

# **LANGUAGE USE IN PACKAGING: THE REACTION OF MALAY AND CHINESE CONSUMERS IN MALAYSIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research sets out to determine the changes in attitude, emotion and behaviour of respondents to packaging using Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese in a multicultural Asian country, Malaysia. The findings of this research indicate that respondents reacted more favorably to product packaging imprinted in their own ethnic language. However, there is no significant difference between respondents in their attitude towards the company, indicating that there is a disparity between consumer reaction towards the company and its product packaging.

Key words: Language, packaging, ethnic, Malay, Chinese, Malaysia.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia is a multiracial and multicultural country, with Malay, Chinese, Indian and numerous indigenous people living side by side. Communities in Malaysia speak various languages, including Malay, Chinese, Tamil and English (Khoo, 1991; David, 2003; Gannon, 2001). However, the Malay language is the national language and is taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools (Maier, 1996; David, 2003). Chinese, Tamil and English languages are still widely used and most Malaysians are bi- or tri-lingual and can comfortably switch between more than one language in a sentence (Gannon, 2001; David, 1999a; 1999b). This language shift is the sociocultural process of individuals changing from the habitual use of one language to that of another, indicating familiarity with the various languages used (Weireich, 1970).

It is therefore not surprising that product packagings used in Malaysia can be found in various languages widely used by people belonging to different cultural and speech communities. Each community has a particular way of “seeing things” and is more influenced when its own language is used (Paul, 1993). Language also plays an important role in persuading people to buy products and services (Dyer, 1982), especially if the product is targeted at a specific group, such as an ethnic community.

Cultural differences and especially language differences have a significant impact on the way a product may be marketed, its brand name, and the advertising campaign chosen (Doole and Lowe, 1999). Numerous promotional efforts have gone wrong because of language-related mishaps, such as the case of Coca-Cola in China (Kotabe and Helsen, 1998; Hollensen, 1998; Doole and Lowe, 1999). Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid when using different languages in packaging.

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