different colours and designs, forming into decorative jewelry such as bracelet and necklaces.

The Mah Meri People

A report by JAKOA Selangor (2011), stated that the Mah Meri people are one of 18 native tribes or “Orang Asli” living in Peninsular Malaysia. Classified under the Senoi ethnic, the Mah Meri people are well known for their carvings and weavings handicrafts. The uniqueness of their handicrafts received many interests from both the locals and foreigners. Their handicrafts also received recognition from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) due to the quality handicraft produced by the tribe. They are active in a variety of participation of handicraft showcases and demonstrations. The following are some of the participation took part by the Mah Meri people:

a) Carnival organized by the tourism sectors
c) Participate in Shanghai China, Tourism under Handicraft Corporation (Shanghai World Expo 2010).
d) Aboriginal representatives to Paris for cultural performances under the Ministry of Information, Communications, Arts & Culture.
e) Involved with the UNESCO, 2005.
f) Aboriginal representative to the United States of America, 2010
g) Involved in HKK 9 Craft Complex, 2011.
h) Engaging with Aboriginal Carnival 2011 at the National Museum.
i) Involved with One Million Youth Assembly 2011 at Putrajaya.

(Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli Negeri Selangor, 2011)
Although the Mah Meri handicrafts are recognized as one of Malaysia’s unique tourism products, still there are issues that have yet to be solved. The fact is that Mah Meri handicrafts are not exposed to the current technology trend of marketing communication in the competitive tourism products for commercialization.

In 1997, an article from The News Straits Time addresses the concern of the Peninsular Malaysia aborigines in preserving their traditional art – sculpturing and weaving. The importance in preserving the traditions is to keep the culture alive among the younger aborigines who shall continue practice from generation to generation. The preservation of the art brings awareness the existence of their present living among the society, contributing the uniqueness of their cultural heritage to the country. The handicrafts not only promote the culture, the handicrafts help to generated income for the elderly aborigines. The younger generations of aborigines are no longer interested in the traditional art and this attitude is of concern as the culture will slowly fade and lost in time (Dalip, S., 1997).

The Chairman of Perak Aboriginal Foundation states his concerned on the future of the aborigines’ craftsmanship as the elderly craftsmen are passing away. He tries to preserve the aborigines’ handicrafts, the traditional heritage art culture before it vanishes in the future. The aborigines depend on their handicraft as source of income and also for promoting Malaysia’s tourism industry. By conducting workshops, it is hope that this may help to gain the interest of the aboriginal youngsters in sustaining the culture’s future (Singh, J., 2012).

There are several aboriginal self-owned craft shops operating publicly selling the handicraft to the public, targeting the local and international tourists. The aboriginal’ handicrafts are sold on the market shelf as well through online shop such as Facebook and websites. It is confirmed by the aboriginal entrepreneurs that the most sellable handicrafts are weaving products and their traditional hunting blow pipe. To promote the handicrafts, the aborigines are already exposed and involved in craft exhibitions on both local and international levels. Thus, the aboriginal handicraft is no longer considered as rural craft industry due the fact the handicrafts are now being sold overseas (Amri, S. A. K., 2013).

Surprisingly, trend selling online is being practiced by the aborigines, following the current technology to put the handicrafts on sale. By doing so, the handicrafts have attracted the attentions from people in other countries such as Japan, United State and Singapore. Today, the Mah Meri people has learned the use of brand name for their online business, selling the handicrafts for living. The reasons to establish a brand name is to indicate the ownership of the handicraft ‘designer’. A logo or symbol to represent the group’s identity was created for marketing purposes. Selling through online base have made the aborigines improve the standard of living (Sulaiman, K., 2009).

The text above reveals that the aborigines of Peninsular Malaysia are concerned of their culture heritage will disappear soon in future due to the lack of interest by the younger aborigines. Workshops are introduced to stimulate the young to maintain and carry on with their cultural traditions. Through the sales of handicrafts, it is surely one of the ways the aborigines generate their income and to promote their culture globally. By following the current marketing trend to achieve better sales of their handicrafts, the aborigines have started to indulged online sales using the online internet technology. A minimum understanding of the function of having an identity through brand name and the use of logo as adopted by the Mah Meri people has further improved sales. Craft exhibitions and workshops organized by the craft bodies have helped boost the handicraft sales widely and assist in promoting the rich culture and heritage of the indigenous people.
Packaging design

The best experience when consumers purchase products are from the attractive packages. Packaging is a medium which has the ability to communicate directly with consumers. They generate trust and confidence to the targeted consumers on their content. It is claimed that 100 percent of the buyers will look at the package (Dupuis, S. and Silva, J., 2008).

In marketing, packaging design is one the effective marketing communication tool which gives a brand image to its targeted consumers (Keller, 1998). Appealing packaging design will gain the attention of the consumers and will be noticeable of its presence in the market (Kotler, Armstrong, Brown, Stewart and Chandler, 1998). The physical and visual elements work together to communicate emotions, culture, and social, psychological and informational to the targeted consumer. It reflects the pride of the one’s identity (Klimchuck, M.R. & Krasovec, S.A., 2006).

A qualitative research conducted by the Canadian Tourism Commission (2007) found that Australia has the most percentage among the tourists’ thoughts regarding aboriginal cultural attractions and experiences. This follows next by New Zealand. Thus, ecotourism in Australian and New Zealand is well recognized with momentous tourism promotion and awareness.

Australia and New Zealand have adopted the trend of today’s current market. The aboriginal arts are sold in attractive packaging design available worldwidely through online sales, promoting the art as tourism product. The products could be seen on websites promoting the items internationally by Individual Corporation, packed in proper packages to clarify the art and craft belonging culture. Packaging help sell products (Dupuis, S. and Silva, J., 2008)

Research framework

Elements of packaging design are used in this research for the analysis purposes. Hence, research questions pertaining to VIEW (Visibility, Information, Emotional Appeal and Workability) Model (Shimp & Andrew, 2013) is referred:

1. Does the packaging of the product possess strong VISIBILITY?
2. Does the packaging of the product display sufficient/necessary INFORMATION?
3. Does the packaging of the product have EMOTIONAL APPEAL?
4. Does the packaging of the product have WORKABILITY?

Visibility - signifies the ability of the package to attract attention at the point of purchase. The main objective is to have packaging that stands out to consumers i.e. brand identity, presentation and legibility.

Information - the various forms of information that is available on the packaging. This includes data such as product information, claimed benefits, instructions on use and ingredients i.e. product name, description, content, producer, origin and price tag.

Emotional Appeal - the attempt to arouse specific feelings such as elegance, prestige, cheerfulness, fun i.e. colours, graphic design, image, illustration, font style.

Workability – contents protection, facilitate storage space, access and ease of use, protection against breakage, environmentally friendly packaging i.e. form.
Methodology

In pursuing the result on up scaling the Peninsular Malaysia Aboriginal handicraft through packaging design, several methods of receiving data collection are to be undertaken.

The first phrase is to observe the aboriginal handicrafts presentation on the market shelves. Two potential tourist attraction centers are chosen for the study. These are located at the Aboriginal Handicrafts shop in Pulau Carey, Selangor and at the Central Market in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. The task is to observe the availability of the handicrafts on the shelf market. Several handicrafts are selected and closely scrutinized for further observation on the design implementation on the handicrafts packaging proposed later in the third phase.

Under the second phase, a qualitative study on the aboriginal tourism souvenirs from other countries are carried out to understand the concept of design application on their packaging designs. Two countries - Australia and New Zealand are selected for case study purposes. However due to constraint of budget and time, the items are carefully obtained from proper authentic native souvenir online shops – Warlukurlangu Artists’ Aboriginal Corporation of Australia and Jade Mountain of New Zealand. These selected products are analyzed according to the packaging design elements that include visibility, information, emotional appeal and workability (VIEW) (Shimp & Andrews, 2013).

In the third phase, with the qualitative study case information gathered, the significant design is predicted and arrived for the implementation of new packaging design relative to the study. For the purpose of discussion, the development of a new packaging design in this paper focuses on Mah Meri tribe.

Findings

Case study is being done on packaging design of two different countries in extracting the data for further implementation on the Mah Meri packaging design. Observation by looking into the VIEW model are crucial in order to assess the selected packaging designs from the two online souvenir shops - Warlukurlangu Artists’ Aboriginal Corporation and Jade Mountain.

In table 1, based from the observations, both packages have the same concept in implementation their design. The visibility of the brand identity can be seen clearly on each of the packaging. From the logo, colours and motives are the elements combined making up the appealing visual identity, clarifying the aboriginal art origin and heritage. Visual Identity is consistency implemented on the packaging design. It is memorable, authentic, meaningful, differentiated, sustainable, flexible and have value.

The package contains informative information such as the product description, producer/manufacturer and artist. Both designs on the packaging using simple typeface which is readable and legible. The good contrast usage of colours, size, weight and typeface make the information clearly understood and support the design concept.

Each packaging design give a different emotional appeal. The aboriginal art motives implementation on the packaging design gives the feel of its heritage. The surface design on the both packaging are different from one another. This is because each of the countries’ aborigines have adopted their own style in expressing their art. The implementation of the aboriginal art design on the surface of the packaging together with the logo, immediately communicates the origin.
Table 1: Aboriginal Art packaging design from Warlukurlangu Artist’ Aboriginal Corporation (Australia) and Jade Mountain (New Zealand) output.

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<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Element of Packaging Design</th>
<th>Assessments</th>
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| 1  | VISIBILITY (Brand Identity, Presentation and Legibility) | **Brand Identity:**  
The identity of the aboriginal art can be seen on the box design. Its origin can be easily recognize.  
**Presentation:**  
Pattern and motive on packaging design using the aboriginal art on the package.  
**Legibility:**  
The packaging design shows the belonging of the both countries’ aboriginal art. |
| 2  | INFORMATION (Product Name, Description, Content, Producer, Price tag etc) | **Product name:**  
The both countries product/brand name is visible on the package.  
**Description/Content/Producer:**  
The information is stated on the surface of the package. |
| 3  | EMOTIONAL APPEAL (Color, Graphic Design, Image, Illustration, Typography and Logo) | **Colours:**  
a) Australia: Vibrant colours are used in the artworks – painting on textile and aboriginal instruments. The colorful packaging gives a feeling of cheerfulness and energetic.  
b) New Zealand: Black which represent the country’s national colour and also the colour of tattoo used on the Maori’s body gives the look of elegancy.  
**Graphic Design/Image/Illustration:**  
It reflect the product heritage which can be seen on both countries’ aboriginal art design.  
**Typography:**  
The type using san serif fonts which gives a contemporary looks. Plain dark backgrounds used makes the information dominant which will be a focal point to the eyes in directing the information on the product.  
**Logo:**  
The logo is visible on the packaging using the elements of concept design in the aboriginal art. |
| 4  | WORKABILITY (Packaging Design, Labeling, Material and Durability) | **Packaging Design and Labeling :**  
The box can be kept and display as souvenir items as it contains information of the product i.e. the artist, origin etc. It can be used as general container.  
**Material and Durability:**  
Heavy weight paperboard is being used to create the packaging. It can protect the product during distribution to the market shelve, display and delivery. The material is environmental friendly and recyclable. |
The workability part, both packages are made out of recyclable material paperboard. Cardboard is environmental friendly as it can get easily degradable when discarded but could last for a long period of time on the market shelf. Furthermore, this material is hard and able to protect the item during storage, distribution, sales on market shelves and delivery. The design on both packages have unique authentic look. Tourists may keep the individual package as part of the souvenir item or as display decoration, gift (due to the attractive informative packaging design) or even saved as after-product reuse - using it as another depository for other items.

Results

Based on the observation done as in Table 2, the researcher made a recommendation for the implementation design on the Mah Meri handicraft packaging design as pictured in Plate 1 (designer’s impression).

From the findings, the researcher has worked out the packaging design based on VIEW derived from considering the aspects of the packaging design assessment from the (above) two overseas online shops which sell their country’s aboriginal art souvenir item.

Plate 1: Proposed packaging design for Mah Meri handicraft

The overall concept is visible on the Mah Meri’s brand identity. A logo to represent the Peninsular Malaysia Aborigines handicraft has been implemented into the design, showing the origin of the aboriginal’s handicraft in Peninsular Malaysia. The motives are selected carefully and simplified according to the Mah Meri expertise, incorporated with the aboriginal culture – statue sculpturing and weaving.

Information of the product is provided on the packaging design to describe the function of the handicraft usage. The typeface is readable and legible. The artisan of the handicraft is also stated to reveal the authenticity of the aborigine’s ethnic craftwork. The logo of Tourism Malaysia is attached as it represents the product of tourism Malaysia. Price tag is listed to give the standardization of sales on the shelf market.

Emotional appeal implemented on the Mah Meri packaging design gives the brand personality of its culture and heritage. The logo of the Aboriginal Handicraft Malaysia symbolizes nature which relates with the aborigines culture heritage. The name of the product is written using the Mah Meri dialect – Bujam Lipo (Pandana Pouch) to expose the tourists of the artisan’s mother tongue language, giving
the authentic feeling. Typography style shows the flexibility fits the packaging design concept. A sculpture from the Mah Meri’s wood carving and weaving are stylized making into graphically pattern, easily associated with the Mah Meri primitive art. Colours applied on the pattern to express a contemporary look and feel in order to create attraction and purchasing desire. The colours are obtained and modified from the original weaving handicraft.

**Workability** wise, the packaging is produced by a single piece of heavyweight paperboard. It offers protection to the handicraft and provides space savings when on display - hanging on the shelve market. The information is printed on the surface of the packaging which reduces production cost. The material is durable, environmental friendly and last for a long period for storage and display.

**Conclusion**

The study reveals that the packaging design has the ability in transmitting immediate communication to the audience with the right concept of design. It creates an impression of the mind a product which is meaningful, of quality, durability, usefulness and attractiveness. The proposed sample on the Mah Meri packaging is accomplished through the understanding on elements of packaging design which are needed for the design implementation. The new proposed sample of Mah Meri handicraft packaging design stands out giving the handicraft a value - complement by its contemporary and authentic look. Consistently maintaining the packaging design on the other Mah Meri’s handicrafts, it can create awareness on the tribe ownership’s product as well promoting the handicrafts as tourism Malaysia souvenir item.

**References**


