



Metaphor Beyond Branding: From the Perspective of Cultural Semiotic

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ABSTRACT

Metaphors can help brands tell compelling stories about their products and values, but they also can create false associations between a product and unrelated concepts. Thus, the study explores the role of cultural values and beliefs in shaping the use of metaphors in Malaysian food product branding. A semiotic analysis is run on five food packaging designs to understand the symbolic meanings encoded to uncover the hidden meanings and associations that influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. Data analysis involves a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting signs, and symbols to uncover their underlying meanings and significance. Findings showed that brand elements closely related to a specific cultural attribute can be a complicated topic because they can also be manipulative for branding or marketing purposes. The existence of metaphor in multiple brand elements enhances the brand's image and appeal by evoking positive emotions, aspirations, or associations. This study contributes to the conceptualization of the relationship between visual metaphor and brand relationship in the field of visual communication. Thus, it helps marketers create effective brand positioning that resonates with consumers' relevant cultural symbols and meanings and avoids costly marketing blunders.

1. Introduction

A co-branding strategy in a culturally diverse setting is a popular strategy that triggers varied psychological responses that influence consumer reactions (Chiu, Ho, Xie et al., 2024). Branding often unconsciously represent ideas that shape perception regarding a product that they represent. Branding is a way to differentiate themselves and become a strong presence in the market. Many products in the market

leverage elements like brand awareness and image to capitalize on brand perception to gain competitive advantages. According to Porter (2008), one of the strategies for any brand can do is creating differentiation in a product. Such strategy helps to draw consumer attention and to identify as well as remember a specific brand. Differentiation can be made through brand naming, used to identify a company, service, or concept and it was treated simply as trademarks signs. In Castro & Sáiz (2020), consumers buy things not only for what the product offers to them but also for what they mean. Moreover, the application of metaphors also be able to affect consumer attitudes, beliefs, and actions in surprisingly hidden ways (Geary, 2011). A metaphor involves comparing two seemingly unrelated concepts to create symbolic meaning (Septianto, Pontes & Tjiptono, 2021) and also help people grasp abstract concepts they have difficulty understanding. Metaphors can be found visually in both verbal (copywriting / text) and pictures. It is imperative to comprehend the influence of metaphorical representations in text and visuals on perceptions of brand personality. Developing a brand personality entails a "transfer of cultural meaning," where the meanings associated with social and cultural symbols are imparted onto the brand with certain symbols and ideologies (Ang & Lim, 2013; Yang, 2023). Batey (2015) stated, branding is quite a unique process whereby it is the people who create the brand image based on their perception and interpretation based on the brand identity that the advertiser or marketer set up in the first place. To achieve persuasion, brand need to establish trust and appeal to both the logical and emotional sides of the audience.

Aaker's model suggests that brand personality is directly reflected in consumers' personalities, stemming from the projection of human traits onto the brand (Fajardo, Molinilo, Sanchez et al., 2023). This underscores the significance of emotion in branding (Zhang & Luo, 2019). Based on the concept, brand personalities also depict associated feelings and it is related to the brand's value in the consumer's mind (Munasinghe, 2019). Such application allows brands to convey deeper symbolic meanings and forge emotional connections with consumers including in packaging design that plays a vital role in communicating brand identity and brand personality. Packaging itself comprises a combination of elements that effectively influence consumers' perceptions and purchasing decisions (Teofilus, Sutrisno & Gomuljo, 2019). Thus, consumers' purchasing tendencies are indirectly influenced by packaging strategies.

2. Problem Statement

The key principle of advertising is to effectively, cognitively, or behaviorally influence and change the attitudes of the audience (Al-Heety & Hussein, 2019). This also apply in branding whereby such manipulation is mainly achieved by structuring text or visuals to target layers of meanings. Some connections are cultural and these relations is interesting because it is used to communicate their story. Language, signs and symbols are the semiotic tools for brands to uncover and produce the right codes (Yakin & Totu, 2014) in order to culturally fit with their audience in the market. Furthermore, Ang & Lim (2013; Birdsell, Tatsuta & Nakamura, 2022) stated metaphors able to stimulate greater cognitive engagement than literal messages, introducing novelty that enhances motivation to read and process by consumer. However, metaphors also can be less sincere compared with those using literal visual elements. There is limited understanding of the impact of cultural congruence on perceived fit (Chiu, Ho, Xie et al., 2024). Consumers often pay attention to cultural nuances, making cultural sensitivity a crucial issue warranting study. Metaphors have great power to alter belief systems and at the same time culture related attributes through branding can be part of brand personalities to deceive the audience to make them believe due to the visual metaphor given; specifically, brand names, logos and symbol, slogans in packaging as mentioned by Husna, Yusof and Hashim (2022). This is done to captivate Malay-Muslim consumers and influence their interest and preference towards the brand's products. Chen (2020) stated, names play an important role in marketing and advertising especially for consumer products. Various brand naming strategies were documented and classified as descriptive or suggestive as stated by Kara, Gunasti and Ross Jr. (2020), however semantic names are the most adaptable to reflect local language. Besides, religious symbols on product packaging could stimulate Muslim consumers' purchase intentions (Bakar, Lee &

Rungie, 2013). The image associated with a specific brand offers a distinctive relevancy not just for Malays but Muslim self-preferences to gain their acceptance.

Branding itself is part of signs and symbols that act as a communication vehicle in a given culture that interact, and shape consumer understanding that is embedded in a brand. However, the misuse of metaphor to enhance the brand personality to win shelf space from the competitors are getting attention from time to time (Feng, Xu & Wang, 2023). Therefore, the objective of the study is to explore how metaphors are employed in packaging to convey cultural meanings, evoke emotions, and establish connections with consumers. The codes of cultural context affect audience attitudes towards the brand especially to Muslim as Halal branding influences their behavior and attitude (Ahmad, 2015). Culture related attributes in packaging can be part of brand personalities to deceive the audience to make them believe due to the branding nature. The analysis presented in this study is able to provide insights regarding the puzzling on the adaptation of metaphorical cultural value on packaging and gives a clear understanding towards brand image. By starting to understand the true value of culture in branding, relevant recommendations that provide brand with focus can be strategized even before the product is out in the market.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Branding

Brand is more than slogan and sign whereby it identifies who or what you want to be in the consumer's mind (Kotler & Keller, 2015). With creative strategies in hand, branding helps to convey such credible information to consumers by increase their brand awareness, promote customer engagement and loyalty (Chierici, Bosco, Mazzucchelli et.al, 2018). Brand can be identified as all kinds of signs from person names, shapes, words, letters, numbers, the form of the products, picture or combination any of these in distinguishing and differentiation of any product (Durmaz & Yaşar, 2016). These brand elements produce memorable, meaningful, likable, transferable and adaptable in informational or emotional ways. Words in brand name is one of the prominent brand elements created with simple language and unique that are easy to recall, importantly, reflected the target groups. Therefore, the target group will be loyal to their favorite brand and choose a convincing or trusted brand name (Zia, Younus & Mirza, 2021).

The combination of synthetic interaction of the cognitive, affective and lastly the evaluative processes in a consumer's mind is known as brand image (Lucy, James & Kim, 2014). Packaging is part of branding component serve as communicative and marketing imperatives that effectively articulated through the medium of visual language. In Teofilus, Sutrisno and Gomuljo (2019), packaging has been serves as a key factor in attracting consumers' attention and influencing their purchasing decisions. Beyond aesthetics, functional elements like graphics, colors, sizes, shapes, and materials enhance the packaging's appeal and drive sales. Such particular elements were set up to uphold brand association in consumer memory that usually organized in some meaningful way Ansary & Nik Hashim, 2017; Keller, 2013). While the use of cultural icons and symbols can easily assimilate with a specific identity worthy of consumer admiration, some received negative feedback due to inappropriate associations too (Chiu, Ho, Xie, Wu et al., 2024). However, the right branding strategy may lead to an eternal relationship between consumers and the brand - providing a 'self-identity' and value that fit with consumers' mental mapping as mentioned by Mooij (2019).

3.2 Culture

Given the pivotal role of products in consumer understanding processes, a brand need to tap into local cultural sources through cultural respect (Guo, Heinberg & Zou, 2019) as an attribute of cultural sensitivity. However, cultural differences affect the perceptions and behaviours of consumers. Within a multicultural background, motivation and ability to attend to and comprehend a brand have an influence on such

formation. As a matter of fact, customs and cultural differences also exist in Malaysian society due to different beliefs (Minsung & Wahid, 2016).

Likewise, marketing has become integrated with local cultural tradition and interpreters started to be aware of it in persuasive message transfer (Pillis & Reardon, 2007) to strengthen consumer–brand interaction (Feng, Xu & Wang, 2023). Visual communication is one of a variety way in creating the sense or communicating culture information to others. Transmission and shaping a culture through visuals are also able to influence perceptions of different cultures among others (Yudhanto, Risdianto & Artanto, 2023) and can be a significant tool for teaching about other cultures. By selecting a culturally recognizable symbol in representing a brand, audience can establish a deeper connection that resonates with the brand's key audience. Therefore, cultural insights enable brands to tailor their messaging effectively by creating meaningful engagements to influence communication behavior. Maden (2013) stated that while culture and cultural perspectives significantly influence branding, brands also exert a substantial impact on culture. Culture itself can be transmitted through various means including symbols that promotes unity among the individuals, irrespective of differences among them (Taylor & Thoth, 2012). Therefore, culture enables individuals to grasp the significance and meaning of positivity from that includes the set of knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and much more. However, culture is dynamic and can be transformative too according to Sun and Wang (2023). Transformations in culture can happen in promoting betterment and well-being both personal and collective levels; by adapt to changing circumstances or even cultures interact and influence one another.

3.3 Metaphor

References should be listed According to Keller (2013) functional packaging can convey the product's value through the brand's character or foster a positive perception in the consumer's mind. Rompay and Valtkam (2014) mentioned that visual packaging cues are effective in elevating consumer appreciation and shaping brand personality perceptions. Metaphor is one of the approaches in crafting a compelling narrative in branding often used to create symbolic associations, evoke emotions, and communicate the brand's values, personality, and positioning in the marketplace. Metaphor naturally viewed as linguistic expression that draws a comparison between two seemingly unrelated things, highlighting a shared characteristic to convey a particular meaning or idea (Bolognesi & Lievers, 2020). Meanwhile, visual metaphors are often more implicit and intricate than verbal metaphors, enabling consumers to derive multiple interpretations via the use of an implied comparison between two objects that have dissimilar features (Kim, Kim & Kim, 2017).

In consumer terms, encountering an advertisement using a specific metaphor should positively influence beliefs. However, it's worth noting that the notion of conceptual metaphors exerting persuasive effects through highlighting and masking processes is not universally accepted (Philips & McQuarrie, 2009). Advertiser conceals the primary objective of boosting sales by giving out indirect relationships between source and target to convey concepts hinted at or represented by other elements to capture the audience's attention and interest. This means, the same brand may be perceived totally in different ways by consumers because brand is seen more than name or visual images, user association or product attributes but seen as 'association network' (negatively or positively). Consumers interpret advertising messages based on their individual cognitive processes and background, leading to potential variations in the degree of ad comprehension under different conditions. Consumers' relevant knowledge and their familiarity is one of the fundamental constructs in selecting visual cues. According to Alam & Sayuti (2011), there are also brands tried to project the 'Islamic look' through packaging or labelling to catch the Muslim consumers. Therefore, a brand gives consumers a reference to a product and provides meaning for the brand to consumers.

3.4 Semiotic

Semiotics is the study of signs and its role in the construction of meaning. In Marcos (2018), the theory encompasses a broad set of concepts, principles, and tools to the ontological nature of meaning and the semiotic processes by which words, gestures, myths, and products construct reality. Comparison, imagination, emotive and semiotic itself are theoretical models have been set forth to explain metaphor over time. The idea that in some way articulate similarities within differences to expose the whole in a unique way that highlight meaning and expand understanding (Parse, 2022). Signs are interpreted by elements that convey meaning through their form, appearance, and context or codes that govern their utilization. Signs can evoke emotional responses from consumers, influencing their perception of the brand and product. Brand can manifest through various markings, encompassing both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, such as trademarks (consisting of words or pictorial symbols) as opposed to trade dress (which includes packaging and product design) (Manning, 2010). Thus, semiotic serves as a powerful tool for branding, allowing brands to utilize various signs and symbols as a communication channel to convey brand identity and values effectively.

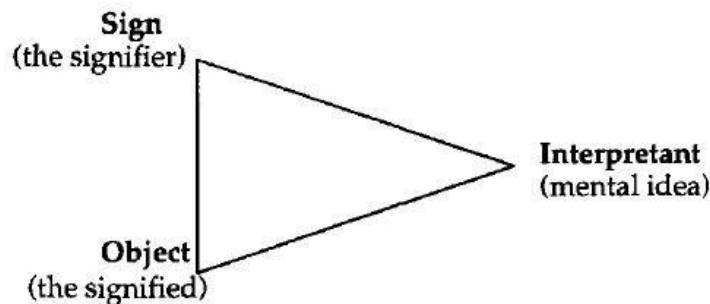


Figure 1.0: Peirce's model of a sign.

Clarke (2016) mentioned the “dyadic” relations in Saussure paradigm but Peirce built up his paradigm on “triadic” relations; connoting association in light of the people, social institution and culture, makes Peirce’s semiotics more dynamic. According to Arus & Ahmad (2017), branding as well as marketing reflects certain behaviors and values of the relevant culture, and supports only certain lifestyles and perspectives of that culture semiotically. Communication through branding, words and visual elements such as words, graphics, images, and colors, along with other symbols, are strategically employed to shape the audience's perception of the product. Consequently, semiotic principles are utilized to distinguish between the form (brand) and function (product), emphasizing aesthetic considerations of styling, ornamentation, or enhancement over technical functionality or utility (Manning, 2016). This is important in transcending cultural symbols and meanings of visual communication. For example, Oputa, Fakhrorazi & Islam (2019) and Shukla, Misra & Singh (2022) highlighted that there is a growing and notable influence of semiotic in purchase intentions decisions of consumers which is important to sell the products to the targeted audience. As a communication agent, semiotic not only increases awareness regarding a brand but also helps in building meaning associated with it; including consumers’ cultural values.

4. Methodology

Visual analysis is a systematic research method used to analyze qualitative data by examining the content of various forms of communication. Content analysis for the study involves studying the visual and textual elements present on product packaging to extract meaningful insights. The technique extends beyond quantification to encompass the interpretation of meanings, intentions, consequences, and contextual factors but to reflect cultural patterns and beliefs; or other characteristics in communication

content (Azizan, Smith, Cooper, 2018). Five packaging designs were selected based on the volume of discussions and mentions observed on *Info Ekonomi Muslim Malaysia* facebook page from year 2019 to 2024 post. This chosen brand reflects the level of attention and engagement towards the topic or phenomenon receives from Facebook user to indicate increased relevance as well as significance of the topic within the subject being studied as shown on Table 1.

Case study method had been applied in many areas and disciplines to closely examine the data within a specific context. According to Yin (2017), case study allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues, particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required. This includes the study of physical artefacts, signs and much more because in cultural studies, visual records, are referred to as ‘texts’ or the ‘signifying practices’ of a culture (Priya, 2020). However, analyses of texts are always done within their context. Packaging use signs and symbols to create connotations that appeal to consumers’ emotions and shape societal meanings that often contain hidden messages and cultural references. Thus, semiotic is helpful in uncover the layers of meanings present in decode symbols, signs, and their connotations, the cultural and contextual significance concealed within texts and images.

Table 1. Five different brands for the case study.

Packaging	Brand Name	Product
	<u>Timah</u>	Whiskey
	<u>Kak Su @ Hong Seng</u>	<u>Fishball</u>
	<u>Pak Zul</u>	Roll Cake
	Ameera	Lychee
	Cap Bilal	Sardine

5. Analysis

The study utilizes a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis as the primary data analysis technique which offers a flexible approach to analyzing data, accommodating various types of information and allowing for nuanced interpretations. Content analysis primarily deals with textual data, therefore interpreting visual cues grounding within a semiotics studies, researchers can enhance the validity and rigor of the analysis process by providing a structured and systematic approach to understanding the meaning and significance of visual elements. However, to support valid and reliable inferences, a set of methodical and transparent procedures for processing data still should be carry out. Importantly, the data need to be transformed into written text before analysis can start (Klaus, 2013). Generally, each stage builds on the previous one, which results in a comprehensive understanding of the data and it can be divided into the following steps, beginning with (a) preparing the data; in a table, (b) code the data; outlines the categories, themes, or attributes to be used in analyzing the visual content - by branding elements such as logos, colors, fonts, pattern and imagery, (C) review and interpret; consider the context and content that serves as the bridge between raw data and meaningful insights, ultimately aiming at semantic. With regards to this stage, Microsoft Excel software was utilized to facilitates the systematic organization. (D) Identify patterns, trends, or relationships relevant to the among the visual elements to gain insights into the underlying phenomena. This stage helps the study make inferences about the messages within the texts, the intended audience, and contextual factors such as culture and temporal surroundings (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell et al. (2023). (E) Thematic analysis to systematically organize and analyze based on common themes or attributes, (F) draw conclusion; make inferences and present the reconstructions or meanings derived from the data by generate findings, conclusions, or insights and (G) validation or feedback from peers. Thus, improve the trustworthiness from the preparation, organization, and reporting phases (Udo, 2014). Presenting qualitative content analysis results, the strive for a balance between description and interpretation are taking into account in running the procedures. And this systematic structured applied ensures thoroughness and limits potential bias.

6. Result & Discussion

The strategic use of metaphorical elements in packaging has emerged as a captivating means of infusing cultural meaning, evoking emotions, and establishing connections with consumers. Through a comprehensive exploration of packaging metaphors, three themes were emerged namely packaging element, cultural meaning and brand resonance.

6.1 Packaging Element

Localization is one of the easier approaches for all the brand's positioning and messaging. In (Yudhanto, Risdianto & Artanto, 2023), the consideration of culture and communication factors is helpful in creating effective and targeted design work. Signs and symbols apply in the packaging become a canvas for storytelling, cultural expression other than brand identity.

Table 2. Packaging element with metaphorical visual cues

Copy	Image	Color	Graphic
-Malay language/name (all brands) -Jawi writing (being used in 2 brands)	Men in kopiah illustration	Green (being used in 3 brands)	-Mosque logo -Local look-like ornament

Element such as brand name, graphic and visual images as shown on Table 1.0 above embedded as product descriptions or brand messaging further reinforce metaphorical associations, fostering deeper

connections with consumers. By leveraging cultural cues, these may create a memorable and relatable brand image. Culture serves as a powerful source of inspiration and meaning in packaging design, where it is often employed as a symbolic signifier by integrating cultural elements such as symbols, motifs, and traditions into packaging. Thus, brands can evoke associations either to resonate with consumer values and beliefs, or creating a sense of local identities of the product to the target audience. To resonate with consumers, Malay language is still the first option in having a brand name considering the geographical market and audience other than to suit the language preferences of the local.

Consumers often trust brands that embrace local culture and language suggesting authenticity and credibility regardless of who is the producer of the product. Malay local names such as Pak Zul, Ameera and Kak Su reinforces a specific identity beside pride as attracting factors of product evaluations, and consumer judgment. This is in line with the idea of adapting them to fit specific markets and cultures by Castro & Sáiz (2020). On top of that, Jawi writing and Muslim image represented by illustration and in a logo also a visible metaphor that influence consumer interpretation and building the first rapport with the target audience cultural identity, and beliefs. Many consumers are relying heavily on extrinsic cues in evaluating products in particular. Therefore, brand product images also may increase the brand values. However, the overall visual usage, shapes communicate distinct messages and evoke specific emotions. One element might not sell a good brand story, but incorporating multiple elements may establish a specific image by fostering a cohesive and impactful personality trait. This either to resonates with target audiences or persuasive tactics deliberately exaggerated and sensational by distinctive exploitation of cultural elements.

Eventually, compelling stories and shaping consumer perceptions by their messaging that often connect with consumers on a deeper level. Even though culture is influenced much by religion, the use of mosque logo, illustration with 'kopiah' to resemble Muslim men was an example of manipulation that easily takes place on an emotional level by creating a positive association with the brand or false perceived value such as Halal or made by Muslim. Overemphasis on cultural elements also may might limit the product's appeal to a broader audience; thus, potentially reducing market reach.

6.2 Cultural Meaning

Incorporating specific design elements in branding is a powerful way to resonate a specific consumer, especially in convey a sense of cultural identity. Element such as brand name, color and image are not only enhancing aesthetic appeal but a powerful cue by giving 'personality' aligning with the brand's intended image and eliciting specific emotions or sentiments from the audience. Different attributes can be found and evaluated against the suggestive cultural metaphorical given in the packaging element. It is also worth noting that local values are interpreted differently because cultural values are also related to religious belief. Cultural identity and market positioning is the prominent marketing strategies to appeal to their specific needs and preferences encompasses a range of cultural, religious, and ethical meanings. The element used can significantly influence consumer perception, enhancing the brand's appeal and fostering deeper connections with the targeted audience which are Muslim consumers in culturally diverse markets.

Table 3. The cultural codes in packaging

Local Value	Halal
Cultural identity	-Reliable
-Cultural pride	- Religion
-Local made	-Muslim
	market /
	positioning

Cultural representation as brand element is none other to be easily recognizable and enhance brand recognition as well as appeal in a competitive market. This can resonate deeply with Muslim consumers, emphasizing the brand's respect for their religious identity and values. This can enhance trust and credibility in the product. However, the presence of Islamic elements not totally can serve as an assurance to consumers that the product adheres to halal standards, as three of the products are not certified as halal. Eventually, many consumers easily believe the brand is aligned with the shared values and mission at their first glance. Misled names are usually the ones that project religious association terms and messages to shift the audience's attention towards Halal status of the product such as Kak Su, Cap Bilal, Ameera and Pak Zul. All product names may apply Malay names but not necessary produced by them. The semantic features of the selected names enhance their suggestiveness of Malay-Muslim Halal product. This can be a sensitive issue especially towards food and beverages products that are heavily influenced for Malay-Muslim consumption ethical belief. Kotler, Harris, Armstrong and Piercy (2017) noted that consumer's decision making is the result of interplay of many stimuli; including names with emotional connections. Thus, culture cues can impact consumer perceptions and evaluations of products other than to fit within the market other than to portray a positive connotation. Relevant brand element can evoke a sense of cultural pride among consumers because consumers will appreciate products that honor their cultural identity. Focusing on public brand image allows customers to choose products that align with social environment, thereby fostering positive social relationships (Frank, Enkawa & Schvaneveldt, 2015). Different ethnic groups may have varying preferences; however, cultural and religious sensitivities eventually impact brand perception because every detail of visual including brand name gives out an 'image' or personality towards one brand. Brand image embedded in a product may commute to a unique set of values, embedded into products, helping to convey the brand's image and value but it also can be perceived as manipulative for branding purposes.

6.3 Brand Resonance

The font Incorporating cultural values as cultural codes in packaging offers both advantages and potential drawbacks. The interplay between culture and branding has become a paramount factor to ease market entry, boosting trust and credibility to these brands. Brand resonance represents the strength of the psychological bond that customers have with a brand and the extent to which they feel a deep, personal connection with it. Emotional resonance, cognitive engagement and cultural relevance leveraging meaningful communication between the brand and its audience. By carrying cultural connotation that is familiar to the target audience, emotional connections easily build, thereby fostering a sense of connection by the symbolic systems of representation and identity. In cultures with high collectivism (such as Asian), these brands foster a sense of community and belonging that are likely to evoke feelings of warmth. The dimension of collectivism emphasizes the significance of being connected with others, showing how cultural factors impact people's motivation (Rawal, Torres, Bagherzadeh et al., 2024). By emphasizing group identity and community values, these brands construct a reliability and social acceptance that may create strong emotional bonds. Cultural factors shape how deeply consumers feel connected to a brand. Culture itself is built based on norms, values, precepts, and common practices. Metaphors translate abstract brand values and attributes into tangible, relatable imagery as consumers see the brand as a reflection of their own values and beliefs. This imaginative approach helps consumers in having favorable evaluation and grasp the brand message. By engaging consumers on a symbolic level, brands can enhance perceived value, build emotional resonance, and ultimately strengthen consumer preference. The sense of community can be a powerful driver of brand resonance. They create a sense of belonging and facilitate social interactions by achieve high levels of resonance. Symbolic meaning adds depth, offering consumers rich associations that enhance brand perception while ensures the metaphorical story is clear and consistent, providing a unified brand message. This customer-centric brand identity is a bottom-up approach in which the brand is molded to align with the cultural context of its target audience. However, cultural symbols can be represented both positively and negatively, though they can be part of brand identity. Insensitive use of cultural symbols or misinterpretation of symbolic meaning (example in the Timah brand name) can be

perceived differently causing discomfort and negative emotions among the public. Using cultural symbols requires a deep understanding of their significance and context, and what is seen as positive might carry different connotations by others. Image is the result of this interpretation, which can strongly influence buying decisions and behavior across markets. Miscommunication about the brand's message and values can be appear by the inaccurate depiction of element; such as Cap Bilal with mosque logo but not selling any religion-related product. Such depiction clearly a usage of marketable assets for commercial gain and lead to the loss of cultural significance. Lastly, communication clarity ensures that the metaphor delivers a compelling message, consumer trust is built when metaphorical packaging effectively conveys the brand's values and reliability while promote cultural diversity. Cultural congruence between a product and its market enhances consumer reviews, with this effect being more pronounced in collectivist cultures (Soong, Moon, Chen et al., 2017). Given the similarities of approach, the visual helps the formation of meaning in communication that shows the user's reliance on cultural -congruence in product evaluation.

7. Discussion

All brands show the immense significance of such visuals as a social discourse that perpetuates cultural narratives and constructs and interprets related realities, thus affecting consumer perceptions and imagery. Utilizing cultural brand value specifically brand names to position products towards specific markets showcasing the uniqueness of a specific cultural background to a larger audience. By embedding cultural codes into their visual representations, these brands can align themselves with cultural identities and values, thereby influencing how consumers perceive and interact with them. This strategy is employed for easy recognition, as it is discovered that products that embrace local culture and language will establish trust and rapport with the target market especially to Muslim consumers. Rather than focusing on what the brand actually is, these brand image leads people to think about the brand in abstract terms; Islamic brand personality and value creation. However, brand image that heavily relies on religious values may resonate with a specific audience initially, but it often results in only short-term impact as broader market dynamics shift and diverse consumer expectations evolve.

This research carries important implications for SME strategy and business ecosystem development in Malaysia and similar emerging markets. In a digital economy where market visibility and cultural credibility are key, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) can benefit from strategically deploying cultural symbols in branding to attract niche markets and reinforce community-based consumption. However, the use of religious or ethnic cues must be ethical and transparent to avoid misleading consumers and jeopardizing trust. From a policy perspective, these findings support the need for clearer guidelines on culturally sensitive branding and Halal certification enforcement. Encouraging authentic cultural integration in product packaging and storytelling may enhance FDI appeal in local food sectors by signaling cultural intelligence, localization effort, and respect for consumer identity - factors increasingly valued by international investors and socially conscious buyers.

It is essential to systematically assess product fit, brand compatibility, and cultural congruence when integrating local elements into brand image, both prior to and following the implementation of this strategy without creating negative connotations, or cultural conflicts. It is recommended the value of goods that consumers obtain is fundamentally based on the product's attributes or to incorporate patriotic themes into branding, packaging, and marketing strategies to enhance favorable acceptance and increase the likelihood of purchases among local consumers. In the consumer part, they should remain vigilant, read product descriptions, and conduct research to determine brand's claims and background. More studies are needed with regard to age and brand name preferences. The insights from this study hopefully help to guide marketer in reflecting societal values and norms to brand name and beneficial for consumers on how cultural codes are embedded in brand names with symbolism, and meaning. Significantly, understanding how cultural codes are interpreted by consumers can help marketers position their brands more effectively. Strong visual cues associated with positive psychological experiences as mentioned on the study. Therefore,

future research endeavors should comprehensively investigate other facets of branding such as emotional or cultural and investigate their market implication.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests.

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