

## **JOM MAMAK! EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SOCIOCULTURAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS IN A LOCAL POP-CULTURE PHENOMENON**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Mamak-culture has become an observable indication of ethnic salience, pluralism, and business acumen in Malaysia, particularly in the Peninsula. Unfortunately there is a dearth of literature on the roles of technological and sociocultural determinants that have moved this pop-culture. Guided by the prevailing themes within both determinisms, several in-group members' of the pop culture were observed and selected media articles were analysed. The findings suggest several emerging themes that can be used for further studies pertaining to the technological and sociocultural determinisms. Some unique features of the Mamak-culture are also discussed.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

*Mamak-culture* or “frequenting a *Mamak* restaurant” has evolved in terms of the elements it signifies and become a phenomenon in Malaysia. In the past, a *Mamak* restaurant signified the hot milk tea drink, popularly known as *teh tarik* (literally “pulled tea”), the tasty *Mamak* dishes, especially curry, and the express service provided in the restaurant. The beginning of the big-screen television era had led to a major uplift of the image of most *Mamak* restaurants and extended the list of their cultural roles. Watching football matches on big-screen televisions with groups of friends, regardless of their ethnic origins while enjoying meals or drinks at *Mamak* restaurants had since become a favourite pastime for those who live in places where a *Mamak* restaurant can be found. Today, the expression *Jom Mamak!* (Let’s go to the *Mamak!*), is no longer an invitation to merely eat at a *Mamak* restaurant. Instead, it connotes something larger than what most of us think it is.

Apart from offering an alfresco dining experience at a rather low price especially in major cities and towns throughout the Peninsula, this pop-culture phenomenon has also become an activity that brings people together particularly in the major cities and towns of Peninsular Malaysia. Apparently the *Mamak-culture* defies the myth of harmonious pluralism by portraying the opposite reality. It is also believed that the *Mamak-culture* inculcates values of national unity without even trying (“Celebrating”, 2005), while providing a place where Malaysians and foreigners can come to relax while enjoying great food and great conversation in a laid back environment.

The craving for *Mamak* food and drinks, and the excitement in watching football matches on a big-screen television are clear evidences of how a technological consumption is congruous with social interest. While the opposing views and different premises between the technological and sociocultural determinisms are discussed in abundance, there is a dearth of literature discussing these stances within the Malaysian cultural perspectives.

Similarly, not much attention has been paid to the roles played by ethnic pluralism and national agenda in this regard.

This paper therefore aims to add information to the cultural aspect of the studies on technology-versus-sociocultural determinism while providing the literature with a preamble on the Malaysian *Mamak*-culture and its role in media technological consumption. This will be achieved by explicating the main premises advanced by determinists from both stances which are the *cultural roles of technology* in technological determinism and the *inevitability of technology* sociocultural determinism (Dominick, 2009). More specifically, the discussion throughout this paper is guided by the following themes which emerge from the salient premises; *cultural identity*, *cultural cohesion*, *intertwined relationship*, and *society control (mediation)*.

The discussion in this paper is divided into three parts; the first part demystifies the socioeconomic aspects of the *Mamak*-culture and how it relates to media technological consumption by relating them to evidences from the collected online newspaper articles, blogs, visuals and individual experiences. Later, in the second part, the roles played by this *pop culture* in assimilating the technological and sociocultural determinants are analysed using the four themes mentioned earlier. Finally, in the third part, the emerging themes and stance based on the analysis are put across and discussed within the perspective of local culture.

## **2.0 Technological and Sociocultural Determinants**

The history of mass media tells us the evolution of communication technologies is congruent with the evolution within the society. Apart from providing a distinction between mass and other forms of communication (Vivian, 2011), the cultural roles of technology, according to Dominick (2009), are viewed by the *technological determinists* as the biggest influence on societal behaviours and have continued dictating these behaviours as time progresses. Vivian has also asserted that the cultural roles of technology unite a society through its cultural identity, cultural cohesion and moral consensus, hence the existence of technology as a cultural unifier. An example of such unification, resulting from the evolution of print technology, is the appearance of the first distinctly American novel in the early 1800s, which helped give the young nation a cultural identity. Meanwhile other technologies used to describe the entailing cultural influences include radio and television.

The sociocultural determinists, on the other hand, argue that the relationship between technology and society should not be described with a cause-and-effect formula that is too simplistic as no technology is inevitable and that technology is dependent on (or entwined with) social circumstance (Murphie & Potts, 2003). An earlier argument on a similar stance by Winston (1998) posits technological inventions as a result of control and mediation within the society, by the society. Winston further explains these control and mediation come from various social factors including politics and socio-psychology, which is an indication of technology being socially determined. An example which supports the sociocultural determinists was Hall's (2004) description of the prohibition of mobile phones in country clubs and upscale restaurants in Africa. Although mobile phones symbolized status when first introduced among the African community, Hall described,

later on, even the bus conductors could easily afford them. To maintain their distinctiveness Hall explained, members of the higher class society should not be using mobile phones, an almost similar phenomenon that represents sociocultural determinism is found in Umble (1992) who reported the practice of prohibiting house telephone among the Amish community in Pennsylvania. This was practised as engagement on the phone is seen as going against the principle of *Gelassenheit* (submission to the Authority, God, Churches, the elders and family).

### **3.0 The Mamak-Culture – Its Origin and Evolution**

“*Mamak*”, which literally means ‘uncle’, is the term used by Malaysians to refer to a male adult Indian Muslim. Meanwhile, a female adult Indian Muslim is called “Mami”. The Mamak society in this country is said to have travelled from Madras, India at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They slowly planted their roots through marriage with local women and later opened family businesses such as road side eateries selling Indian Muslim food (the original *Mamak*), which later expanded to provision stores, money changers and also book stores (Lim, 2005). However the restaurant business ventured by the *Mamak*-society has been proven to be the most successful of the lot.

The contemporary *Mamak*-culture scene has changed from road side hawker stalls to bistros as *Mamak*-shops are housed in proper shop lots with air-conditioning sections inside the shop and foldable chairs and tables laid out on the streets set in the late afternoon to cater for the evening and late night crowd. As the profile of their patrons become ethnically diverse it is not surprising that most *Mamak*-restaurants nowadays serve Chinese, Malay, Thai, and Western food apart from the original Indian Muslim food it has been serving since they started (Abdullah, 2006)

#### The *Mamak*-Culture & Social Behaviour

A restaurantier Razman Maarof notes,

*I am one of those who love going for supper in the middle of the night; it could be for tarik and roti canai or for nasi lemak. Then we have the clubbing crowd who just don't want the night to end.*

An observer commented on the above by writing that;

*This group will then check-in somewhere at a place which to them is where they can have some food and chit chat some more (where they can get some food and have a longer chat over it) (Chen, 2006, p. 1)*

A blogger on the ‘the star online’ website shares his view on football and Malaysians,

*We have our own interest. But now I believe that football is a language of its own. I believe now that football is not just samba kick, what I saw was a display of colors, unity and family values.*

The same blogger observes that;

*‘Football fans of all skin colors, all religions, all languages and all education background come together and cheer during matches. They*

*don't mind being seated close to each other at the more-crowded-than-usual Mamak places'*



Pic 1: Whoops of joy and moans of disappointment abound over football at one *Mamak* restaurant

In the following part, the roles played by the *Mamak*-culture in assimilating the technological and sociocultural determinants are analysed using the following themes;

- i) *cultural identity*; and
- ii) *cultural cohesion*, that are advanced by the technological determinists
- iii) *intertwined relationship (between technology and society)*; and
- iv) *society control (mediation)*, which are advanced by the sociocultural determinists

However, prior to the analyses, the social make up and behaviour of the Malaysian society is briefly discussed.

#### **4.0 Social Make Up of the Malaysian Society and Behavior**

The Malaysian society is diversified as a result of the British colonization which ended in 1957. There are three major ethnicities in Malaysia that makes up 95% of the population, which are Malays at 60%, Chinese at 25% and Indians at 10%. The remaining 5% is classified under 'Others' which represents the other minority groups such as the Portuguese descendants and the indigenous people.

Such pluralism in Malaysia exists not without racial tensions but fortunately they do not result in violence (Williamson, n.d.). To promote racial harmony the government frequently organizes events for Malaysians to enjoy and appreciate the company of each other, for instances, among others, the National Day celebration and official 'open house' during festive celebrations. Apart from these, Malaysians also organize gatherings where unity of the different ethnics is evident. Such gatherings include the celebrations of ethnic festivities, which indirectly foster racial unity and aspire the building of a Malaysian race.

Although Malaysians are divided by ethnicity, religion, culture and tradition, most of them obviously share one thing in common; their attitudes toward food with which they are indifferent about eating at any time of the day. This is explained by the number of eateries

that operate all year round, especially in cities like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru. Such eating habit among the Malaysians, according to Lim (2005) is perhaps promoted by the active night-life, late working hours and other types of active socializing habits.

*i) Cultural Identity*

Since its early days, television has been an influence of unity as it is an element of fostering togetherness amongst individuals of family as part of society; enjoying food when watching television in the company of friends and family has been the practice since the beginning of television. An acknowledgment of cultural identity is discernible from the blogger's remark;

*"Football is not just samba kick, what I saw was a display of colors, unity and family values."*

Driven by the common interest in football, which is an attribute of the *Mamak* culture, the remark above can be construed as a subconscious calling for collective acknowledgment that members of the *Mamak* culture should be seen as culturally identical on two grounds; love for football and acceptance of diversity. At one point, advertisers took this opportunity to create a slogan *Makan Bola, Minum Bola, Tidur Bola* (Eat Football, Drink Football, and Sleep Football) which was supposedly a description of the Malaysian society at large during the time this slogan was introduced.

*ii) Cultural Cohesion*

Television has become a powerful source of entertainment and information with advertising, sports and news disseminated straight into the living room. It brings families together, 'the cozy sitting room transformed into a mini stadium for watching the world' where members of the family gather around and enjoy the evening program. Television had influenced the household habits when cooking and eating is centered on television ("Home", 2004)

Such influence, albeit factored by the presence of 'football' being a common interest, is present in the following remark;

*"Football fans of all skin colors, all religions, all languages and all education background come together and cheer during matches. They don't mind being seated close to each other at the more-crowded-than-usual Mamak places"*

By putting them at their restaurants The *Mamak*-culture has married the benefits of big-screen televisions in giving audience a sense of presence which originally targeted to indoor consumption, to the out-door environment.

The information-transmission technology progressed on to the invention of television in the 1950s when people started owning their own television sets to catch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II (see Pic 2 below). If placed next to each other Pic 1 that is shown earlier would portray several similarities with Pic 2 below.



Pic 2: A family tuning their wireless to listen Winston Churchill's Speech on 19 May 1945

When the population for television out-staged the radio, the popular radio programs such as *Take Your Pick* and *Opportunity Knocks* were transferred to television (“Home”, 2004). This became more apparent when the Americans invented TV dinner – a ready-to-eat meal which is microwave friendly and takes only minutes to prepare (“Home”, 2004).

### iii) *Intertwined Relationship (between Technology and Society)*

The role of big-screen television played in the *Mamak*-culture was very much heightened during the FIFA World Cup 2004. Although Malaysia was not represented in the match, the spirit of the game lived in the passion for football among especially the urban Malaysian of all races, gender and social class. Big-screen televisions were placed in an outdoor environment for everyone, patrons or not, to watch the game. A young blogger wrote that it was the “big-screen or nothing at all” as he arrived at the neighborhood *Mamak*-shop counting the seconds till the World Cup match started (“Exciting”, 2006).

The power of presence of television was felt throughout the season as passionate football fans gather at the nearby *Mamak*-place for a cheap satisfied meal while watching the ‘greatest game on earth’, alfresco style. The sense of engagement is felt as they watch it from the big-screen television and it gives the audience a greater sense of experience of the game through greater engagement, enjoyment, involvement, and to an extent, participation. The cozy living room family gatherings which was practiced during the start of radio/television invention (see Pic 3 below) is taken to a whole new level which is the cozy *Mamak* gathering while watching football with hundreds other ‘family’ members to share the same passion and excitement for the game.



Pic 3: Hull's family watching television

Before the invention of television in the United Kingdom, information and entertainment were disseminated through the radio, which was the main focus of living room and dining room in the 1930s. Families would gather around the radio each night to listen to the programs aired. This simultaneously promoted a healthier living environment. When television came, the popularity of radio soared as old wind up record players were replaced by 'radiograms – impressive piece of furniture with the radio, turn-tables and also loud speakers' ("Home", 2004).

**iv) Society Control (Mediation)**

*"I am one of those who love going for supper in the middle of the night; it could be for tarik and roti canai or for nasi lemak ..... where they can have some food and chit chat some more"* (where they can get some food and have a longer chat over it)

If interpreted from the sociocultural determinism perspective, another way of saying this would be,

*"I love eating at the Mamak in the middle of the night while having a long chat with my friends. So, when my friends and I come, especially when there's a live telecast, we make sure we don't miss it."*

The *Mamak* society has definitely been keeping up with the times and has been observing its patron's social habits, behavior and the development of technology. The road side *Mamak* stalls that started from manual paper-pencil calculations have moved on to cash registers, from natural breezy air to fans and air conditioners and from relying on normal conversations as a form of entertainment, it has advanced into placing television sets to aid in the subject of the regular chit chats. Moreover being in tuned to the habits of Malaysians in having supper in wee hours of the mornings, most *Mamak* shops have also extended its opening hours from the previous 16 hours to 24 hours a day. These adoptions of technology and change of operational hours were socially determined by its patrons of wanting comforts in their eating experience.

When no football match is aired, off late the *Mamak* restaurants have started showing educational programme like National Geographic or Animal Planet (author's personal observation). These educational programmes are usually shown by the *Mamak* restaurants at noon and in the afternoon. This somehow indicates the *Mamak*'s acumen in operating their business where patrons will eventually associate the *Mamak* restaurants with the one-stop edutainment, which will attract more female patrons, apart from its 'male-stuff-football' as it is termed by many.

According to Green (2002), the enhancement and use of technology (and improvisation) are related to social bound knowledge. Therefore, the *Mamak*-restaurants are seen to be knowledgeable and sensitive to sociocultural determinants in influencing the choice of technology adopted. In the past five years, the *Mamak*-culture has erected big-screen televisions and projector screens in their premises to cater to sports especially football fanatics and various forms of fandom ("Malaysia", 2006). Past programs broadcasted on the big-screen televisions and projector screens in *Mamak* bistros have been the FIFA 2005 World Cup, wrestling, FI races and much awaited finales of the reality TV programs (Abdullah, 2006, p.1).

In the next part, the attempt to arrive at a stance will be discussed by first discussing the role of screen size through the presence and television study by Lombard *et al.* (2000).

The development of television has been vast and one of the latest developments worth mentioning (as it is vital in this analysis) is the size of the television screen. Lombard *et al.* (2000) conducted a study called 'presence and television' to investigate whether the size of television screen can evoke presence. A total of 65 students were shown rapid point-of-view movements on 12 inches televisions screens and also 46 inches television screens. The results obtained were unsurprising, whereby the respondents feel that rapid point of view movements in a large screen television are seen as 'enjoyable and exciting with more sense of involvement and participation' and to the extent of physical arousal. Such inventions give meaning to the home theatre experience in bringing 'presence' into the home. Although the inventors would have had 'technology consumption at home' in mind, large screen televisions have positioned itself as a strong influence among the urban Malaysian culture, not at home but at places like the *Mamak* restaurant instead.

The traits, relevant to business operation, which most *Mamak* possess, not just indicate their acumen in business but also the salience of their ethnicity. The *Mamak* restaurants are known for their line-ups of workers who would run (figuratively) to the patrons upon arrival to take orders. They hardly make their patrons wait for the ordered drinks and dishes, let alone for their orders to be taken. Their movements within the restaurant especially during peak hours show how energetic the *Mamak* are. Such trait or rather attitude in F&B businesses can be considered rare that the Chinese who are known for their business efficiency may not be able to compete in this matter.

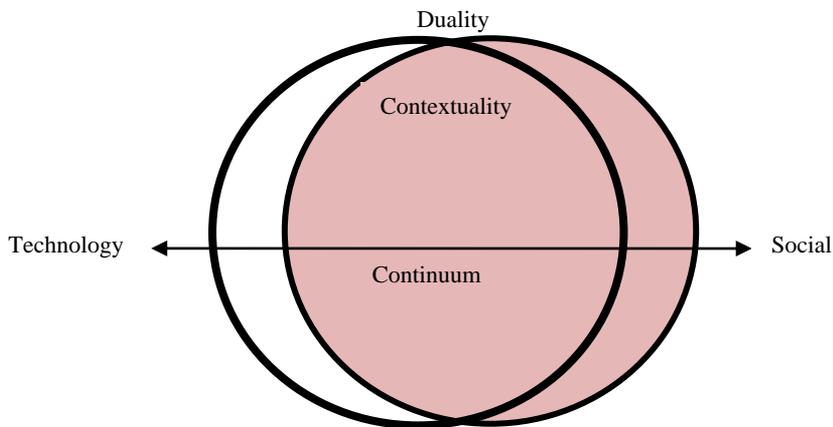
To reach a stance in between the deterministic debate, the following equation must first be considered:

$$mc = [mrs + bstv + fbm + ed + es]$$

where;	mc:	<i>Mamak</i> culture	fbm:	Football match
	mrs:	<i>Mamak</i> restaurant setting	ed:	Ethnic diversity (of the patrons)
	bstv:	Big-screen-TV	es:	Ethnic salience (of the <i>Mamak</i> )

The significance of the equation above lies within the *inevitability* of each variable which means if one of them is omitted, the *Mamak* culture will not exist, be it technology or sociocultural determinant. This also indicates that the unified variables are inextricably unified to form a culture. The *contextuality* of every variable also plays a significant role which can be seen in the setting (*Mamak* restaurant setting) and ethnic diversity (highly unique to Malaysia). If all variables but the MRS are placed at another restaurant, the *Mamak* culture too, will not exist. Such contextuality also explains the *national agenda* mentioned earlier in which there is a call towards the idea of One-Malaysia through which diversity is seen as one which is already portrayed and evident in the *Mamak* culture. National agenda however does not contribute to the formation of the *Mamak* culture formation and rather is seen as a consequence of the equation.

To decide where the whole equation begins one needs to look at two-way movement. Say, if BSTV is chosen as a decision-making factor. Putting the BSTV at the beginning, thus make it (technology) an independent variable, will not provide a solid ground for one to claim it belongs to the technological determinism. This is due to the *duality* of each technological and sociocultural determinant within the equation that calls for considerations from both perspectives whenever there's a need to discuss or debate the roles played by each variable. Such is where the conundrum of this uniquely-Malaysian-phenomenon lies. Therefore, this paper arrives at neither the technological nor the social stance but proposes a continuum which is not clearly stated through the 'intertwined relationship' trait advanced by the sociocultural determinists. As shown in the proposed diagram below, the three emerging themes.



*Diagram: The synergy of inevitability, contextuality & duality of factors forming an assemblage of technological and sociocultural determinants*

## 5.0 Conclusion

The *Mamak* culture proves to be a phenomenon worth studying for two main reasons; its potential in becoming a symbol of unity among Malaysians and the role it plays in providing additional information to the literature on the debates between the technological versus sociocultural determinism albeit there is no apparent indication of the *Mamak* culture as either a technological or sociocultural determinant. This calls for further studies to provide a more decisive stance in this matter. The existence of unique factors that help form the proposed equation allows, thus leading to inevitability, contextuality and duality of variables that indirectly offers a new perspective to both determinism. Taking a stance along a continuum, however clichéd it may sound is not a choice in the case of this rarely studied phenomenon. In a nutshell, the *Mamak* culture is not only sensitive to social habits and behavior of the urban Malaysians; with the initiative of televising sports programs on a big-screen TV, it has contributed to uniting the diversified Malaysian population and building the Malaysian race. Most importantly and as said, the *Mamak* culture has unofficially become one of the common symbols of Malaysia's national identities.

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## **SOURCES OF VISUALS**

Pic 1 - Whoops of joy and moans of disappointment abound as (clockwise from back, right) Mohd Nubaizailani, Mohd Nubaihisham, Azuadie Jafrinal, Siva Shanker, Emmanuel Joseph, Mohd Akbar, Mohd Anwar Khan and Normann Noel Peter watch matches in their favourite mamak.

(Source: <http://thestar.com.my/education/story.asp?file=/2006/6/25/education/14623218>)

Pic 2 - A family tuning their wireless to listen Winston Churchill's Speech on 19 May 1945  
Source: © NMPFT / Daily Herald Archive / Science and Society Picture Library  
[www.makingthemodernworld.org.uk](http://www.makingthemodernworld.org.uk)

Pic 3 - Hull family watching television. Source: © Manchester Central Library, Arts Library, News Chronicle Collection [www.makingthemodernworld.org.uk](http://www.makingthemodernworld.org.uk)