



The Application of Product Symbolism in Designing Products for Horticulture

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Introduction

Malaysia is set to achieve its target as a high income nation by 2020, turning from being a developing into a developed nation. The driving force or catalyst for achieving the set goal is the Economic Transformation Program (ETP), launched in September 2010 in which there is a positive increase in share per capita as reported in an article produced by Economic Transformation Programme (2014). The implications and impact of cultural shift upon the current consumers in the coming future as affluent consumers will to some degree change society's lifestyle.

The foremost important gauge for the high income society is the increase in per capita income which when translated, when the average disposable income surpasses the cost to purchase new luxurious products and becomes the indication of conspicuous consumers (Quelch 1987). In line with Quelch (1987), Atsmon et.al (2012) revealed that the effect of rapid growth upon share per capita in the Chinese societies from mainland China caused consumers to seek luxury products elsewhere, when domestic products did not meet their expectations or aspirations. Aspiration therefore has a very strong effect on individual behaviour when the person has an inclination towards luxury product brands (Truong et.al

2010). Generally, luxury product brands aspire to a premium lifestyle of status of consumers within the society, marked by their economic prosperity. Considering seeking consumers, Effendi (2011), classified products into two categories, one consisting of highly symbolic and conspicuous products and the other less symbolic and conspicuous products, upon which the consumers are able to analyse and assess the meanings and the congruity of the products according to their status and lifestyle. Under such circumstances, if the level of congruity between the product image and the consumer self-concept is high, then the urge to acquire is also high. Thus, lifestyle very well relates to the economic level at which the society lives, how they spend their disposable income and how they allocate their time (Anderson & Golden 1984).

When there are changes in their lifestyles, consumers tend to transform the pattern and destination for purchasing or window-shopping at more favourable locations, such as malls and hyper-markets, where premium products are displayed at the premium stores. Although the characteristics of premium products vary, stereotypically they offer excellence in quality, displayed in selective stores and

through appointed distributor channels. These premium stores exhibit products that are fused with symbolic meanings of status to the stores interior and exterior environment, thus creating and enhancing the feeling of self-extension to the consumers. Under such circumstances, consumers are willing to pay higher prices, turning the act of purchasing into that of symbolic consumption. Symbolic consumption products are designed products that rely least on technology, but are extremely dependent on the designers conceptualization and interpretation of consumers preferences.

Rationale for the design investigation

Industrial designers function is not limited only to create a design that is to comply with utility aspects, but also is be able to embed the targeted aesthetics for its congruity with the target consumers. They introduce these combined values into the products prior to successful manufacturing and marketing. Such products should alleviate the perception of the consumer's determination to acquire not only by function but also by impressive design and styling that is in congruence with consumer's personality.

Objective

Products which are purposely designed for status consumption and self-extension at large are being highly researched and applied to fashion and cosmetics, household goods, electronic gadgets and more so in automobiles. These products have successfully been associated with and accepted into premium consumption

fads. Store location and products displayed are well acknowledged by those status seeking consumers. Unfortunately, the horticulture enthusiasts and hobbyists who are as equally affluent consumers do not have much opportunity to shop at commendable stores for their tools. Noticeably, these mother-nature lovers have a high appreciation of aesthetic and are receptive to product detail. Understanding the consumers' requirements and niche market segment, this design project seek to address the issue and become the criteria for new product design and development.

Methodology

Therefore, a project brief has been prepared in which students were required to design horticulture products targeted for the affluent enthusiast and hobbyist which involve elaborating symbol. In order to understand about the existing horticulture products (that is purposely purchase for self-extension), a primary and secondary research has been undertaken on the lifestyle of affluent enthusiasts and hobbyists. In terms of secondary research, collecting third-party sources such as websites and magazines and journal articles has been conducted in the earlier stage of data collection process while the primary research was carried out by employing artefact behaviour method merely focusing on the behavioural and observational studies. A subjective aesthetic analysis was also conducted to assess the visual meanings including the aesthetic interaction and the emotional assessment on the objects of creation (Figure 1).

As a result, it was found that high income consumers are exceedingly concerned about the location of specialty horticulture shops display where they purchase plants. Secondly, their anticipation for the need of exclusive devices for maintaining the plants health i.e. devoid of excessive disfigurement from pest attacks. It thus reveals that there is a strong bond between the serious horticulture hobbyist and the shop display, the product ownership, and the outcome from the product utilities, in that it enacts self-expression.

Based on the observation mentioned above, several products have been designed by the students and two were found to have great potential for commercialisation, namely the Aqua Kiosk Display Unit and the Mini Bio Insecticide Spray.

Products

Aqua Kiosk Display Unit

Nowadays, display kiosks selling horticulture aquatic plants at the supermarkets and malls are a common scene; however, there is paucity for the display of water plants inside the building. The research was conducted on the existing kiosk operators to identify the conditions, functionalities, practicalities in order to sell aquatic plants as the existing kiosks have neither provision to display nor storage for such plants. The outcome is the Aqua Kiosk Display Unit designed and proposed by Amar Marwan bin Abdul Azim and truly fulfils the functional aspect of the targeted affluent lifestyle consumers. The design also sustains aquatic plants through the use of a water filtering system equal to

that of a fish aquarium. The use of LED lights makes the displayed plants lively and aqua pots sparkle.



Figure 1 Aqua Kiosk Display Unit

Mini Bio Insecticide Spray

Durner (2012) provides an interesting view that horticulture is unique by being a combination of Art and Science. The desire to plant beautiful things is artistic in nature, whilst the understanding of plants and soil functions are the science. It is in this subject area that research was conducted to identify the home gardening enthusiasts (hobbyists) needs in their gardening activities.

From the analysis, Zuratun Nisa'a Rohani identified that a closed-up insecticide spray tool can be an extremely helpful item for the enthusiasts to rid of harmful insects or larvae attacking their budding plants or flowers. The mini spray is not only handy but also uses a bio-insecticide canister. To assist the user during the night inspections, the holder has an LED light and mini flip-able magnifying glass giving an effective spray to the intended spot (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Mini Bio Insecticide Spray

Conclusion

The horticulture hobbyists and enthusiasts, with their attentiveness to how plants are being displayed and the need for exclusive product design resulted in the two design proposals i.e. the Aqua Display Unit and the Mini Bio Insecticide Spray. Their inclinations for self-expression is based on caring how plants are being displayed and keeping the plants fresh and vibrant for their selective shopping. The purchase of the conspicuous product reinforced with their satisfaction and pride while enhancing their self-extension as compared to the current shop display artefact and the current insecticide spray cans. The product design form and finishing manages to be aesthetically defined as a design that complies with the utility aspects, while extensively embeds the 'targeted aesthetics' for its congruity with the status-seeking consumers.

The display, consumption, and utilization of exclusivity reflect the status and social recognitions by the horticulture hobbyists and enthusiasts.

The design knowledge from both products provides useful background not only to manufactures of high-end gadgetries and tools but also significantly opens up ideas for the new luxury market in horticulture. It is also found that a significant number of serious horticulture enthusiasts and hobbyists are those from the "baby boomers" or commonly referred to the X-generation. Further design research can be beneficial to explore the ageing users, their relationship to the feel of products with tactile design features and their externalities consumption (Spence & Gallace 2011).

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