

Title : TRADE OPPORTUNITY IN MYANMAR AND CULTURAL AWARENESS ON THAI'S PRODUCTS

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Abstract

This research paper reviews accumulated data and academic works related to Thai products consumed by Myanmar with the objective of determining Myanmar's consumption behavior. It also seeks to determine Myanmar lifestyle and overall awareness of Thai products. The researchers seek to provide potential consumption direction in the future by presenting Thai products opportunities and threats, particularly products from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the Northern Region that aim to expand their market and export to Myanmar. From our study, we found that the people of Myanmar, or Burmese, continue to consume products for daily necessity such as food and clothing while at the same time, they are increasingly consuming items not just for a product's benefit, but for the semiotics attached to the product. Thai products in general are regarded by many in Myanmar as premium products and having high quality. Thai products are also viewed as modern in design and usage can contribute positively to the users' image and status. People of Myanmar rank Thai products/services of highest quality, followed by products from Singapore, Myanmar, China, Malaysia and Vietnam. The Burmese link personal usage and consumption of imported goods to their own social status and standing. Usage of Thai products or services, therefore, enhances individual's personal attributes. Products which may be unimportant for daily living but is meaningful in enhancing social status appear to be increasingly attractive to Myanmar people. As such, Thai products and marketing communication should consider this aspect of Myanmar perception.

Keywords: consuming culture, semiotics consumption, SMEs' products.

Introduction

Thailand borders the countries of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. All three of these countries have had long historical conflicts, as well as collaboration, at the civil and governmental levels. These relationships have been in existence long before the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015, with the relationships of people living in close proximity to national boundaries most pronounced. In many cases, people who are living on the border are acquainted with, or may even have relatives, on the other side as they share the same culture and were separated only by national boundaries. Their differences only arose as a result of political and national differences, but many actually grew up as neighbors having close ties and familiarity with each other's cultural identity. They may actually share a closer bond to these foreign neighbors than their own countrymen as their location is far removed and remote from the majority of people in their own country. Because of this, understanding people who reside along the borders must include an understanding of the neighborhood relationship amongst people of both nationalities who may have a unique identity that separates them from their own countrymen. In fact, the national identity that may be prevalent among the majority of people in the country do not have much impact on the deep cultural relationship of people who are living along the border. They continue to have positive relationships with their foreign neighbor, a fact which has been confirmed by a number of research studies and academic works that focus on awareness or opinions of Thailand. This includes opinions regarding Thai products as well, which helps to strengthen the

opportunity for Thailand to become the trading hub for the region. Transnational Labor in Thailand Representing Culture and Products The political and national differences among countries in the region, which includes the different direction of each country's national development and infrastructure, also contributes to the differences with a country's economics, trading, and investment dimension. The country which is more developed will require more human labor. Higher wages and living standards contribute to the migration of labor, goods, and investment. When this happens, the culture and way-of-life are also carried along when the migrants cross the border. The emergence of the AEC has also been an important factor that emphasizes not only the previously mentioned border relationships, but more acceptance of transnational labor with resulting stability and increases in legal protection. These promote the movement of labor, goods, investment and culture at an exponential rate. When we look at the economics and a country's readiness for trade among the border countries of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar we find that labor and investments move in opposite directions, i.e., the movement of labor is from the country which is less developed to more developed economies, whereas, investments tend to move from more developed economies to less developed ones. In 2014, Thailand had a high number of transnational labor in many industrial sectors, roughly 2 million people. This included both legal and illegal labor, 65% of which came from Myanmar. This article will focus mainly on the issues of Myanmar's cultural and consumption behavior because these transnational workforce have a direct impact on Thai's product brand

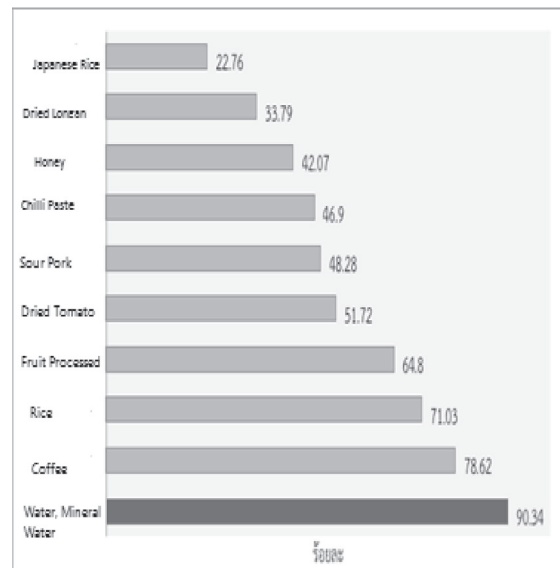


awareness that originated in their home country. Migrants also carry the Thai's lifestyle and consumption pattern when they return home. From a sociological perspective, when one country absorbs another country's culture, it creates economic and competitive advantages for the other. As research has shown, many countries now emphasize exporting their culture in many forms such as movies and music, promoting the image and culture. This creates a positive attitude towards that country's products and services. England, the United States, Japan and South Korea have all successfully exported their culture through sports, movies, music, cartoon characters, and TV Series. As a result, many kinds of products from these countries were successfully exported to the countries that were the recipient. The country where the exported culture originated gained a great many benefits, including a robust exporting industry in a wide range of products, as well as tourism and other trademarked products. Thailand already has the production capability, not only in terms of quantity and diversity, but also technological complexity, logistics, and infrastructure, which should help to drive Thai product awareness with neighboring countries and provide sustained growth and awareness of Thai products in its neighboring countries markets. Thai Product Consumption in Neighboring Countries – Opportunity for SMEs in the Northern Region The latest Myanmar census shows that the country has a population of 55 million people. Their imported goods come mainly from Thailand, China, and Vietnam. The number one exporter of goods to Myanmar is China, accounting for almost 40% of Myanmar's total imports. Thailand is number two, accounting for 23% of Myanmar's imports.

Myanmar is a neighboring country with Thailand and has had a long trading and historical relationship. The working class is among the most important consumer groups and has significant purchasing power, particularly the young adult workforce. This demographic is familiar with Thai consumer goods, particularly when they themselves or a relative has worked in Thailand. They like and trust Thai products for its quality and can be relied upon for repeat purchases. Many research studies have confirmed this buying pattern and the product types which are preferred. They are ranked below in order of preference by the Burmese: 1. Food and clothing goods 2. Electrical appliances, furniture 3. Decorative items and souvenirs 4. Agricultural goods and agro-industry. From the research data, we've found that consumption behavior of Myanmar people includes purchasing products that are necessary for daily living. Over 80% of the sampling group from our study bought primarily food items and clothing goods. Products or services that Myanmar people who live along the Thai-Myanmar border use is found in Thailand businesses such as food outlets, beauty salons, vehicle parts and accessories stores, lodging, spa and aesthetic clinics. This shows that the Burmese spend on items that are necessary for daily living, followed by spending on personal wellness and convenience in daily life. Accordingly, products that enhance personal wellness and beauty will have a high potential of success in the Myanmar market. Instant food or ready-to-eat items, instant drinks either sachet or canned, and confectionaries are also increasing in demand as a result of community expansion. Currently, Myanmar household expenditures are predominately on food items which accounts for roughly 70% of

total income. Regarding decorative items and furniture, these items may see improvement in demand in Myanmar due to the open-door policy related to the hotel and tourism industry. This sector is expected to expand which will include building and construction. The automobile and spare parts sector will rapidly expand at the same growth rates of Myanmar's economic expansion which is 5.8% per annum during 2012 and 2016. Most of the cars used in Myanmar are second-hand and more than 5 years old, which would require increased maintenance and spare parts. This provides an opportunity for Thailand to both export cars and spare parts. Demand for agricultural machinery also continues to increase along with the country's economic expansion. The Myanmar government has given concessions to foreign agricultural investors. Myanmar imported agricultural machinery from Thailand through Mae Sot-Myawaddy Border and from there, flows to Hpa-an, Mawlamyine and Rangoon where it will be distributed to machinery outlets throughout the rest of the country. In general, products that most Burmese regularly purchase are consumer goods such as food items and clothing. But products such as electrical home appliances and home decorative items are also in high demand by the Myanmar people. The type of products that Myanmar people consume are similar to the type of products that SMEs in the Northern Region produce. The research (Table 1) shows that over the past four months (during February – May 2016), the top ranked items that 70% of the sampling group purchased were drinking water and mineral water, followed by coffee and rice. The total amount of coffee bought are almost equal to the amount of drinking and mineral water purchased. This tends

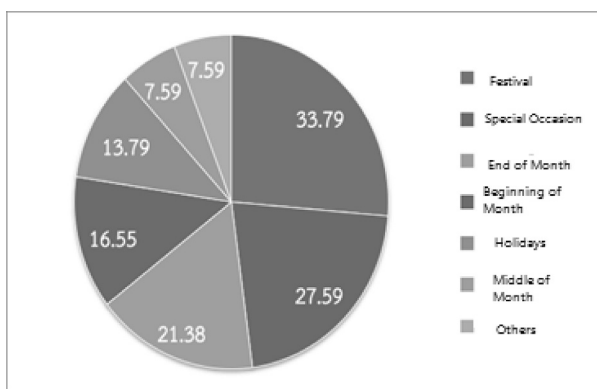
to demonstrate that Myanmar people have increased their consumption of coffee which is a result of a change in lifestyle to more resemble their Thai counterparts.



Although Myanmar has had a closed-door policy over a long period of time, the Myanmar people are still very familiar with Thai products and Thai people in general. This is a significant advantage for Thai SMEs and provides an opportunity to expand in the Myanmar market without any major adjustment to existing product marketing or packaging. This is due to the fact that labeling in the Thai language conveys a message of quality and trust already recognized by the Myanmar people. Billboards and local newspapers are an influential marketing medium in Myanmar and can be utilized to promote Thai products. An interesting finding suggests that marketing activities and build-up of inventories in Myanmar people tend to have consumption patterns related to different occasions. This is similar to Thai consumption patterns. Our research indicates that Myanmar people prefer to buy or spend on goods and services on special occasions or during festive



seasons (refer to Table 2). Thai entrepreneurs should be familiar with Myanmar culture to better prepare for important holidays and annual events or festivals so marketing plans can be prepared accordingly. Promotional campaigns should link or be in-line with special events as consumers in Myanmar will usually make purchases at the end or beginning of the month, not during the month or during a long weekend.



Although there appears to be ample business opportunities in Myanmar, Thai businesses must also be aware of certain threats, i.e., the political, economic, and monetary systems. This can manifest itself in ways such as limitations on infrastructure, transportation systems, finances, communications, and other important logistical concerns that are not prevalent in Thailand. These threats and limitations are things that exporters must be aware of and prepare beforehand. For example, there may be a significant level of political instability, such as clashes between the central government and minority groups that may cause a closure of border access. This is a common occurrence. Infrastructure and public utilities are sometimes inadequate. For example, roads are not accessible in certain areas. Even on some main roads required for transportation of products, the roads remain underdeveloped.

This may cause damage to some of the products during transport. The unreliable power supply can impact production capacity. In some cases, access to reliable electricity is limited and not sufficient for industrial and business needs. This problem is becoming pronounced due to the rapid expansion of businesses in Myanmar. Myanmar People's Product Awareness and Image From our observations of Myanmar consumer behavior at border check points and large towns, it can be concluded that they give relativity between product quality and price, i.e., good quality products will be more expensive. Their selection criteria may suggest that quality is more important than price, but it does not mean that they will always choose a quality product that is much more expensive. According to research conducted by Atti Pisanwanit (2014), the same observation regarding product quality and price relativity was prevalent. "Myanmar consumers have high price sensitivity. When one product price is far more expensive than another, the chance that the more expensive priced product will not succeed is very high also." Myanmar people prefer products from Thailand due to product quality, but when selling in Myanmar at the very high price compared to the competitors price, it may not be able to compete. Therefore, pricing strategies for Thai products in Myanmar should not exceed 5-10% relative to its competitor. Promotional and distribution channels for SMEs that have limited budgets for large promotional campaigns should consider direct selling. That is, SMEs should give out product samples and conduct marketing activities through small introductory marketing channels. Mobile sell units at tradition wet markets will be less expensive than mass market advertising campaigns or elaborate promotional

campaigns. On each purchase, Myanmar people tend to make comparisons between products before making purchasing decisions. This will be focused on their necessity as their monthly income is generally 3,500 – 9,000 Baht. Based on this observation, it is a distinct advantage to have the reputation of Thai products/services as they are viewed to have better quality at a reasonable price. Additionally, Thai products are viewed as modern and fashionable, providing prestige, and more reliability as well as more widely available. This aspect of Thai product attributes provides a distinct competitive advantage, greatly enhancing product value from the perspective of Myanmar consumers. When Thai products can simply elevate itself beyond the normal standard utility due to a higher level of prestige, it is a unique success that must be maintained in the future. Because products that are associated with social class can garner a higher premium, it will be in high demand and can command a higher price. Any product or branding or logo that provides the consumer with a feeling of well-being, i.e., modern and fashionable, means that the product has strong market appeal and can be positioned to build on a stronger image as well. Consumers can become addicted to product semiotics or the image that is attached to the product more so than its actual functionality. They may not consider that “the existing product is long-lasting, but their interest will be focused on its new release,” meaning buyers are focused on re-purchase. Research conducted by Nanthasorn Chaiyingot (2015) found that current consumer behavior in Myanmar has shifted somewhat. The local people are more “open to new things” and accept and are prepared to buy products based on person-

al satisfaction. One of the important contributing factors believed to be as a result of the “open-door policy” is that it has made the Myanmar people more open minded. The acceptance of foreign cultures has led to an “adaptive” way of life. Culturally in the old days, Myanmar consumers rarely deviated their purchasing habits and tend to stick to the old brand, buying the same regularly used products over and over again. After its open-door policy, many new brands were imported as more competitors entered the market. Consumers were looking more towards personal well-being, demanding more variety, more product trial and selection. These consumers became more demanding and gave more attention to detail in their purchases, selecting products according to “special product features.” Envirosetl Thailand Company (2015) studied Myanmar’s consumer behavior and their preferences and has summarized the following 8 key points: 1. Open to new products and ideas. As a result of the open-door policy, consumers became more open to many new ideas such as technology, innovation, new brands, and fashion. Myanmar people started to open up, willing to spend more to fulfill their personal needs. This included convenience items as such, detergent products, dish washing liquid, cleaning products, etc. So it wasn’t just an openness to new ideas, but an openness to try new items that they had never seen or used before. 2. Dare to take challenge. Consumers were prepared to switch from their current brand used to other varieties of new brands available. Their decision making roughly 48% of the time was based on media and advertising, especially roadside billboards and cutouts that provide product recognition. Another 25% of Myanmar consumers were ready to try new things.



New businesses received more positive responses as previously they relied more on referrals or affirmation from reliable sources. But now, consumers were more prepared to take on new ideas and challenges on their own. 3.

More beauty conscious. In addition to becoming more open to new product and product ideas, consumers in Myanmar are also becoming more conscious of their personal well-being. This is the case for both female and male consumers. Previously, very few cosmetic products were in demand in Myanmar, with the exception of Tanaka. Today, many kinds of skincare and beauty products such as facial cleanser, sun screen, hair treatment, and other types of cosmetic products experienced an increase of 20% in overall demand. 4. Found to be more modern. Many Burmese are becoming more “modernized,” largely due to mobile phone penetration which increased from 72% in 2013 to 97% in 2015. The transition of the older generation from mobile phones to smartphones have resulted in increased interest in online media. This is prevalent not only in notebooks, but tablets are common and being used for communication between individuals. Other modern products adopted include LCD and LED televisions. 5.

Addiction to the internet. The expansion of tele-communication and smartphones have made a huge impact on telephone communication and digital media in Myanmar society. Different types of Apps such as Line and Whatsapp are highly popular. The App Viber is the most popular social media in Myanmar. 6. Ready to seek convenience. Myanmar people use different types of tools for convenience in life. Home appliances such as refrigerators and air conditioners are becoming much more common in homes. Convenience items

which simplify lifestyle, such as instant noodles and cooking powder, are also popular. Better road systems have also helped to enhance living standards. 7.

Change in modern trade areas. There has been a 44% increase in consumer spending at modern trade outlets, which is a change from the traditional wet market in the old days or to simply stay at home. 8.

Broader life activities. The way of life, particularly among the younger generation, have changed. Previously, the Myanmar people preferred to stay at home or visit the temples on the weekends. Modern Myanmar people, by an increase of 44%, engage in out-of-home activities more frequently, including visiting with friends, socializing, going to parties, or visiting coffee shops. They also attend more frequently social events such as concerts, tread fair, or contest events. Clearly, the day-to-day behavior of Myanmar people has changed. They are more open to new ideas and concepts, consume (borderless) new media, readily try new products, and embrace the idea of convenience goods that simplify their lifestyle. But the research has also found that Myanmar’s Happiness Index has declined. One of the reasons may be the forced modernization of the population which required the citizens to adapt too quickly or sense that they are falling behind. And the fact that more Myanmar people, particularly the young, spend more time away from home socializing, shopping, or dining out, may have also contributed to the decline.

Conclusion

Conclusion on Trade Opportunity and Cultural Awareness on Thai's Products

As more Myanmar people are spending increased time in out-of-home activities, more of the out-of-home marketing communications were used to reach the consumers. More billboards along streets can be seen. More promotional campaigns utilizing point-of-sale tactics are used to attract customers as previously, consumers were more loyal to the brand they have previously used. A study from EnviroSale Thailand Company also concluded that "Fundamentally, Myanmar people liked enjoyableness, beauty, and excitement with technology." Recently, the government's open-door policy has made the Myanmar people's life focus on health, wellness, and education. Religion is still important in their lives, as well as happiness within one's own family.

Myanmar people's point-of-view towards Thai products remains positive. They acknowledge that Thai branded products are modern and fashionable. Thai products and services rank highest in terms of quality among the six main countries in the region. Thailand is followed by Singapore, Myanmar, China, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Wherever Thai products are available, Myanmar people will consider them first. The product image that the Myanmar people have of Thai products are premium, high quality, nice design, modern, and enhances the users persona and image.

Thai products that have a high potential of penetrating the Myanmar market are:

1. Consumer goods. Myanmar people are already accustomed to Thai consumer goods as many of them or their relatives have visited or lived in Thailand previously. They trust the brand

name Thai products as nearly every type of Thai consumer goods are in high demand. Myanmar is the number one importer of Thai non-alcoholic drinks, mainly energy drinks, sport drinks, soy milk, and ready-to-drink tea. Traditional retail stores remain the major distribution channel with 80% of overall retail business.

2. Machinery and construction materials. Myanmar is moving aggressively to improve their basic infrastructure in order to support economic development and fast-moving foreign investments. This means that machinery and construction materials should be in high demand. Agricultural tools and machineries also have high potential for exporting into Myanmar. A large number of the Myanmar people still work in the agricultural sector. The suitable tools and machinery that would be ideal in Myanmar should not be too complex, allow for self-maintenance, and not be too expensive. Many Myanmar farmers still lack the skills to operate complex machinery and tools. This sector may be attractive for foreign investors as exporters in many countries can now trade freely with Myanmar. Thai businesses may face more competition from other countries and must prepare for such a scenario by seeking local strategic alliances to help facilitate administrative matters with the government sector. The local partner can provide insight into trade and investment strategies and perhaps may have already done extensive research. They can provide a better understanding of the market landscape as they are more familiar with local consumer behavior and can provide better insight as to how to best prepare products to suit local needs.

One of the reasons that Thai products are popular in Myanmar, particularly at the border line,



is that it is widely available. Cross border trade has been active for some time and basic logistics, such as transportation, can be done easily. This is an advantage for Thai products. The Myanmar people can easily travel across the border to make purchases from the Thai side, both for personal use or reselling. Good roadways in some areas of Myanmar makes Thai products easy to distribute and widely available in Myanmar. The channels of distribution and dissemination to small and medium size retailers have contributed to this success. Currently, there are no large shopping centers in the country. Myanmar people typically make purchases at nearby shops. They will take some time in making decisions. Providing accessibility to products with a wide coverage area make products easier to find for consumers and fits with the typical consumer behavior when making purchasing decisions.

The Myanmar people's consumption and usage of foreign products are more relatable to cultures that tend to be individualistic in nature. In social terms, the use of foreign or Thai products can contribute to class and social status. The consumption of Thai products or services provide a certain level of desired status due to the semiotics that are attached to the product. The use of non-necessity type products by status conscious Myanmar people is on the rise.

The use of celebrities or brand ambassadors to help promote products or as a part of a promotional campaign would only have minimal or medium impact to the purchasing decision making of Myanmar people. They give more consideration to products that are considered modern and fashionable. One of the key purchasing decisions is that the product is up-to-date. The Myanmar

people tend to keep up-to-date on the latest releases of new products, regardless of the utilization of the current product or whether the new product is more functional or not. The focus is more on social status or whether use of the current product is in decline.

The importance of social status on a product's usage and consumption behavior has been on the rise, particularly in areas that share the border with Thailand. At particular border check points, such as at Tachileik province, we found that Myanmar people change their lifestyle to better resemble big-city lifestyle. This includes lifestyle behavior such as doing more exercise at a gym or fitness center as this is symbolic of a city lifestyle which represents higher social status.

Recommendation

1. When conducting a research study in Myanmar, it is highly recommended that a translator be used in order to more accurately convey the message. The Myanmar people may not be familiar with being interviewed or giving interviews. As such, misunderstandings of the questions and/or not understanding the key intent of messages could lead to incorrect interpretations of the answers or ideas being expressed. Carefully phrasing the sentence using different words to confirm the meaning of what's being said is suggested, even if conducting the interview in the Burmese language.
2. Thai products are clearly popular among the Myanmar people. Thai SMEs should continue to build on this important advantage by building on their brand image and attaching it to their brand personality.

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