

Consumerism a new emerging culture: Study

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KOTA KINABALU: Consumerism is a new emerging culture of the world, and Malaysia is no exception. The consumerist culture is also strong in Sabah as indicated in a study.

These are among the many observations made by Associate Professor Dr Andreas Totu in his newly-published book "Consumerism in Malaysia: Mass Media, Lifestyles and Identities."

He obtained his Bachelor's degree from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang and his Masters degree from the University of Leicester, United Kingdom. Currently, he is the Dean at the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), here. His research interests are in the field of cultural imperialism through mass media, communication and media studies.

The 180-page book with five chapters on consumerism as a way of life, the rise of the Cultural Imperialism Thesis dating back to the mid-1960s and consumerism in Malaysia was published by UMS. For starters, 300 copies were printed.

In a nutshell, the book examines the indispensable role of the nation's mass media (particularly advertising) in shaping the lives of contemporary Malaysians and in the formation of consumerist lifestyles and identities among Malaysian youths.

For Dr Totu, who obtained his doctorate (PhD) in Mass Communications from the University of Wales, Cardiff, United Kingdom, his approach to penning the book is a departure from the norm.

While other literature on consumerism usually focuses on consumer rights, his book puts the spotlight on the correlation between consumption and the conception of self-identity within the framework of mass media.

"Ideally, I would like people to understand that consumerism has something to do with the mass media, particularly the role of TV and TV advertising in influencing Malaysian youths while they are in the process of creating their lifestyle and identity.

"My point is that consumption of goods and services determines how youths construct their lifestyle and identity," he contended.

Defining the term 'consumerism', Dr Totu said it refers to a life preoccupied with consumption.

"Consumption literally means the use of commodities for the gratification of needs and desires. Consumption has become the source of lifestyle and identity.

"Young people, in particular, pursue consumption in seeking self-actualisation and lifestyles. Such practices are the main aspects of consumer culture."

On the term "consumer culture", he said it refers to the norms and values of a consumer society.

"Today, we are talking about the symbolic aspect of goods. In short, we consume goods not merely for their use-values (their material utility) but for their sign-value (what they signify).

"Apparently, we consume material goods and services not only for their functional benefits but also as symbolic signifiers of tastes, lifestyles and identity.

"By 'identity', it is meant a sense of who we are, and how we relate to others and to our cultural and social environment."

The author noted that consumerism is increasingly becoming an integral part of our daily lives in Malaysia, especially in the urban areas.

"Consumerism arguably pervades our daily lives. Every day life appears to be dominated by our relationship with consumer goods. We tend to buy and consume commodities, mostly not because of their utility but due to their symbolic value.

"In the case of youths, they relate consumerism to their identity. In other words, the creation of the personal identity of Malaysian teenagers is now based on consumption. I am what I consume," said Dr Totu.

Still, "Consumerism in Malaysia: Mass Media, Lifestyles and Identities" has a dual-purpose in that the writer cautions society against over-indulging in consumerism.

"Awareness is the word. What is the purpose of buying expensive stuff if they have no or little functional benefit? Is it really important to consume the goods and services as advertised on TV?" he asked.

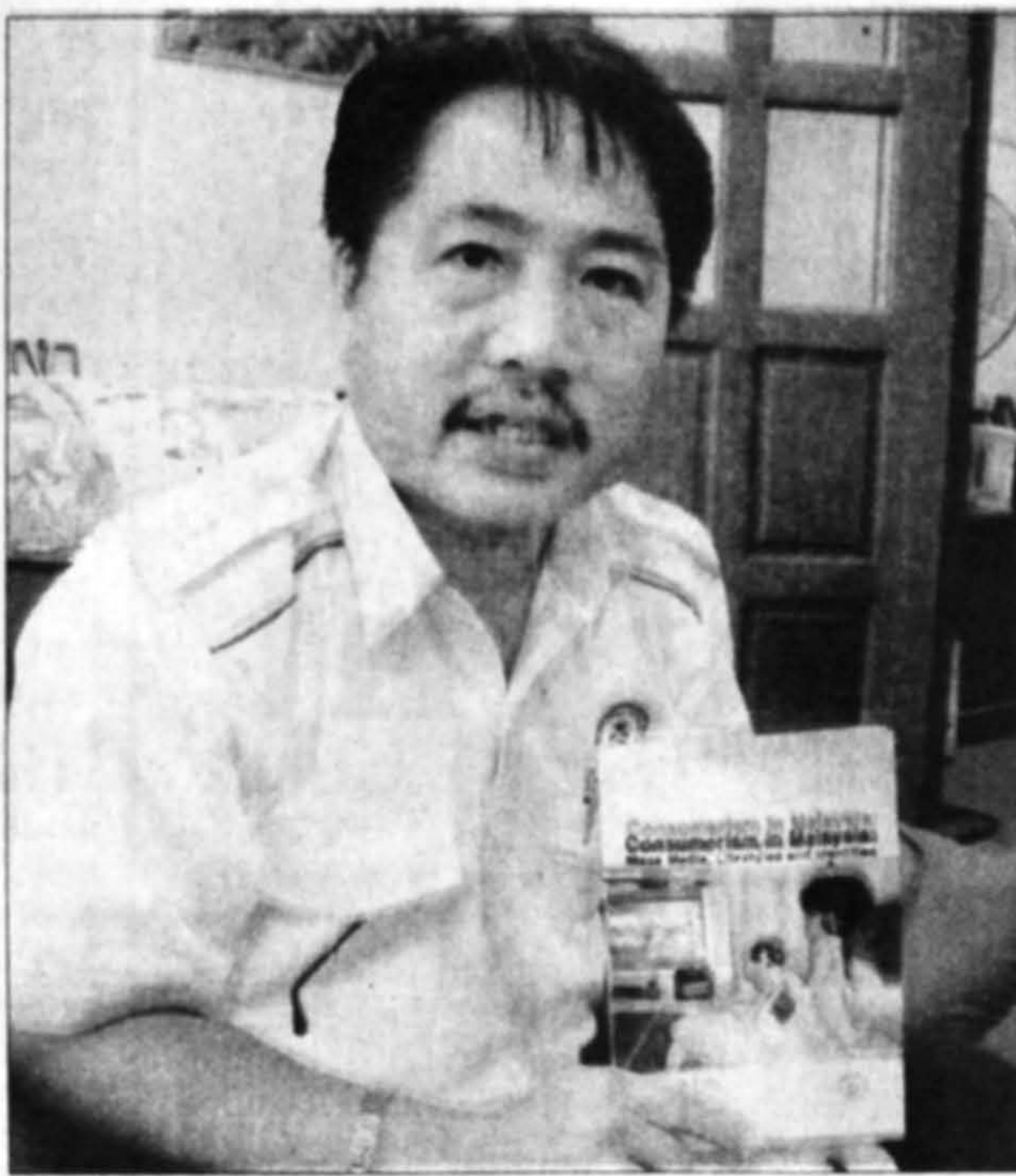
According to Dr Totu, his book was written based on his research when he was doing his PhD thesis at the University of Wales.

"My research examines the cultural transformation of youth lifestyles in Malaysia as a result of exposure to television and advertising from the cultural imperialism perspective.

"I studied the development of consumerist attitudes, desires and habits among youths in Malaysia.

"My finding is that global consumerist cultures are gaining a foothold in the lifestyles of youths in Malaysia. And in the process of maintaining their lifestyles and identities, they have to consume and keep on consuming in such a way that the practice of consumption becomes a way of life (of the young) contemporary society," the Associate Professor explained.

For his research, the tools employed were surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. His 700 respon-



Dr Totu with a copy of his newly-published book.

dents are mainly from Sabah. He explored the five main consumption sites – clothing and fashion; body appearance; food and drink; technology and shopping.

"It is these spheres of social life where modern societies, particularly the young generations, extract their sense of self-identity."

Asked what prompted him to carry out research on consumerism, Dr Totu said: "I have been observing the consumer behaviour of my own children and also that of my nephews and nieces. Their lifestyles have always been interesting compared with mine.

"I hail from a poor family. In bygone days, I never had toys bought from the shop. We made our own toys, using local material such as jungle produce (examples, rumbia and bamboo). Very creative."

Like many other parents, the associate professor had pampered his children with modern toys and technological gadgets.

"It's compensatory because of my past experience. I feel I don't really want to deprive my children."

"Coolness" is the current trend among fashion-conscious Malaysian youths.

Quoting Dr Elliott Barker, a Canadian psychiatrist, Dr Totu said the consumption of material goods and services is pursued in an attempt to make oneself "feel better" or "cool".

"For example, my boy likes to dress in a hip-hop style with a long jacket and hood. I asked him whether he feels hot in a tropical climate like ours, and he says, 'No, stylebah, Dad. Oh, I am cool, man.'

"It's all because of fashion. The catchword now for teenagers is 'coolness'."

At this juncture, Dr Totu recalled one study in Ireland which found that ladies there loved to put on sexy clothes during winter. "It's all about consumerism," he said, adding that young Australian women practise smoking as a means to project their individuality and self-determination.

From his research, the sign of the emergence of consumerism is visible even in the sub-urban and rural areas.

"Everybody wants to indulge in consumption. Their only shortcoming is lack of purchasing power."

One point of observation is that traditional values can help one keep a distance from less favourable aspects of consumerism.

"Say for example, it may be cool for some girls to wear very short skirts. But then if they embrace strong cultural values, they may refrain from doing so. Thus, our local culture is a kind of mechanism to keep young people on the right track in terms of consumption activities."

Hence, it's important for us to raise awareness of our own cultural values, Dr Totu said.

In this respect, he attempts to convey yet another message – be moderate in your lifestyle.

While conceding that we cannot curb the onslaught of this new culture called "consumerism", he welcomed the notion of "hybridisation" which denotes a kind of fusion "like what we have in cuisine."

"It's a question of consumerist culture vis-à-vis traditional culture. Therefore, when we put these two together (global culture & local cultural values), we will come up with a cultural hybridity of both global and the local scenario. So, we won't be seen as being too outdated and neither will we be seen as too consumerist in a sense."

Dr Totu's conclusion is: "Malaysia cannot escape from the influence of global culture. We are living in an era of globalisation. Life is life. We cannot run away from reality.

"So, let us take the middle stand. What we should do in our consumer culture is take the good elements but discard any form of excessiveness."