

Ways Mums connect

In the age of mobile devices and technology, who or where do Malaysian mums turn to for advice and information? **Aneeta Sundararaj** finds out

WHAT happens when you decide to buy a baby stroller? Do you phone friends to ask which ones they bought? Do you go online to research available brands? Or, do you ask your friends on Facebook to make recommendations?

These are precisely the issues Dr Milan Agnihotri, McCann Worldgroup Malaysia Brand Planning and Innovation Group Director, considered when he conducted a five-week study titled *The Truth About Malaysian Mothers*.

"We know that mothers are responsible for the majority of purchasing decisions made in many households. We also know that the key to connecting with Malaysian mothers is to first connect with the people that these mothers go to for advice," says Milan. The data collected would be useful to companies to brand their products and services in a way that would motivate Malaysian mothers to buy them.

Together with his team, Milan began to create focus groups and conduct in-depth interviews with urban mothers in Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Kuantan, Penang and Johor Baru. The main criterion for those chosen to participate in the study was simple: They had to be mothers who are actively advising or seeking advice from others about everything, from planning parties and health concerns to which brands to choose. Central to the study was the use of mobile devices and technology.



Mothers are responsible for the majority of purchasing decisions

What Milan observed was that the traditional role of Malaysian mothers has changed. "Women are now empowered in their own right. They are not only informed and employable, they are also financially and economically independent."

With a quiet smile, he adds: "Men are still the centre of the mother's existence, but their voice is being heard now and they will speak up for what's right in the family."

One of the first conclusions Milan makes is that Malaysian mothers love their hand-held devices because they tend to shorten the generation gap with their children.

"These devices also allow mothers to solve their problems without having to go from pillar to post," says Milan. For instance, one mother was concerned about her teenage daughter's sullen moods. The mother sought help from her Facebook friends and one of them spoke with the daughter. The problem was solved and, soon, all was well.

"The mother said that this would probably never

have happened when she was young. Parents then might not have noticed if their child was quiet and, even if they did, they wouldn't have known how to help the child. Today, because of the Internet, she was able to seek assistance from a friend to help her child," says Milan.

This mother sharing her child's problems so openly on the Internet, however, seems to be an exception. In an interview with another mother, Milan discovered that to help her obese child become healthier, the mother chose to go online and find the necessary information.

She then devised a diet plan and exercise regime for her son. Today, her son is leaner and has gained self-confidence. One of the conclusions Milan made was this: Malaysian mothers were judgemental of the choices other mothers made.

"This mother said that if she had asked her friends for advice on how to help her son, she knew that they would tell her one thing, but think something else and probably criticise her for not looking after her child."

Furthermore, she didn't bother to seek the advice of a doctor or nutritionist when devising a diet plan for her son because, "she would have had to pay lots of money for the

same information she got for free online".

Although sharing information about a child's ill health was a "no-go", tongue-in-cheek Milan adds: "If the child does well in school or won an award, Malaysian mothers had no problem sharing such information openly."

Indeed, many younger Malaysian mothers shared information about fashionable clothes their children liked and expensive skincare products they used. At this point in the discussion, Milan laughs and admits that there were times he couldn't tell if the women were genuinely sharing their experiences or just showing off.

Malaysian mothers with smart phones asked for the Time Shrinker App and the Sensitive Man App so that they would have more time and not lose their patience with the family. They didn't like the Grocery Gadget App as there was no point in paying for such apps when they could just write down what they need on a piece of paper.

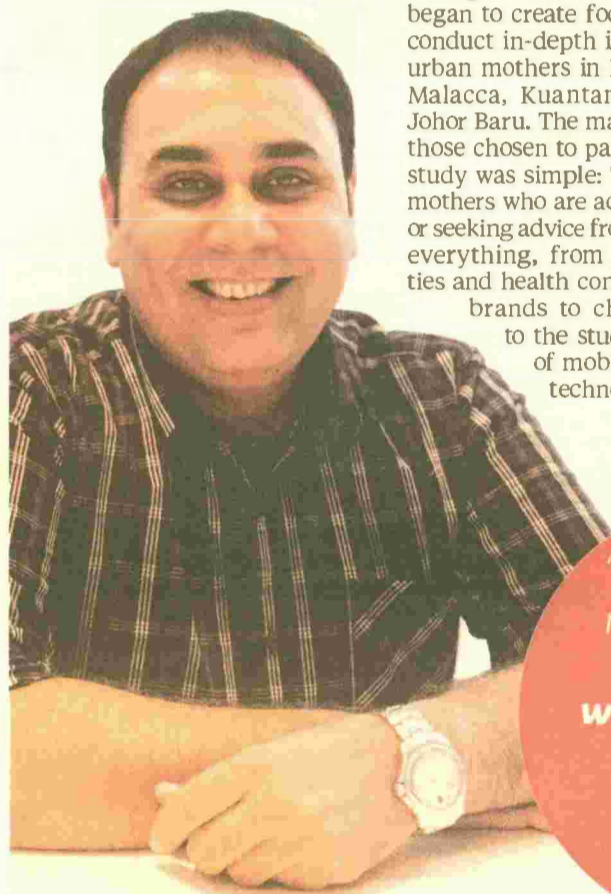
The Child Tracker App was popular as it allowed Malaysian mothers to keep track of their teenage children's whereabouts at all times. It was particularly amusing that the SitorSquat Bathroom Finder App was equally popular as this helped mothers find toilets for their children in big malls or unfamiliar places.

It is the story of a Malaysian mother who suffers from Urticaria (hives) that prompted Milan to make one of his final observations. This mother had sought medical help and was told that the only thing she could do was take antihistamines.

Weary from the effects of the medication, she followed the links on her Facebook page and visited websites that promoted herbal concoctions and traditional medication. She tried them and has found some relief.

As he pondered over this story, Milan wondered if Malaysian mothers are willing to believe the word of a complete stranger on the Internet. The answer, he realised, was simple: Malaysian mothers will believe the word of strangers as long as what's said works for them.

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Dr Milan Agnihotri



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