


It's not just a brand name: The impact of language on consumer attitude and behavior

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Abstract

This paper notes the impact of language choice in a brand name on consumer's response. This was measured based on three different language based brand names in the same product category (coffee). The brand names were Aik Cheong, Kopimas, and Power Root, representing Chinese, Malay, and English language respectively. Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT) is used as the basis for this paper as it indicates that a group prefers its own language and will respond positively. Data was collected from Chinese respondents throughout Malaysia using a survey. Questions were from past measurement scales utilizing a 6 point forced scale. The findings indicate that respondents preferred English and Chinese language brand name over Malay language brand name and there was no difference in response for English and Chinese language brand name. Malay language was the least preferred. This paper is limited by the method, breath and scope of data collection.

Keywords: brand name; language; Chinese; Malaysia; consumer attitude

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1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-racial and therefore multi-lingual country with a number of speech communities (Omar, 1982; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2007). The national and official language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malaysia. It is also the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools. English is the second most important language in Malaysia is commonly used for a variety of functions in professional and social transactions (Hashim, 2003). Other major languages are Mandarin (and the various Chinese dialects) and Tamil, which are taught in the national type schools and used within the subgroups. Most Malaysians are at the very least bilinguals and many are multilingual (Omar, 1982).

This diversity in language has also impacted the choice of brand names in the Malaysian market. Names such as Gardenia, Julie, Power Root and Old Town represent the English language's brand names while Saji, Jati, Syahirah, and Suria represent the use of Bahasa Malaysia brand names. In addition there are also Chinese language brand names such as Aik Cheong, Poh Kong, Lee Fah, and Chek Hup. It is clear that cultural differences and especially language difference will influence the way a product may be marketed, its brand name and the advertising campaign chosen (Doole & Lowe, 1999). Therefore, it is important to study the impact of language use in brand names on Malaysian consumers. This paper will only look at the Malaysian Chinese consumer. The Chinese are the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia.

2. Literature review

Brand naming is an essential component in marketing strategy. It can contribute significantly to the success or failure of new products or services (Kotler & Armstrong, 1997). The selection of the right brand name is one of the most important marketing decisions (Keller, 1993). A good brand name enjoys high levels of consumer brand awareness and commands strong consumer preference (Chan & Huang, 1997).

Malaysia is not yet a significant global brand player as the brand value is not more than US 2.7 billion but Malaysia is proud of its many international brands such as Petronas, Air Asia, and Royal Selangor. The Malaysian government through its Ministry of International Trade and Industry and has been allocating funds and grants up to RM1 million to companies to undertake the development and promotion of Malaysia brands. This is done through the Brand Promotion Grants where SMEs are allowed for 100 percent reimbursable funding grant (Ahmad & Baharun, n.d.).

In Malaysia, local brand names can be found in various languages. The brand names such as Munchy, Gardenia, Julie, and Old Town represent the English language's brand names while Seri Murni, Jati, Kapal Api, and Zaitun represent the use of Bahasa Malaysia in local brand names. Besides, there are also Chinese language brand names such as Aik Cheong, Poh Kong, Sin Tai Hing, and Chek Hup. The use of various languages in local brand names is because of diversity in the Malaysian diaspora.

The branding strategy for nondurable consumer products must always be related with the local culture (Boddewyn, Soehl, & Picard, 1986). Companies are quick to act on this, utilizing brand names in their target market language and using it as a cue to indicate who the producer is. A brand name such as Seri Murni may indirectly indicate the product is produced by Malay producer.

The use of language on consumer purchasing behavior has received recognition and attention of academics especially in understanding consumer preference and acceptance of global brand. Language expresses, embodies and symbolized culture reality (Kramsch, 1998). Previous research has shown that language differences may affect consumer information processing (Schmitt, Pan, & Tavassoli, 1994). However, not many studies on