UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

GRAPHIC DESIGN MATTERS: DEFINING THE ROLE AND INTEGRATION OF LOCAL LANGUAGE AND GRAPHIC DESIGN IN REPRESENTING MALAYSIAN LOCAL IDENTITY

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NOOR SAHIRAH BINTI MD NAYAN

Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

In graphic design practice, language functions not only as verbal content but also as a visual and cultural signifier. In the Malaysian context, Malay Language serves both as the national language and as a symbolic representation of cultural identity within a multilingual society. The problem addressed by this study is that, although Malaysian merchandise brands increasingly place Malay words and slang at the centre of their graphic design, there is no systematic account of how these forms are visually constructed, how audiences decode them, or on what basis such practice can be said to support local identity. This study therefore examines how local language is integrated into graphic design on locally produced merchandise and how such practices contribute to the symbolic communication of Malaysian local identity. A qualitative approach is employed, bounded as a single-brand case study of APOM Malaysia, a Klang Valley lifestyle merchandise brand. Seventy-two merchandise items across nine product categories were analysed, supported by semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected participants (academicians in Malay language and graphic design, design practitioners, a Generation Z designer and an expatriate consumer) and non-participant observation at retail outlets. Data are analysed through thematic analysis supported by NVivo software, alongside content analysis guided by Stokes' Semiotic Analysis. The findings reveal that local language functions as a cultural signifier, while graphic design elements act as semiotic amplifiers that enhance meaning. Audience interpretation and ethical considerations further influence meaning construction. Based on these findings, a conceptual, case-derived framework is proposed to guide culturally meaningful and responsible graphic design practice in Malaysia. Because the study is confined to one urban brand and a small purposive sample, the framework is offered as a reflective guide rather than a validated model, and its claims are limited to selected forms of contemporary Malaysian urban identity.

Keywords: *local identity; local language; graphic design; semiotics, slang*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Study Background

Language may be understood as a key marker of identity at multiple levels, reflecting the distinctiveness of the state, the nation, social groups, and individual speakers. In Malaysia, Malay is recognised as the dominant national language, transcending differences in religion, ethnicity, and origin. Since independence, it has been regarded as the country's mother tongue and, in its role as the national language, has functioned as an important medium linking citizen in everyday communication (Irma Wani Othman et al., 2022). The Federal Constitution formally establishes Malay as the official language of the Federation and as one of the principal languages used within the national education system (Ku Samsu, 2020, as cited in Wani Othman et al., 2022).

This status was further reinforced in 1967, following a proclamation by His Majesty the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, when Parliament passed the National Language Bill, officially recognising Malay as the national language of Malaysia (Mohamad Kamil & Mohamad, 2020). This legislative act emphasised the crucial role of Malay in fostering national unity and a shared sense of belonging within Malaysia's multi-ethnic society (Mahamod et al., 2021). The National Education Policy further strengthens this position by designating Malay as the primary language of instruction and by implementing a common national curriculum aimed at nurturing a unified national identity among students from diverse ethnic communities (Jamian et al., 2022; Mahamod et al., 2021).

Concurrently, language functions as a powerful cultural emblem, with cultural practices both shaping and being embedded within linguistic expression. Article 152 of the Federal Constitution reaffirms Malay's status as the official language, forming the basis for its use as the principal instructional language within the National Education System. As a result, Malay is elevated beyond an everyday communicative medium to a symbol of national dignity and a representation of the country's image (Ibrahim &

Maliati, 2020). Within this legal and ideological framework, Malay is positioned as central instrument of national integration and a means of safeguarding cultural heritage (Mahamod et al., 2021). At the same time, Malaysia's lived reality is characterised by multilingualism and multiculturalism, as various ethnic communities continue to express their identities through different languages. The coexistence of these linguistic traditions simultaneously contributes to national cohesion and responds to the broader demands of nation-building within a heterogeneous society (Suhaimi et al., 2025).

Within this socio-linguistic landscape, graphic design language emerges as a distinct channel for communicating meaning. However, scholarly research on more advanced or "intelligent" recognition and interpretation of graphic design language remains limited (Lifang Lu & Lu Huang, 2022). Design language, as a form of non-verbal communication, is articulated through visual elements such as shape, colour, texture, and pattern. These elements are central to professional design practice, particularly within industrial and product design, where they function as visual cues that guide users in interpreting, engaging with, and utilising products (Pierre Yohanes Lubis, 2019). In the Malaysian context, Malay as a verbal language contributes directly to social cohesion and mutual respect among diverse ethnic communities, while graphic design language complements this role by visualising shared cultural values, narratives, and symbols of belonging (Mahamod et al., 2021). Kauffman (2019), as discussed by Tisha Hupkes and Anders Hedman (2022), argues that design interacts with language to construct a meaningful world. This observation highlights the semiotic richness of design practice, in which visual forms operate as signifiers embedded within broader cultural and linguistic systems, enabling national identity and historical continuity to be expressed through aesthetic and material means (Hall, 1997; Naidu & Rajanthiran, 2021).

Local identity, in this context, is conceptualised as a subjective and multi-layered construct shaped by shared histories, languages, ancestries, and cultural practices (Bing et al., 2021). It becomes particularly salient as communities respond to the uncertainties and homogenising pressures associated with globalisation (Kinvall, 2004, as cited in Fachrurazi et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in Malaysia, where a mosaic of ethnic groups including Malays, Chinese, and Indians coexist and collectively contribute to a complex national identity that negotiates between long-standing traditions and contemporary global influences (Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017; Qulub

et al., 2025). A nuanced understanding of how these identities are lived, perceived, and represented is essential for strengthening national cohesion and social integration (Mahamod et al., 2021). In this regard, Murshed (2019), as cited in Fachrurazi et al. (2024), suggests that nationalism can function as an effective strategy for framing consumer national identity, reinforcing socio-cultural values, and encouraging affinity with locally produced goods in relation to global brands. Brand identity thus serves a dual function: it operates as a marketing tool while simultaneously acting as a medium for cultural expression and the affirmation of national pride.

Designers occupy a critical position within this process, acting as intermediaries between strategic brand objectives and the material products that ultimately reach consumers. They interpret and shape brand values while navigating tensions between creative innovation, market expectations, and commercial imperatives (İlhan & İpek, 2025). Their professional expertise is essential for translating abstract brand concepts into concrete visual and experiential forms that resonate with users while remaining faithful to the intended brand identity (İlhan & İpek, 2025). This process involves developing a coherent design language that reflects the brand's historical evolution, current positioning, and future aspirations, while reworking visual elements to maintain consistency and recognisability. Such work requires a sophisticated understanding of semiotics, cultural context, and user perception in order to communicate intended meanings and evoke appropriate emotional responses through visual communication (Zolkefil & Talib, 2022; Kumoratih, 2022). Through this strategic integration of design and identity, products transcend functional utility and operate as visual embodiments of corporate values and national identity within a competitive global marketplace (İlhan & İpek, 2025).

1.2 Motivation for This Work

The motivation for this study arises from a sustained interest in the interaction between graphic design and language in expressing Malaysian identity. In a multicultural society where identity is closely intertwined with language, symbols, and everyday practices, visual communication is never neutral. Design artefacts such as T-shirts, tumblers, tote bags, mugs, and button badges may appear playful or informal; however, they also communicate assumptions about which languages, humour, and cultural references are regarded as "Malaysian" and therefore appropriate for reproduction, circulation, and display. The tension between commercial design practices and cultural meaning forms the starting point of this research.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable growth in local merchandise brands that extensively employ Malay language, local slang, humour, and visual cues drawn from everyday Malaysian life. Brands such as APOM Malaysia demonstrate how graphic design can transform ordinary consumer objects into carriers of local identity, allowing individuals to symbolically "wear" or display their culture in informal contexts. These products are particularly popular among younger Malaysians and tourists and circulate widely through both physical retail spaces and social media platforms. Despite this visibility, limited scholarly attention has been given to how local language and graphic elements are systematically combined to communicate Malaysian identity or to the extent to which such practices meaningfully support the preservation of local culture.

Existing research on design language and souvenirs has largely focused on other cultural contexts or has examined visual elements in isolation, without sufficiently addressing the specific role of local language within Malaysian graphic design. Although prior studies acknowledge that design can contribute to cultural preservation and national identity, a clear gap remains in understanding how Malay language and local slang are integrated into graphic design, how audiences interpret these messages, and what forms of identity are promoted through such representations. This gap constitutes the central academic motivation for the present study, which seeks to analyse the integration of local language and graphic design and to develop a framework explaining their role in supporting the preservation of Malaysian local identity.

The study is further motivated by practical concerns. Designers, brand owners, and students often rely on intuition when incorporating local language into design work, with limited access to systematic guidance on how to do so in ways that are both culturally sensitive and visually effective. By examining existing merchandise and gathering perspectives from designers, academicians, consumers, and expatriates, this research aims to generate insights that can inform future design practice. Ultimately, the study seeks to demonstrate how a more deliberate and reflective integration of local language and graphic design can move beyond superficial trends and contribute to a more sustainable and culturally grounded representation of Malaysian identity within the marketplace.

1.3 Problem Statement

Slang may be understood as a form of linguistic variation in which lexical items undergo shifts in meaning and usage beyond their original definitions. Muhammad Zaid Daud (2018) characterises slang as language that is used flexibly and informally, often without strict adherence to grammatical conventions. Similarly, Zuraidah Mohd Sulaiman (2016) describes slang as a creative linguistic expression that reflects playfulness, innovation, and stylistic freedom in everyday communication. Within contemporary society, slang frequently functions as a marker of social identity, familiarity, and group belonging. At the same time, Kauffman (2019), as cited in Tisha Hupkes and Anders Hedman (2022), argues that design maintains a dynamic relationship with language, in that design practices can actively engage with linguistic forms as a medium through which particular versions of reality and meaning are constructed.

Existing scholarship on design language demonstrates that the combination of visual and textual elements can articulate, sustain, and transform expressions of local identity. Rocha (2020), for example, emphasises the importance of authenticity in design for preserving cultural integrity, particularly in the context of tourist souvenirs, where mass-produced artefacts often fail to convey meaningful cultural representation. Similarly, Santosa et al. (2020) show that the incorporation of ethnic names into T-shirt graphics in Bali functions not only as creative expression but also as a strategy for maintaining and promoting local culture within a competitive market environment.

Related studies by Dadan (2018) and Sukarman et al. (2023) further demonstrate how the use of local symbols in graphic design can resist homogenising global influences and foreground local identity. More recent research by Yeo and Cao (2021) reinforces the argument that national identity can be powerfully communicated through culturally embedded references in graphic design, while Aleshawie (2019) and Qiu et al. (2024) highlight the potential of culturally informed souvenir design to contribute simultaneously to heritage preservation and economic development.

Despite this expanding literature, three specific gaps remain. First, the empirical base is located elsewhere: studies linking design language to cultural identity have been conducted mainly in Indonesian, Chinese and European settings (Santosa et al., 2020; Yeo & Cao, 2021; Qiu et al., 2024), and the Malaysian case, in which a constitutionally protected national language coexists with dense everyday code-mixing, has not been examined in comparable detail. Second, where Malaysian vernacular language has been studied, it has been treated as a sociolinguistic object rather than as a design resource, so its typographic, compositional and material treatment on consumer products remains largely undescribed. Third, studies of souvenirs and branded merchandise have typically analysed either the visual artefact or the audience response, rarely both, and have not connected production intent, visual form and audience decoding within a single analytical account.

The consequence of these gaps is analytical rather than merely descriptive. Without an account that links linguistic choice to visual treatment and then to audience interpretation, claims that design supports culture cannot be tested, because it is not possible to distinguish design that carries cultural meaning from design that borrows a vernacular phrase as a commercial device. The two outcomes are indistinguishable on the surface of a printed T-shirt, yet they differ significantly in cultural consequence.

This research gap is significant, as the use of local language in graphic design extends beyond stylistic preference and plays a crucial role in reinforcing linguistic and cultural cohesion. When analysed through a semiotic perspective, local language operates not merely as text but as a signifier embedded with cultural meaning, shaped by context, audience interpretation, and ethical considerations. As Yeo and Cao (2021) argue, contemporary graphic designers are increasingly expected to create work that reflects national cultural specificity while simultaneously generating new layers of meaning. Designers therefore carry a responsibility to integrate local culture and

language into design practice in ways that are meaningful, respectful, and socially responsible.

The research problem addressed by this study is therefore the absence of a systematic, evidence-based account of how the Malay language and local slang are integrated with graphic design elements in Malaysian merchandise, and of the conditions under which that integration supports, rather than simply commodifies, the expression of local identity. The study addresses this problem through a bounded case study of APOM Malaysia, examining how local language is visually constructed, how different audience groups decode it, and how these observations can be organised into a conceptual framework for culturally responsible design practice.

1.4 Research Objectives

In this study, the researcher intends:

a) To identify how local language is integrated in graphic design to reflect local identity.
b) To analyse the role of graphic design elements in communicating local language in reflecting local identity.
c) To develop a framework for integrating local language and graphic design in supporting the representation and continuity of local identity

1.5 Research Question

i) How is local language integrated in graphic design to reflect local identity?
ii) How do graphic design elements communicate local language in reflecting local identity?
iii) How can local language and graphic design be integrated to support the representation and continuity of local identity?

1.6 Significance of Study

This study is significant in advancing scholarly understanding and professional practice in the field of graphic design, particularly in relation to the integration of local language and the preservation of local identity. By examining how local language especially Malay and local slang is incorporated into graphic design, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual communication operates as a cultural and semiotic process rather than merely an aesthetic or commercial activity.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to graphic design research by integrating thematic analysis and semiotic theory to examine identity-based visual communication. While existing studies have explored visual elements or cultural symbolism in design, fewer have focused on the role of language as a semiotic resource within graphic design, particularly in the Malaysian context. By positioning local language as a cultural signifier and analysing its interaction with visual elements, this research extends semiotic discourse in design studies and offers a structured approach to understanding meaning construction through language and visuals.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the systematic application of NVivo-supported qualitative analysis in graphic design research. Through the use of visual content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and thematic coding, the research provides a transparent and replicable analytical process. The subsequent development of a conceptual framework illustrates how qualitative findings can be synthesised into a coherent model, thereby offering methodological guidance for future researchers investigating design, language, and cultural identity.

Practically, the findings of this study are relevant to graphic designers, brand owners, educators, and students. Designers often rely on intuition when incorporating local language into visual communication, which may result in superficial or culturally insensitive representations. This research offers insights into how local language can be integrated thoughtfully and responsibly, balancing creativity with cultural authenticity. The proposed framework can assist designers in evaluating how typography, layout, and visual systems support linguistic meaning and audience interpretation, while also considering ethical implications.

In terms of cultural significance, this study supports broader efforts to preserve Malaysian local identity in the face of globalisation and cultural homogenisation. By highlighting the role of graphic design as a medium for transmitting cultural values and everyday linguistic practices, the research demonstrates how design can contribute to cultural continuity and intergenerational understanding. The findings are particularly relevant for engaging younger audiences, who increasingly encounter cultural identity through consumer products and visual media.

In addition, the conceptual framework developed in this study provides value for policy makers and educational institutions by offering a structured reference for culturally informed design practice. It may inform curriculum development in design education and contribute to discussions on cultural policy within the creative industries. Overall, this research enhances understanding of how graphic design and local language can function together as tools for meaningful cultural expression, ethical representation, and the sustainable preservation of Malaysian local identity.

The significance of the study should nevertheless be understood within its proper limits. This is a focused Master's-level case study of one urban merchandise brand, not a comprehensive model of Malaysian identity preservation. Its contribution lies in offering a transferable analytical vocabulary and a reflective framework for examining language-based design, which other researchers may test, extend or contest in different regional, ethnic and product contexts.

1.7 Scope and Limitation of Study

This study adopts a single-brand case study approach centred on APOM Malaysia, a local lifestyle merchandise brand that explicitly foregrounds Malaysian themes through the use of local language, humour, and culturally resonant visual elements. APOM adopts a contemporary, youth-oriented visual style; consequently, the findings of this study primarily reflect current urban design trends rather than traditional or craft-based representations of Malaysian culture. The primary purpose of the study is to develop a conceptual framework that explains how local language and graphic design can be integrated to support the preservation of local identity.

Within this scope, the study focuses on the ways in which design language reinforces Malaysian local identity through everyday merchandise. Empirical analysis is limited to selected categories of APOM products, including T-shirts, baby rompers, tote bag, tumbler, phone case, drink coaster, greeting card, notebook and mugs, which prominently feature linguistic and visual references associated with Malaysian culture. Visual data are drawn from APOM's official website, which functions as the brand's online catalogue, as well as from merchandise available at its physical retail outlets located within the Klang Valley.

To complement the visual analysis, the study employs a qualitative research design incorporating semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participants are recruited within the Klang Valley and include graphic design students, academicians from Art and Design and Malay Language programmes, design practitioners such as graphic designers and art directors, members of the wider community, expatriates, and Generation Z consumers. These interviews, together with non-participant observation and content analysis, form the qualitative core of the research. Data are analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software and interpreted through Stokes' (2003) semiotic framework, enabling an in-depth examination of how linguistic and visual elements communicate meaning. Particular attention is given to the use of Malay slang, as informal language is closely associated with everyday cultural familiarity and local identity expression.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, the focus on a single brand whose physical outlets and primary consumer base are concentrated in the Klang Valley means that the findings predominantly reflect an urban, Klang Valley–centred interpretation of Malaysian local identity. As such, regional variations and perspectives from other parts of Malaysia are not fully represented. Second, the study is confined to the visual and textual dimensions of graphic design in merchandise and does not extend to other cultural forms, such as music, performance, architecture, or digital media, which also contribute to the construction of national identity.

In addition, the research relies primarily on qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and interpretive content analysis. While this approach allows for depth and contextual understanding, the findings are shaped by the researcher's interpretive perspective and are not supported by quantitative measures of consumer behaviour or economic impact. Furthermore, participants are selected through

purposive sampling based on their knowledge of design and local culture; although this enhances the relevance and richness of the data, it limits the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the broader population. Despite these limitations, the case study provides valuable insight into how graphic design language integrates local language, particularly Malay slang, to communicate and preserve Malaysian local identity within contemporary merchandise design.

Because these limitations are substantive rather than incidental, the claims made in this thesis are deliberately bounded in four ways. First, all empirical claims refer to APOM Malaysia and to the 72 merchandise items sampled from its catalogue and retail outlets; they are not claims about Malaysian merchandise design in general. Second, all audience claims refer to the six purposively selected participants and to the researcher's observations in Klang Valley outlets; they are not claims about Malaysian consumers as a population. Third, the identity described in this study is a contemporary, urban, largely Malay-language-mediated form of Malaysian identity as expressed through one commercial brand; it does not represent East Malaysian, Chinese-Malaysian, Indian-Malaysian, Orang Asli or rural expressions of identity, which are visible in the case only marginally or not at all. Fourth, where this thesis discusses preservation, the term denotes the symbolic communication and continued circulation of selected forms of Malaysian urban identity, not the safeguarding of Malaysian identity as a whole. Findings are therefore offered as analytically generalisable to theory rather than statistically generalisable to a population (Yin, 2018).

1.8 Thesis Outline

This section outlines the overall structure of the thesis and explains how each chapter contributes to addressing the research objectives and research questions. The thesis is organised into six interrelated chapters, as described below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces the study and situates it within its broader academic and cultural context. It outlines the research background, motivation, and problem statement, and defines the research objectives and questions. The chapter also explains the significance of the study, identifies its scope and limitations, and presents the overall structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on graphic design, local language, identity, branding, and cultural preservation. The discussion is framed through semiotic theory and examines how language and visual communication contribute to the construction of local identity. This chapter identifies gaps in existing research, particularly in relation to Malaysian local merchandise, and establishes the theoretical foundation for the study.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 3 details the qualitative research design adopted in this study. It explains the use of a single-brand case study approach focusing on APOM Malaysia and describes the methods of data collection, including visual content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The chapter also outlines the sampling strategy, data analysis procedures using thematic and semiotic analysis, and ethical considerations, demonstrating alignment with the research objectives.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings of the study. It reports the results of the visual content analysis of selected APOM merchandise and the thematic analysis of interview data. The chapter identifies key themes related to the integration of local language and graphic design and explains how these themes reflect the communication and preservation of Malaysian local identity.

Chapter 5: Semiotic Discussion of Findings

Chapter 5 discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 through the lens of semiotic theory. It examines how local language functions as a cultural signifier, how graphic design elements act as semiotic amplifiers, and how meaning is constructed through audience interpretation. This chapter provides a deeper theoretical understanding of the interaction between language, visual design, and cultural identity.

Chapter 6: Conclusion, Framework Contribution and Recommendations

Chapter 6 concludes the study by synthesising the findings and discussions from previous chapters. It presents a conceptual framework for integrating local language and graphic design in supporting the preservation of local identity, addressing Objective 3 of the study. The chapter also outlines the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of the research, discusses its limitations, and provides recommendations for future research and design practice.

1.9 Ethical Committee

This study obtained ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of Universiti Teknologi MARA under reference number REC/02/2025 (PG/MR/105). The research was classified as minimal risk, and approval was granted on 18 February 2025. Prior to participation, all respondents were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has introduced the foundation of the study by situating it within the broader socio-cultural, linguistic, and design context of Malaysia. It has outlined the significance of language, particularly the Malay language, as a marker of national identity and its role within Malaysia's education system, cultural practices, and everyday communication. The chapter further established the relevance of graphic design as a semiotic medium capable of visualising cultural values, narratives, and local identity through the integration of language and visual elements.

The research background highlighted the coexistence of multilingualism and multiculturalism in Malaysia and emphasised the growing importance of graphic design language in communicating shared meanings and cultural belonging. The motivation for the study was grounded in the increasing visibility of local merchandise brands that employ Malay language and local slang, revealing a gap in scholarly understanding of how such linguistic elements are strategically integrated into graphic design to preserve and express Malaysian local identity.

The problem statement identified a clear research gap within existing literature, particularly the lack of focused studies examining the role of local language as a semiotic resource within Malaysian graphic design merchandise. This gap underscores the need for a systematic investigation into how linguistic and visual elements interact to construct meaning and reinforce cultural identity. In response to this gap, the chapter articulated the research objectives and research questions guiding the study, focusing on the integration of local language, the role of graphic design elements, and the development of a conceptual framework for identity preservation.

The chapter also outlined the significance of the study from academic, methodological, practical, and cultural perspectives, highlighting its contributions to design research, semiotic analysis, and culturally informed design practice. The scope and limitations were clearly defined, acknowledging the focus on a single-brand case study and qualitative methods while justifying their relevance to the research aims. Finally, the chapter presented the overall thesis structure and confirmed ethical approval for the study.

Overall, this chapter establishes the conceptual and contextual groundwork for the research, providing a clear rationale for the study and preparing the foundation for the literature review in Chapter 2, which will further explore theoretical and empirical perspectives on graphic design, language, and local identity.

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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews and synthesises scholarly literature relevant to the role of graphic design and language in constructing, communicating, and preserving Malaysian local identity. The discussion is organised around four interrelated themes: language, local identity, brand identity, and cultural preservation. These themes are examined through the lens of semiotic theory, which provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how meaning is produced through the interaction of linguistic and visual signs.

In the Malaysian context, where cultural plurality is a defining characteristic, graphic design operates not merely as a functional tool of visual communication but also as a cultural mechanism for articulating identity, heritage, and national values. This chapter therefore examines: (i) the role of language, particularly Bahasa Melayu, in shaping national and local identity; (ii) the visualisation of language in graphic design; (iii) the expression of local identity through visual markers and everyday consumer culture; (iv) the use of local language as a brand resource; and (v) the tensions between commodification and cultural preservation. By synthesising these bodies of literature, the chapter establishes a conceptual and theoretical foundation that informs the empirical analysis and framework development presented in subsequent chapters.

2.2 Language

2.2.1 Language and National Identity in Malaysia

Language plays a central role in the formation and maintenance of national identity, functioning as both a communicative medium and a cultural symbol that unites diverse populations. In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu is constitutionally recognised as the national language under Article 152 of the Federal Constitution and serves as the primary language of administration, education, and public life (Ibrahim & Maliati, 2020). This status was actively established by Malaysian policymakers after independence from British colonization, driven by an effort to limit the role of English and select Bahasa Melayu, the language of the dominant ethnic group, as the official language of government and education (Albury & Aye, 2016; Rahmi, 2016). Beyond its practical function, Bahasa Melayu represents national sovereignty, unity, and cultural continuity within Malaysia's multi-ethnic society (Mohamad et al., 2022). This emphasis on Bahasa Melayu has been a deliberate strategy for nation-building, solidifying the idea of Malaysia in Malay terms and shedding the colonial legacy of English (Albury & Aye, 2016; Haa et al., 2013).

Visual communication has been widely employed to reinforce the symbolic status of the national language. Typography, layout, colour, and culturally resonant motifs are often used in public signage, branding, and packaging to strengthen linguistic and cultural cohesion. Studies have shown that the integration of local language into product branding, particularly in sectors such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyle goods, helps associate cultural values with commercial products and enhances their perceived authenticity (Bai & Wong, 2022; Harun et al., 2023). In public environments, linguistic landscape practices further reinforce national identity by prioritising Bahasa Melayu through visual hierarchy, such as larger font sizes and dominant placement, while other languages function in a supplementary role (Qulub et al., 2025).

Government policies and regulations play a significant role in this visual reinforcement. For instance, bylaws in areas like Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya mandate that Bahasa Melayu be used in all advertisements, either alone or with other languages. Critically, the Bahasa Melayu wording must be given priority in terms of color, prominent display, and a font size that is at least 30% larger than other languages

(Said & Ong, 2019; Xiao-mei & Daming, 2018). This strict visual hierarchy ensures that Bahasa Melayu tops the ranks in public signage and advertisements, thereby asserting its role as the national language without compromising national identity, even when English or other languages are present for accessibility (Hasni & Anuarudin, 2025; Qulub et al., 2025).

However, the implementation of such policies can be complex, as some studies indicate that shop owners still use other languages, particularly English, in their signboards, sometimes with English being more dominant, suggesting ongoing negotiation within the linguistic landscape (Mansoor et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, the intent of these policies is to promote Bahasa Melayu as a unifying force, aiming to reduce communicative distance and foster mutual understanding across cultural groups (Jamian et al., 2022; Mahamod et al., 2021). Within graphic design, language therefore transcends its verbal form and becomes part of a broader visual system, where typographic choices and visual styling act as symbolic representations of cultural heritage and national pride (Kamil & Mohamad, 2020). The aim is to ensure that Bahasa Melayu continues to be the language of national identity and a key component in the formation of a unified nation-state (Kamil & Mohamad, 2020).

2.2.2 Visualising Language in Graphic Design

Visualising language in graphic design extends beyond issues of legibility to encompass cultural expression, emotional resonance, and identity formation. Typography, imagery, and layout work together as semiotic resources that shape how language is perceived and interpreted within specific cultural contexts (Hall, 1997; Zolkefil & Talib, 2022). In environmental and information design, typographic decisions directly influence readability, navigation, and user experience, while simultaneously contributing to the visual identity of a place.

Research in environmental graphic design demonstrates that typography plays a critical role in wayfinding systems and public communication by enhancing clarity and reinforcing local identity (Bigat, 2024). Typeface selection, spacing, hierarchy, and colour affect not only comprehension but also the cultural tone conveyed by visual messages. Heritage-inspired typefaces and culturally relevant visual motifs, when integrated thoughtfully, can strengthen the connection between users and their

environment, embedding shared cultural narratives within everyday visual encounters. For instance, the selection of typeface in Malaysian graphic design is crucial, as it contributes to the overall aesthetic appeal, visual hierarchy, and tone, indirectly contributing to the development of Malay identity (Wan & Fadil, 2022, 2024).

Research highlights the potential of incorporating traditional motifs, such as the "Awan Larat" motif from wood carving patterns, into modern typefaces to raise awareness of Malay cultural heritage values (Wan & Fadil, 2022, 2024). This demonstrates how typography can function as a cultural indicator, embedding distinct ethnic characteristics into letterforms that might otherwise be rigid Latin typefaces (Raden & Qeis, 2023).The creation of digital typefaces that incorporate cultural values and local identity, especially in regions like Indonesia, reflects a growing trend where design serves not just aesthetic but also cultural preservation purposes (Noordyanto, 2017). Similarly, the visual fusion of traditional textile motifs, like Lampung's Tapis, with Latin alphabet characters can produce unique and culturally distinctive font forms (Wantoro & Kasmana, 2017).

In multilingual contexts such as Malaysia, the visualisation of language also performs an inclusive function. Multilingual signage incorporating Bahasa Melayu alongside English, Mandarin, or Tamil reflects linguistic diversity while maintaining national language prominence. This layered visual approach allows graphic design to negotiate accessibility, cultural hierarchy, and identity simultaneously, demonstrating how visual language functions as a mediator between global communication demands and local cultural values. In public spaces, Bahasa Melayu is typically given priority with larger font sizes and striking colors, followed by English in a smaller size to ensure accessibility without compromising national identity (Qulub et al., 2025; Xiao-mei & Daming, 2018). This visual hierarchy is observed in various settings, including airports, where Malay is consistently displayed in the dominant position, followed by English, and then other languages like Japanese, Arabic, or Chinese at the same level of priority (Woo & Riget, 2020).

Studies on creative language forms on signboards in Malaysia also show how typographical design and spatial arrangements are used to produce playful effects and convey complex meanings in multilingual contexts (Said & Ong, 2019). Even in consumer products like Ang-Pow packets, which are exchanged during festive traditions across Malaysia's diverse cultures, specific colors (e.g., green for Malay,

purple for Indian) and cursive fonts are used to symbolize joy and creativity, reflecting the multicultural design approach (Ling, 2021). While modern sans-serif fonts are often used for a clean, sleek look in many local product brand logos, particularly for cosmetic and fashion brands, some also incorporate Jawi script or Arabic-influenced letters, showcasing the blend of tradition and modernity in visual communication (Harun et al., 2023). This further illustrates how visual elements, including typography and layout, are imbued with cultural values, affections, and references, reinforcing a sense of pride and community (González & Salinas, 2025).

2.2.3 Vernacular Language, Slang and Hybridity in Merchandise

Vernacular language, slang, and hybrid linguistic forms represent dynamic expressions of contemporary cultural identity, particularly within urban and youth-oriented contexts. When applied to merchandise and branding, these linguistic forms operate as semiotic resources that signal familiarity, authenticity, and group belonging (Yusuf et al., 2022). In multicultural societies like Malaysia, hybrid language practices such as code-mixing and translanguaging reflect lived linguistic realities and challenge rigid notions of linguistic purity. For instance, studies on Chinese Malaysian informal speech reveal that code-switching patterns often involve English for consumer culture, Malay for place names, and Chinese topolects for emotional expression, illustrating the complex linguistic tapestry that can be leveraged in merchandise (Carstens & Ang, 2019). The use of local names and terms in branding can also provide a distinct local value expression, enriching the brand's identity (Harun et al., 2023).

The incorporation of slang and vernacular language into merchandise transforms everyday objects into cultural artefacts that communicate identity through informal and relatable expression. Studies indicate that such practices can strengthen emotional connections between consumers and brands, particularly among younger demographics who value authenticity and cultural proximity (Buchstaller & Fabiszak, 2021). In Malaysia, the widespread adoption of digital platforms like TikTok has led to the emergence and rapid spread of new slang among Generation Z, influencing their communication both online and in face-to-face interactions (Marzuki & Mustapha, 2023; Sham et al., 2025). This "youth language" provides an identity of expression and

reflects dynamic linguistic changes, making its incorporation into merchandise highly resonant with this demographic (Namvar, 2014).

However, this commodification of language also raises ethical concerns. While culturally relevant terms can influence consumer perception and increase acceptance, a strategy that is not properly planned and executed can lead to negative outcomes, including advertising skepticism (Harun et al., 2023). The "disassociation of brand through the signal leads to misinterpretation and commoditization" if cultural elements are not handled with care, potentially diluting the original cultural significance of community-rooted linguistic practices (Harun et al., 2023). This highlights a tension between commercial appeal and cultural respect.

A semiotic perspective highlights how these linguistic choices function within broader assemblages of visual and material signs. Slang printed on T-shirts or tote bags, for example, gains meaning not only from the words themselves but from their typographic treatment, imagery, and cultural context. Semiotic and cultural analyses of local product brand names in Malaysia, often utilizing models like Charles Sanders Peirce's, demonstrate how cultural aspects profoundly influence brand naming strategies and how the interpretation of brand names can be complex due to the manipulation of social interaction and multiple relationships with brands (Harun et al., 2023). This interaction underscores the importance of critically examining how vernacular language is deployed in design to balance commercial appeal with cultural respect, ensuring that cultural elements contribute positively to consumer perception and choice behavior without leading to misinterpretation or commodification (Harun et al., 2023).

These discussions anticipate the empirical themes identified in this study, particularly those relating to local language as a cultural signifier and audience interpretation of slang-based design. The literature suggests that vernacular language holds strong semiotic potential, yet its application in Malaysian merchandise design remains under-theorised.

2.2.4 Semiotic Perspectives on Language in Visual Communication

Semiotic theory provides a robust framework for analysing how language and visual elements interact to construct meaning. Drawing on the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who conceptualized signs as consisting of a signifier (the form of the sign) and a signified (the concept it represents), semiotics examines how meaning is produced and communicated (Mokhtar & Kasirye, 2023). Later scholars like Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall further developed these concepts, distinguishing between denotation (the literal, explicit meaning) and connotation (the secondary, associative meanings that signs evoke, often drawing upon cultural, historical, or personal contexts) (Harun et al., 2023). For example, in the semiotic analysis of brand names, researchers utilize models like Charles Sanders Peirce's to describe and analyze the connotation, denotation, concepts, and relationships in making inferences about the cultural messages imprinted on them (Harun et al., 2023). Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and how meaning is constructed and understood, covering three main areas: the study of the sign itself, the codes and systems into which signs are organized, and the culture within which these codes or signs operate (Ismail, 2018).

In graphic design, linguistic elements such as words, slogans, and typography function as signifiers that gain meaning through their visual presentation and cultural context. Connotative meanings often draw upon shared myths, ideologies, and social values, allowing design to communicate identity implicitly rather than explicitly. This is particularly relevant in branding and merchandise, where visual language frequently relies on associative meanings to evoke national pride, nostalgia, or cultural belonging. For instance, the selection of typeface in Malaysian graphic design is crucial as it contributes to the overall aesthetic appeal, visual hierarchy, and tone, indirectly contributing to the development of Malay identity (Wan & Fadil, 2022, 2024). Typography, in this context, generates effects that are not neutral but are laden with values, affections, and cultural references, promoting a sense of pride and community (González & Salinas, 2025).

Social semiotics further emphasises the role of the audience in meaning-making, recognising that interpretation is shaped by cultural background, experience, and social positioning. This perspective is central to the present study, as it acknowledges that the integration of local language in graphic design does not produce fixed meanings but

invites diverse interpretations influenced by generational, cultural, and linguistic factors. In Malaysia's multicultural society, the visual communication of national identity through language can be complex. While Bahasa Melayu is officially prioritized in public spaces with larger font sizes and striking colors to assert national identity, English often appears below it in smaller sizes as a supporting communication tool (Qulub et al., 2025).

However, the use of multiple languages in signage, including Malay, English, and Chinese, reflects the diverse factors governing language choice, often attributed to identity, the nature of business owners, and shop location (Omar et al., 2020). Studies on public service announcements in Indonesia and Malaysia, using Barthes' theory, have shown both similarities and differences in languages, contents, colors, media, and designs used, indicating the varying interpretations across culturally similar but distinct nations (Rozi et al., 2022). This highlights how graphic design functions as a mediator between global communication demands and local cultural values, and how even multilingual signs are interpreted differently by various groups within Malaysia (Ong, 2022). The ability of visual signs, including linguistic ones, to generate meaning within specific coding systems and their interpretation depending on the sociocultural context of the receiver is a core aspect of semiotics in design (González & Salinas, 2025).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that language in Malaysia operates not only as a communicative system but also as a visual and symbolic resource within public and commercial design contexts. While existing research has examined language policy and linguistic landscapes extensively, fewer studies have explored how informal and vernacular language functions within graphic design merchandise, indicating a need for further investigation

2.3 Local Identity

2.3.1 Conceptualising Local and National Identity

Local and national identity are understood as fluid, socially constructed processes shaped by shared histories, cultural practices, and symbolic representations. Rather than being fixed attributes, identities are continually negotiated through everyday experiences, media, and cultural products (Hall, 1997). Semiotic approaches emphasise how symbols, narratives, and visual markers contribute to a collective sense of belonging and self-recognition. In multicultural nations like Malaysia, this negotiation is particularly complex, as national identity must accommodate diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups while fostering cohesion (Gan, 2011). The construction of a collective national identity through multiculturalism can be paradoxical, especially when the values of one ethnicity are perceived as more prominent than others, posing challenges for a truly unified visual representation (Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017).

In contemporary societies, identity formation is increasingly influenced by globalisation, which introduces external cultural influences while simultaneously intensifying the desire for local distinctiveness. This tension is particularly evident in Malaysia, a postcolonial nation, where the phenomenon of "glocalisation" the interplay between global and local forces significantly shapes national branding and visual identity (Gan, 2011; Gan et al., 2012). Globalization often leads to the formation of "multiple, fluid and contradictory identities," a phenomenon acutely observed among young multi-ethnic Malaysians, where media consumption plays a significant role in their quest for self-identity (Karim, 2010). This creates a "push-pull" dynamic between global cultural flows and local forces, which can threaten to weaken national cultural identity if not carefully managed (Heide, 2002). Graphic design plays a significant role in this process by visualising shared values and translating abstract notions of identity into tangible forms, thereby mediating the tension between homogenization and the assertion of unique local characteristics (Gan, 2011).

2.3.2 Visual Markers of Malaysian Local Identity

Visual markers of Malaysian local identity include traditional motifs, architectural references, language, and culturally specific imagery that collectively communicate a sense of place. Community murals, environmental graphics, and locally inspired merchandise function as visual expressions of cultural narratives, embedding identity within everyday environments (Zolkefil & Talib, 2022). The rich tapestry of Malaysian culture provides a diverse palette of such markers, from intricate Batik patterns and traditional Malay Awan Larat motifs, which symbolize natural elements and can be adapted into modern typefaces to represent Malay identity (Wan & Fadil, 2022), to architectural styles reflecting Malay, Chinese, and Indian heritage. Islamic geometric patterns and calligraphy, for instance, are frequently integrated into public spaces and designs, reflecting the nation's dominant religion.

The incorporation of traditional symbols, local colour palettes, and linguistic elements into design contributes to legibility and emotional resonance, enabling users to recognise and connect with their cultural surroundings. Semiotic analysis is crucial for understanding how these material culture elements, such as the keris (a traditional Malay dagger) and Tepak sirih (a traditional betel nut set), function as signs with embedded socio-cultural values within visual statements (Abdullah & Abdillah, 2021). These visual signs carry both denotative and connotative meanings, drawing upon collective cultural understanding (Junaidi & Hamuddin, 2019). In Malaysia, the visual prominence of Bahasa Melayu, alongside references to Islamic, Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultural elements, reflects the nation’s pluralistic identity while reinforcing shared national values. Even in contemporary forms like animation character design, local identity is inspired and controlled by culture, where specific characteristics and colors contribute to its representation, albeit sometimes influenced by foreign styles (Khalis et al., 2024). This intricate layering of diverse visual elements is essential in communicating Malaysia's unique multicultural identity.

2.3.3 Local Identity, Tourism and Everyday Consumer Culture

Local identity is increasingly communicated through everyday consumer culture, particularly in tourism and lifestyle merchandise. Souvenirs, apparel, and branded products serve as portable representations of place, allowing identity to be experienced, displayed, and circulated beyond its original context (Zhu & Rahman, 2025). Research suggests that culturally grounded design enhances visitor engagement and supports economic development by differentiating local products in competitive markets. However, the translation of identity into consumer goods also raises questions about authenticity and representation.

The concept of authenticity in tourism and cultural consumption is complex, often viewed as a continuum rather than a binary state (Azizan et al., 2025). While consumers often seek 'authenticity' in heritage consumption, parts of this heritage may be "invented" or transformed to meet commercial interests (Rahmatulloh et al., 2020). For instance, heritage tourism destinations like Melaka, a UNESCO World Heritage city in Malaysia, often employ staged "pseudo-events" and digital media that prioritize visual novelty and convenience over deep cultural engagement to attract visitors (Azizan et al., 2025). This commercialization can lead to "authenticity anxiety" for both tourists and locals, as souvenirs can sometimes be perceived as "kitsch" rather than genuine cultural carriers (Imbesi et al., 2023; Yang, 2023). While the production and consumption of souvenirs commodify material culture, transforming it into a transactional commodity, they also play a role in destination branding and local economic contribution (Zhu & Rahman, 2025).

Ethical design, therefore, becomes crucial in creating souvenirs that sustain cultural integrity by involving local artisans and faithfully representing cultural symbols and narratives (Zhu & Rahman, 2025). This highlights the need for design strategies that balance accessibility, creativity, and cultural depth, ensuring that the commodification of local identity contributes positively to cultural appreciation rather than reducing it to stereotypical symbols.

2.3.4 Tensions and Risks in Visualising Local Identity

The visualisation of local identity involves inherent tensions between cultural preservation and commercialisation. When identity is commodified without sensitivity to context, it risks becoming superficial or distorted. Scholars caution that top-down branding initiatives may marginalize community narratives and prioritize marketability over authenticity (Cole, 2007). For example, the use of staged "pseudo-events" and digital media in heritage tourism, while visually appealing, can prioritize convenience and visual novelty over genuine cultural experiences, potentially transforming cultural heritage objects into "new traditions" to satisfy commercial interests (Azizan et al., 2025; Rahmatulloh et al., 2020). This can lead to negative consequences, including the misrepresentation or dilution of indigenous cultural meanings (Cole, 2007).

Ethical design practices therefore require careful engagement with cultural context, community perspectives, and historical meanings. Designers must navigate these tensions by ensuring that visual representations of identity remain respectful, inclusive, and reflective of lived cultural experiences. This includes considering factors such as the use of traditional materials and techniques, the involvement of local artisans, and the accurate representation of cultural symbols and narratives in design (Zhu & Rahman, 2025). Ultimately, the aim is to create designs that not only serve commercial purposes but also foster a sense of pride and reinforce cultural identity in a manner that is authentic and sustainable (Cole, 2007).

2.4 Brand Identity

2.4.1 Components of Brand Identity

Brand identity comprises a coherent system of visual, verbal, and experiential elements that communicate an organisation’s values and positioning. Logos, typography, colour schemes, and language choices work together to create recognition and emotional connection. In place-based and cultural branding, these elements also serve to articulate identity and differentiate local products within global markets (Chan et al., 2022). The core values underpinning a place's identity, which include functional and emotional benefits, should anchor all communication strategies (Zouganeli et al.,

2012). These values extend to a wide variety of attributes, such as climate, culture, gastronomy, traditions, and crucially, language (Zouganeli et al., 2012).

Fundamentally, brand identity is built upon socio-cultural meanings that interpret brands and reveal connected associations, making these meanings the primary source for constructing enduring attributes of places (Botschen et al., 2017). It is often conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing components like vision, culture, personality, presentation, and relationships (Chan et al., 2022). Ultimately, for a place or cultural brand to resonate and attract, its underlying spiritual foundationthe essence of its cultural values and unique atmosphere must be preserved and effectively communicated through its symbols (Mityagina & Sidorova, 2018).

2.4.2 Local Language as a Brand Resource

Local language functions as a powerful brand resource by embedding cultural meaning and authenticity into visual communication. The use of local terms, dialects, or slang can evoke familiarity and pride, strengthening consumer identification with the brand. In Malaysia, the incorporation of Bahasa Melayu and local expressions in merchandise reinforces territorial identity while enhancing brand distinctiveness. Studies have shown that culture is one of the most powerful and immediate ways to communicate an identity-image and link to the consumer, making local language a critical factor in brand naming strategies (Harun et al., 2023). For instance, the use of Malay names, whether derived from a founder's name or general Malay terms like "Kekasih" (cosmetic brand) or "Aroma Saji" (food), imbues products with local value and cultural resonance (Harun et al., 2023).

This can be particularly effective in influencing consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, as consumers tend to respond positively to brands that utilize their own language (Harun et al., 2015; Run et al., 2012). While foreign languages, especially English, are also popular choices for local product branding to position brands as global, the strategic integration of Malay language and terms remains vital for basic brand-building strategies (Harun et al., 2023). Furthermore, given Malaysia's multilingual context, where Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil are commonly spoken, the choice of language in branding must also consider the personality traits and perceptions associated with each language by consumers (Mohtar et al., 2019).

2.4.3 Malaysian Local Brands and Merchandise

Malaysian local brands frequently integrate language, humour, and cultural references into merchandise to create relatable and meaningful products. These practices transform everyday items into symbols of identity, allowing consumers to participate in cultural expression through consumption. Such branding strategies demonstrate how graphic design mediates between commerce and cultural representation. Many Malaysian brands use Malay language in their naming conventions, sometimes mixed with foreign languages to suggest a global appeal (Harun et al., 2023).

This blend can create unique brand identities that cater to a diverse consumer base. Beyond explicit language use, the broader cultural elements identified in Malaysian culture, such as architecture, art, food, and specific non-material aspects like norms, symbols, and festivals, also serve as rich sources for branding (Muhamad et al., 2023). These elements, when incorporated into merchandise, allow consumers to express their local identity through their purchasing choices. For example, local animations often draw cultural inspiration to create Malaysian characters, even if they are influenced by foreign styles, demonstrating how cultural elements are translated into consumer products (Chan, 2018).

2.4.4 Brand Identity, Globalisation and Glocal Strategies

In response to globalisation, many brands adopt glocal strategies that combine global aesthetics with local cultural elements. This approach enables brands to remain competitive internationally while maintaining cultural relevance locally. The strategic integration of local language and visual symbols is central to this process, allowing brands to balance universality and specificity. In Malaysia, this involves a careful consideration of local cultural dimensions, such as collectivism, relationship-orientation, high-context communication, religion, and hierarchism, in promotional activities and advertisement styles (Khalili, 2014). International organizations operating in Malaysia often adapt their marketing initiatives to fulfill the society's cultural needs and values (Khalili, 2014).

This glocalization extends to incorporating religious concepts like halal (pure and clean) and indigenous knowledge into branding strategies, particularly in industries like beauty, where local companies successfully compete against international brands by appealing to cultural and religious identities (Yacob et al., 2018; Yacob & Zainol, 2014). For emergent nations like Malaysia, nation branding itself often involves a glocal phenomenon, balancing a global image with distinct local cultural characteristics (Gan et al., 2012). This strategic approach recognizes that while international companies may shift towards global marketing, local brands and cultural sensitivities remain crucial in regional markets, especially in Southeast Asia (Yacob et al., 2018).

2.5 Cultural Preservation

2.5.1 Cultural Preservation and Visual Culture

Visual culture plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity by embedding heritage within contemporary design practices. Graphic design, packaging, and environmental graphics can function as vehicles for cultural storytelling, ensuring continuity while allowing adaptation to modern contexts. In Malaysia, where diverse cultural heritage treasures face the risk of being lost due to modernization, assimilation, and globalization, visual culture offers a vital avenue for preservation (Suaib et al., 2020). Traditional Malay designs, for instance, are not merely aesthetic objects but carry deeper philosophical and sacred meanings, making their integration into contemporary design a powerful form of cultural preservation (Shuaib & Olalere, 2014).

This includes elements such as materials, colors, motifs, and forms that are unique to Malaysian culture, which can be creatively incorporated into modern products like furniture to gain a competitive advantage and maintain cultural relevance (Sahari & Shanat, 2021). For instance, indigenous values can be translated into furniture design through creative twists, ensuring acceptance in the global market (Sahari & Shanat, 2021). Similarly, efforts to preserve specific cultural elements, such as the traditional Malay Awan Larat motif, by integrating them into modern typefaces, aim to raise awareness and appreciation of Malay cultural heritage values (Wan & Fadil, 2022). This approach not only safeguards heritage but also allows it to evolve and remain relevant in contemporary visual contexts.

2.5.2 Commodification Versus Preservation

While commodification can increase visibility and economic value, it also risks eroding cultural meaning if not managed responsibly. Ethical frameworks and community engagement are therefore essential to ensure that commercial design contributes positively to cultural preservation rather than exploitation. The challenge lies in integrating cultural elements into design in a way that respects their origins and avoids superficial appropriation (Sahari & Shanat, 2021). For example, the transformation of traditional craft-making activities due to development projects highlights the need for strategies that support material culture through conventional product reproduction (using alternative raw materials), traditional product innovation, and youth participation in craft-making (Jalil et al., 2024).

Efforts to preserve cultural heritage in Malaysia, such as traditional batik, face challenges from global competition and changing consumer preferences, necessitating innovative approaches that integrate sustainability with heritage preservation (Hamid & Nordin, 2025). In the fashion industry, cross-cultural collaborations between international brands and local Malaysian designers in cities like Kuala Lumpur aim to amalgamate cultural heritage with contemporary design aesthetics, redefining fashion identity while engaging with heritage (Guo et al., 2024). Such initiatives, when managed ethically, can promote cultural motifs and traditions to wider audiences while supporting local economies and artisans (Jalil et al., 2024). However, without careful consideration, commercialization can lead to the "democratization of material culture," where the focus shifts from intrinsic cultural value to economic gain, potentially diluting the original meaning of cultural assets (Jalil et al., 2024). Therefore, there is a continuous need for policies and practices that ensure design choices are made with cultural sensitivity and contribute to the authentic representation and long-term sustainability of cultural heritage.

2.5.3 Youth Culture, Digital Media and Changing Language

Digital media has accelerated linguistic change, particularly among younger generations. Slang, hybrid language, and visual communication dominate online spaces, influencing how identity is expressed and consumed. This presents both challenges and opportunities for cultural preservation, highlighting the need to engage youth through culturally relevant and visually compelling design. In Malaysia, Generation Z actively uses digital platforms like TikTok, leading to dynamic shifts in slang usage and communication patterns (Sham et al., 2025). This "youth language" is a significant aspect of their identity expression and is influenced by sociocultural factors (Sham et al., 2025). The internet and social media have created new forms of language, including slang, emoticons, hashtags, and abbreviations, as well as code-mixing, such as "Manglish" (a blend of Malay and English) (Rusli et al., 2018). While these hybrid forms reflect the lived linguistic realities of young Malaysians, they can also lead to miscommunication across different generations (Rusli et al., 2018).

The exposure of digital natives to the internet and social media in countries like Malaysia influences their language use and cultural perceptions, including an interest in global trends like Korean culture and Manga (Chih-I, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). Online activities among urban Malaysian adolescents show a high percentage of English usage compared to Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese, indicating the influence of digital platforms on language preferences (Tan et al., 2010). This fluid and evolving linguistic landscape, shaped by digital media, requires cultural preservation efforts to be adaptive and engaging for young audiences. For instance, gamified approaches like an "Interactive Stamp Trail" can be used to raise cultural awareness among the young generation about traditional heritage, such as Malay kuih (desserts), through modern, interactive means (Jakuan & Kamaruddin, 2025). This demonstrates how contemporary design and digital media can be harnessed to connect youth with their cultural roots, ensuring that heritage remains dynamic and relevant.

2.5.4 The Role of Designers, Brands and Policy in Preservation

Designers, brands, and policymakers play interconnected roles in shaping how language and culture are represented visually. Through ethical design practices, culturally informed branding, and supportive policies, visual communication can become a strategic tool for sustaining linguistic diversity and local identity in contemporary society. Designers, acting as cultural interpreters, have the responsibility to integrate indigenous values and elements authentically into modern designs, as exemplified by efforts to infuse traditional motifs into typefaces and furniture (Sahari & Shanat, 2021; Wan & Fadil, 2022). This involves creativity in translating cultural elements without direct replication, ensuring that designs are accepted by both local and global markets (Sahari & Shanat, 2021).

Brands have the power to promote cultural heritage by incorporating local motifs, languages, and narratives into their products and marketing, thereby creating a stronger connection with consumers and fostering pride in local identity (Jalil et al., 2024). This is particularly true for small and medium enterprises that can preserve and promote cultural heritage while generating economic benefits for the community (Jalil et al., 2024). However, brand strategies must be carefully planned to avoid misinterpretation and commodification of cultural elements (Harun et al., 2023).

Policymakers, through national cultural policies and regulations, provide the framework for cultural preservation. In Malaysia, efforts are made to refine national cultural policies to address the influx of foreign culture and provide guidelines for safeguarding local cultures (Khoo, 2024). These policies can support initiatives that integrate traditional design elements into contemporary products and encourage digital preservation efforts for various cultural heritage treasures (Shuaib & Olalere, 2014; Suaib et al., 2020). The governmental framework of design practices and networks also plays a role in national branding and the visual identity of the nation (Gan et al., 2012). Collaborative efforts between policymakers, designers, and brands are crucial to ensure that design practices align with national objectives of cultural preservation, fostering an environment where cultural heritage is both respected and dynamically integrated into modern society.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1 Introduction to Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the intellectual foundation for a study by identifying and explaining the theories that guide the interpretation of data and the analysis of relationships between key concepts. It offers a structured lens through which the research phenomenon can be understood, ensuring that empirical findings are grounded in established scholarly perspectives (Olaare, 2024; Waldt, 2024). These frameworks act as intellectual scaffolding, enabling researchers to make sense of complex social phenomena and frame research questions and approaches (Maritz, 2023; Waldt, 2024). In qualitative research, theoretical frameworks also play an important, though sometimes invisible, role in the design, implementation, and analysis phases, shaping ontological, epistemological, and methodological decisions (Keogh et al., 2023).

In this study, the theoretical framework draws primarily on semiotic theory, supported by perspectives from cultural identity theory and postcolonial thought, to examine how local language and graphic design interact in the representation of Malaysian identity through merchandise design. These theories are particularly relevant for understanding how visual and linguistic elements operate as signs that communicate cultural meanings within everyday consumer products. The application of such an integrative framework allows for empirical research on culture-inspired product design, weaving together socio-cultural and symbolic elements that influence consumer preferences and product experiences (Odewole et al., 2025).

By applying this framework, the study is able to link visual design practices with broader processes of identity formation, cultural representation, and resistance to cultural homogenisation in a globalised context. This approach also allows for the exploration of "design narratives as worldmaking," serving as a compass for qualitative research and stimulating investigation into important yet underexplored areas (Hayama, 2023; Imbesi et al., 2023).

In the Malaysian context, where national identity and visual representation are constantly being negotiated, this framework is crucial for understanding how various elements, from national landmarks to traditional motifs, contribute to a significant visual identity (Dzulkepli & Lazim, 2022; Wan & Fadil, 2022).

2.6.2 Semiotic Theory (Saussure and Peirce)

Semiotic theory provides the primary analytical lens for this study. Rooted in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, semiotics examines how meaning is produced and communicated through signs. Saussure conceptualised signs as consisting of a *signifier*(the form of the sign) and a *signified* (the mental concept it represents) (Bin et al., 2019). Peirce further expanded semiotic analysis by categorising signs into *icons*, *indices*, and *symbols*, based on how meaning is constructed through resemblance, causality, or convention (BalcÄ±oÄŸlu et al., 2025, 2019). This triadic model, comprising the representamen (the sign's form), the interpretant (the meaning derived), and the object (what the sign refers to), enriches the study of visual semiotics (BalcÄ±oÄŸlu et al., 2025). Modern semiotic discussions, extending from Saussure and Peirce, often incorporate the work of scholars like Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall, who expanded on denotation and connotation to analyze meaning in cultural contexts (Bin et al., 2019).

Within the context of graphic design, semiotic theory enables a systematic examination of how typography, colour, layout, imagery, and language function as visual and linguistic signs that communicate cultural values and social meanings (Zolkefil & Talib, 2022). Visual semiotics, in particular, delves into how visual representations, such as color palettes and design choices, communicate meaning, often drawing from linguistic perspectives (Thellefsen & Friedman, 2023). This approach is particularly valuable in analysing merchandise design, where visual elements and textual language operate simultaneously to produce layered meanings that are interpreted by audiences within specific cultural contexts (Jeronimo & Medeiros, 2019; Rothewelle, 2019).

The meaning-making process in design involves the interplay of all elements, both visual and textual, including their size, color, distance, and arrangement, which viewers interpret based on cultural values and beliefs (Rothewelle, 2019). Semiotic

analysis extends beyond the literal, exploring how connotative meanings are embedded within visual elements, reflecting personal and cultural identities (“Visual Semiotics: Identity Reflection in Personal Symbol Creation,” 2021). This perspective acknowledges that "we think only in signs" and that these signs, whether words, sounds, or images, acquire meaning through interpretation within conventional systems (2019).

In the Malaysian context, semiotics has been widely applied to examine nation branding, visual identity, and the symbolic representation of cultural hybridity. For example, semiotic analysis has been used to examine brand communication in Malaysia, integrating Gestalt principles with Saussure's semiotic analysis to understand how images and text in websites are interpreted within the local culture (Mokhtar & Kasirye, 2023). Researchers have also applied Peirce's semiotic model to analyze the connotation, denotation, and cultural messages imprinted on local brand names, highlighting culture as a powerful influence in branding strategies (Harun et al., 2023).

The study of semiotics also helps in understanding the visual characteristics of national symbols, such as Independence Day logos, from an art appreciation perspective (Hashim et al., 2021). Furthermore, in areas like advertising to Muslim societies in Malaysia, social semiotics helps to interpret how socio-cultural and religious aspects are embedded in product messages (Rasit et al., 2019). Applying semiotic theory allows this study to deconstruct how local language, such as slang, vernacular expressions, and hybrid linguistic forms, is visually treated within graphic design and how these treatments contribute to the construction of Malaysian identity.

This includes analyzing how elements like landmarks, images, or logo designs contribute to a significant visual identity that helps tourists and foreigners recognize national identity (Dzulkepli & Lazim, 2022). Semiotic analysis therefore allows for an in-depth understanding of how everyday merchandise functions not merely as a commercial object, but as a cultural artefact embedded with social and national meanings (Lawes, 2019; Li & Xu, 2024). It provides a framework to understand how identity, inspired and controlled by culture, is delivered through animated designs, with criteria like physique, national characteristics, and colors reflecting local identity based on semiotic theory (Khalis et al., 2024).

2.6.3 Cultural Identity and Postcolonial Perspectives

In addition to semiotic theory, this study draws on concepts from cultural identity theory to contextualise how graphic design participates in the representation and negotiation of identity. Cultural identity is understood as a dynamic and socially constructed process shaped by history, language, and everyday practices (Hall, 1997). Within multicultural societies such as Malaysia, identity is often expressed through hybrid forms that reflect the coexistence of multiple linguistic and cultural influences. In Malaysia, cultural identity is not fixed but rather fluid and continuously shaped by various factors, including the individual's linguistic identity, ethnic heritage, and the influence of their environment (Liew & Hassan, 2021). Studies emphasize the interconnectedness of language, culture, and identity, highlighting how these three constructs impact one another (Suhaimi et al., 2025). The concept of identity itself is complex, unfixed, and intersectional, and many studies tend to be restricted by conceptualizations that project essentialism, highlighting the need to deconstruct these labels for social justice purposes (Leow et al., 2025).

Postcolonial perspectives are crucial for understanding the complexities of Malaysian identity, given its history as an emergent nation following British colonial rule. The transition from colonial rule necessitated the development of a national language policy to promote unity and nation-building (Naidu & Rajanthiran, 2021; Suhaimi et al., 2025). This involved promoting Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) and English competencies to foster a strong sense of national identity and cohesive progress (Naidu & Rajanthiran, 2021). However, in a multicultural nation like Malaysia, where ethnicity remains a significant dividing line, the road to a collective national identity through multiculturalism can be paradoxical, especially when one ethnicity's values are perceived as more prominent (Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017). Political discourse and policies continue to address issues of ethno-cultural and religious intolerance and linguistic competence, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of identity in a diverse society (Suhaimi et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of "glocalization" the interplay between global and local forces is particularly important in understanding Malaysia's national branding and visual identity in the postcolonial era (Gan, 2011; Gan et al., 2012). Graphic design, therefore, operates within a context where national identity is actively constructed and

negotiated, reflecting the intricate relationship between ethnic groups and identity politics (- & Sharma, 2024). This process often involves leveraging visual culture to reconstruct a multicultural society (Yusof & Esmaeil, 2017). The national capitalist project in Malaysia, for instance, aims to restore a Malay/Muslim civilizational history, often conceived in opposition to Western civilization, highlighting the influence of anti-colonial sentiments on national development (Choong, 2024).

Furthermore, postcolonial studies in Malaysia frequently examine how racial identity, often formalized from colonial distinctions, remains a defining aspect of national identity (Sitharan, 2018). This creates a complex landscape where multiple, fluid, and sometimes contradictory identities coexist, particularly among young multi-ethnic Malaysians (Karim, 2010). The concept of "hybridity" is central to this understanding, where syncretism and hybridization emerge as Malaysians navigate their diverse ethnic and cultural landscapes, gaining strength from their variety (- & Sharma, 2024). For example, the Peranakan Chinese community, born from intermarriage between Chinese migrants and indigenous Malays, developed complex ideas of nationhood advocating for an inclusive and multi-ethnic approach to Malaya's plural society during British colonial rule (Keo, 2025).

This illustrates how graphic design, by representing and mediating these hybrid narratives and diverse subjectivities, can either reinforce historical power structures or contribute to a more inclusive visual representation of Malaysian identity. Artworks, including new media art, also explore and unravel Malaysian subjectivity concerning the racialized body and its relation to artistic practice, demonstrating how cultural and identity aspects are explored in contemporary art forms (Abdullah & Elham, 2019). Through a postcolonial lens, the study will examine how graphic design either challenges or reinforces these historical and contemporary power structures, contributes to the resistance of cultural homogenization, and participates in the ongoing negotiation of identity within Malaysian society. This includes understanding how interlinked practices of representation and separation have been embedded in the logic of governance in postcolonial Malaysia, impacting the conceptualization of "Malaysia" itself (Tham, 2025)

2.6.4 Application of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The theoretical framework guides the analysis of APOM's merchandise by providing tools to interpret how visual and linguistic elements function as signs that convey meaning. Semiotic analysis is used to examine specific graphic design treatments such as typography, layout, colour, and visual hierarchy and their interaction with local language. Cultural identity and postcolonial perspectives further assist in understanding how these design choices represent hybridity, everyday Malaysian-ness, and cultural continuity within a globalised marketplace. Collectively, this framework enables a comprehensive interpretation of how graphic design operates as a medium for cultural expression and identity preservation.

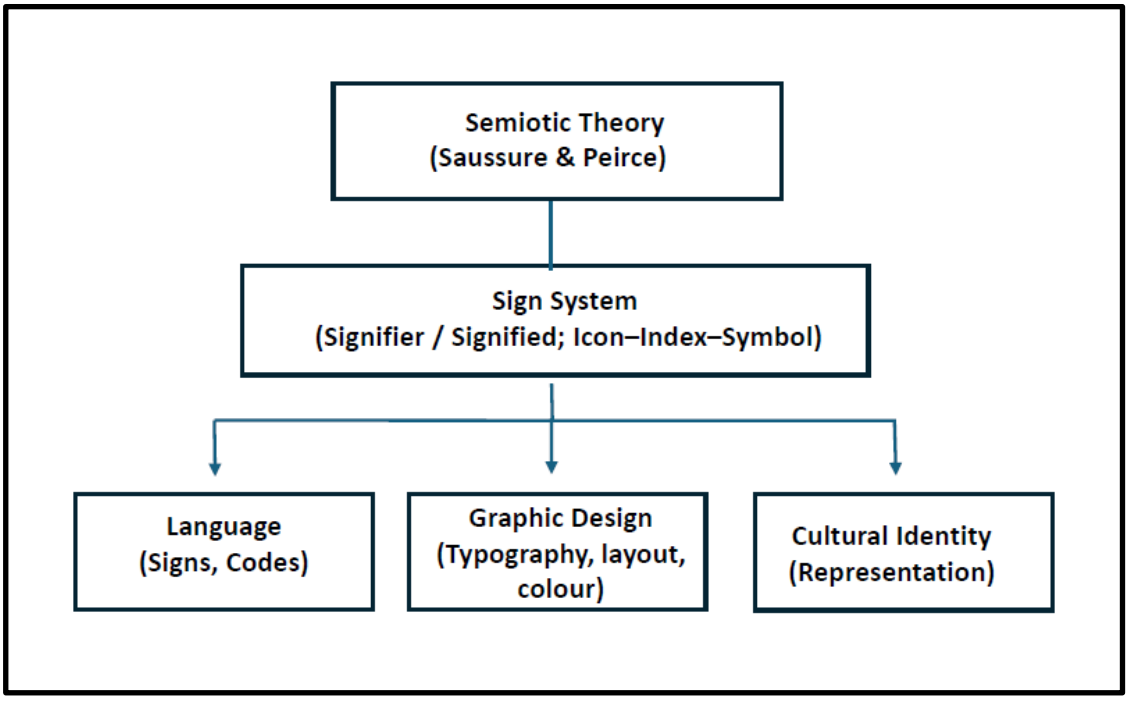


Figure 2.1 Theoretical Framework (Semiotic Theory in Graphic Design)

2.6.5 Justification for the Selection and Combination of the Semiotic Perspectives

The theoretical framework outlined above draws on more than one semiotic tradition, and this combination requires explicit justification rather than assumption. The five bodies of work referred to in this thesis (Saussure, Peirce, Barthes, Hall and Stokes) are not treated as interchangeable authorities on the same problem. Each is

retained because it answers a question the others cannot, and each is applied at a distinct point in the analysis. Where their assumptions conflict, the conflict is acknowledged rather than dissolved.

Saussure supplies the basic structural vocabulary of signifier and signified, and is used at the level of the individual word or phrase to establish that the relationship between a slang term and the cultural meaning attached to it is conventional rather than natural. Saussure alone, however, is insufficient for this study because his dyadic model brackets out the interpreter: it can describe the sign but not the reader. Peirce is therefore introduced for the triadic model and the icon-index-symbol distinction, which allow visual elements such as typographic style and illustration to be classified according to how they generate meaning, and which admit the interpretant as a constitutive part of the sign. Barthes contributes the layering of denotation, connotation and myth, which is necessary because the merchandise examined here operates precisely at the level of connotation: the phrase itself is trivial, while its cultural charge is not. Hall contributes the encoding and decoding model, which is required because the empirical findings of this study show systematically different readings across generational and cultural groups; Hall provides the vocabulary of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings that describes this variation. Stokes (2003) is used at the operational level, providing an accessible and replicable procedure for conducting semiotic analysis of media and visual texts, which structures the analytical stages set out in Chapter 3.

There are genuine tensions between these positions. Saussure's structuralism assumes a closed and stable sign system, whereas Peirce's pragmatism treats signification as an open and unlimited process; Barthes's account of myth implies a relatively dominant ideological reading, whereas Hall's model explicitly allows audiences to resist it. This study does not claim to resolve these differences. It adopts the position that Saussure and Peirce operate at the level of the sign, Barthes at the level of cultural meaning, and Hall at the level of reception, and treats them as complementary at different analytical scales rather than as competing accounts of the same scale. This is an interpretive decision, and it constitutes a limitation of the framework as well as a justification for it.

2.6.6 Why Semiotics Rather Than an Alternative Analytical Lens

Semiotics is not the only lens capable of examining language-based graphic design, and it is adopted here on argued rather than conventional grounds. Four alternatives were considered and set aside. Visual rhetoric would foreground persuasive strategy and audience effect, which suits advertising analysis but is less able to account for cultural meaning that is not primarily persuasive in intent. Social semiotics in the tradition of Kress and van Leeuwen offers a detailed grammar of visual composition and would strengthen the description of layout and modality, but it is oriented towards the resources of visual design and gives comparatively less analytical weight to verbal language, which is the central object of this study. Critical discourse analysis would surface ideology and power effectively, but is developed for extended text and is difficult to apply to a printed phrase of two or three words. Material culture analysis would illuminate the object itself, its handling and circulation, but would displace attention from the linguistic and typographic questions that motivate this research.

Semiotics is selected because it is the only one of these approaches that treats the verbal and the visual as instances of the same underlying process of signification, and can therefore examine a slang term and the typeface that carries it within a single analytical vocabulary. That capacity is the specific requirement of this study. This does not make semiotics the sole legitimate lens for the topic. A social-semiotic or material-culture study of the same merchandise would produce a different and equally defensible account, and the findings reported in Chapters 4 and 5 should be read as the product of a semiotic framing rather than as the only reading available.

2.6.7 Critical Synthesis of Competing Perspectives in the Literature

The preceding sections have reviewed literature on language, identity, brand identity and cultural preservation. Because that literature does not speak with one voice, this section draws the competing positions together and states where this study places itself. Four debates are relevant.

The first concerns the nature of identity itself. Essentialist accounts treat local identity as a stable inheritance transmitted across generations, which supports the language of preservation and safeguarding. Constructivist accounts, by contrast, treat identity as continuously produced through practice and representation, so that what is described as preservation is more accurately described as ongoing re-articulation. The two positions carry very different implications for design: on the first, the designer's task is faithful transmission; on the second, the designer is a participant in producing the identity being described. This study adopts the constructivist position, which is why the revised title refers to representing rather than preserving Malaysian local identity.

The second debate concerns the relationship between commercial circulation and cultural value. One body of work argues that commercial reproduction sustains cultural forms by keeping them visible and economically viable, particularly for younger audiences. A contrasting body of work argues that commodification hollows cultural forms out, converting meaning into style and detaching signs from the communities that produced them. This thesis does not adopt either position wholesale; it treats the tension as an empirical question about specific artefacts, and returns to it directly in Chapter 5.

The third debate concerns which semiotic tradition best explains visual culture, and has been addressed in Sections 2.6.5 and 2.6.6 above. The fourth concerns what is being preserved and for whom. Nation-centred accounts emphasise a shared national culture expressed through a national language, while plural and postcolonial accounts emphasise that any single-language account of a multilingual society necessarily foregrounds some communities and marginalises others. This study proceeds from the second position, and Chapter 5 examines the extent to which a Malay-language-centred brand repertoire can represent a multilingual Malaysia.

Table 2.1
Competing Perspectives in the Reviewed Literature and the Position Adopted in This Study

Debate	Position A	Position B	Position adopted in this study
Nature of local identity	Essentialist: identity is inherited, bounded and transmitted; design preserves it	Constructivist: identity is produced through representation and practice; design participates in making it	Constructivist. Design is treated as a site where identity is articulated, not a container that stores it.
Commerce and culture	Commercial circulation sustains cultural forms by keeping them visible, used and economically viable	Commodification detaches signs from their communities and converts meaning into consumable style	Treated as an unresolved empirical tension rather than a settled question; examined artefact by artefact in Chapter 5.
Analytical lens	Structural semiotics (Saussure, Barthes): meaning is located in the sign system	Social semiotics and reception theory (Kress and van Leeuwen, Hall): meaning is located in use and interpretation	A layered position: structural tools at sign level, Peircean and Hallian tools at interpretation level, with the tension acknowledged in Section 2.6.5.
Scope of the identity claimed	Nation-centred: a shared national culture expressed through the national language	Plural and postcolonial: any single-language account foregrounds some communities and marginalises others	Plural. The study claims to describe a Malay-language-mediated urban register of Malaysian identity, not Malaysian identity as a whole.

Positioning the study in this way has a direct consequence for the research gaps identified in the following section. The gaps are not simply topics that have not yet been

studied; they are the points at which these four debates have not been brought into contact with one another in the Malaysian design context.

2.7 Research Gaps and Conceptual Framework

Despite extensive research on graphic design, language, and identity, several gaps remain evident within the existing literature, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Firstly, there is a notable lack of research examining the use of local language in contemporary merchandise design. While previous studies have explored language preservation within educational, literary, and cultural heritage contexts, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how local linguistic forms such as Malay slang, Manglish, and hybrid language expressions are integrated into graphic design on everyday consumer products.

Secondly, the intersection between graphic design and identity formation in Malaysia remains underexplored. Existing studies tend to examine visual communication and language as separate domains, with relatively few investigations addressing how identity is visualised through the combined use of linguistic and visual elements within commercial and consumer-oriented design contexts.

Thirdly, there is limited application of semiotic theory to local language-based design practices in Malaysia. Much of the existing literature relies on universal or Western-centric design frameworks, without sufficiently considering how local languages function as semiotic resources for cultural expression, meaning-making, and identity construction within Malaysian graphic design.

These gaps indicate the need for a focused qualitative investigation into how local language operates within graphic design as a meaningful tool for representing and preserving Malaysian identity through everyday merchandise. While prior studies have examined language policy, branding, souvenirs, and visual identity as separate areas of inquiry, limited research has analysed how local language functions as a semiotic resource within everyday graphic design merchandise in Malaysia. Moreover, few studies integrate audience interpretation, ethical considerations, and design practice perspectives within a single analytical framework. This study addresses these gaps by adopting a qualitative, semiotic approach to examine the integration of local language

and graphic design in Malaysian merchandise, leading to the development of a conceptual framework that supports the preservation and articulation of local identity.

2.8 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study provides a structured representation of the key concepts and relationships derived from the literature review, theoretical framework, and identified research gaps. It illustrates how local language, when integrated into graphic design, contributes to semiotic meaning-making and the preservation of Malaysian local identity. The framework consists of four interrelated components:

a) Local Language –including Malay, Manglish, and hybrid vernacular expressions used in merchandise design.

b) Graphic Design Elements – such as typography, layout, colour, imagery, and visual hierarchy.

c) Semiotic Meaning-Making – where design elements function as signs that generate cultural and social meanings.

d) Malaysian Local Identity – expressed through cultural representation, everyday Malaysian-ness, and shared social meanings.

This framework proposes that the interaction between local language and graphic design elements produces semiotic meanings that contribute to the representation and preservation of Malaysian identity within consumer culture. The conceptual framework guides the analysis by clarifying the relationships examined in the study.

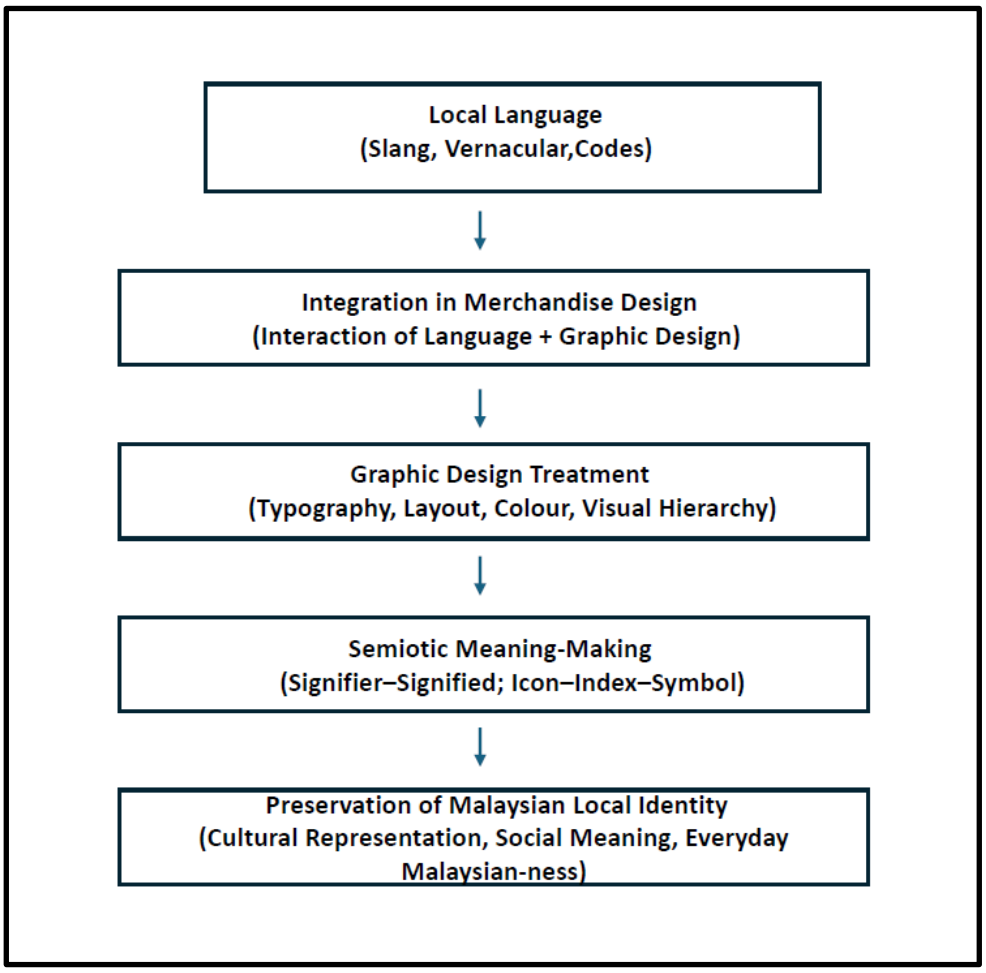


Figure 2.2 Conceptual Framework (Local Language and Design in Malaysian Identity)

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature on language, graphic design, local identity, brand identity, and cultural preservation, establishing the scholarly foundation for the study. A theoretical framework grounded in semiotic theory, supported by cultural identity and postcolonial perspectives, was presented to guide the interpretation of visual and linguistic elements in merchandise design. Key research gaps were identified, particularly concerning the underexplored role of local language in Malaysian graphic design. A conceptual framework was subsequently developed to illustrate the relationships between local language, graphic design, semiotic meaning-making, and the preservation of Malaysian identity. Together, these frameworks provide a coherent foundation for the empirical investigation undertaken in the subsequent chapters. The next chapter outlines the research methodology employed to examine these relationships in detail.

CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted to investigate how local language is integrated into graphic design and how this integration contributes to the communication and preservation of Malaysian local identity. The methodological approach is designed to address the research objectives through a qualitative, interpretive lens that prioritises meaning-making, cultural context, and participant perspectives.

Given the study's focus on language, visual communication, and cultural identity, a qualitative research design is considered most appropriate. Qualitative methods enable an in-depth exploration of how meanings are constructed, interpreted, and negotiated through graphic design practices, particularly when local language and slang are embedded within everyday merchandise. This approach allows the researcher to capture nuanced insights that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative measurement alone.

This chapter details the theoretical orientation underpinning the study, the research design and case study approach, methods of data collection, sampling strategy, and procedures for data analysis. It also explains how semiotic theory informs both the analytical framework and interpretation of findings, ensuring coherence between the methodology and the discussions presented in Chapters 4 and 5. Finally, issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are addressed to demonstrate the rigour and credibility of the research process.

3.2 Theoretical Orientation: Semiotic Theory

This study is grounded in semiotic theory, which provides a systematic framework for analysing how meaning is produced and communicated through signs. Semiotics is particularly relevant to graphic design research because it enables the examination of both linguistic and visual elements as sign systems that operate within specific cultural contexts.

Semiotic theory is concerned with how signs function, how they are interpreted, and how meaning is constructed through relationships between signifiers and signified concepts. In the context of this research, semiotics offers a theoretical foundation for understanding how local language, typography, layout, colour, and imagery interact within graphic design to communicate Malaysian local identity.

3.2.1 Saussurean Semiotics

Ferdinand de Saussure's model of semiotics conceptualises meaning as arising from the relationship between the signifier (the form of a sign, such as a word or visual element) and the signified (the concept or meaning it represents). According to Saussure, this relationship is socially constructed rather than inherently fixed, meaning that interpretation is shaped by cultural conventions and shared understanding.

Within this study, Saussure's model is applied to analyse how local language particularly Malay slang and hybrid linguistic forms functions as a signifier within graphic design. When incorporated into merchandise design, these linguistic elements signify familiarity, cultural intimacy, humour, and national belonging. Their meanings are not universal but are shaped by Malaysian social and cultural contexts, making them especially relevant for analysing identity representation through design.

3.2.2 Peircean Semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce extends semiotic analysis through a triadic model, comprising the representamen, object, and interpretant. This model emphasises meaning as a dynamic and interpretive process rather than a static relationship. Peirce further categorises signs into icons, indexes, and symbols, each functioning differently in the production of meaning.

Peirce's framework is particularly useful for this study as it allows the researcher to examine how graphic design elements operate at multiple semiotic levels. For example, typographic styles may function iconically by visually resembling cultural references, indexically by pointing to specific social contexts, or symbolically by relying on culturally learned meanings. Figure 3.1 illustrates Peirce's triadic semiotic model and its relevance to visual communication.

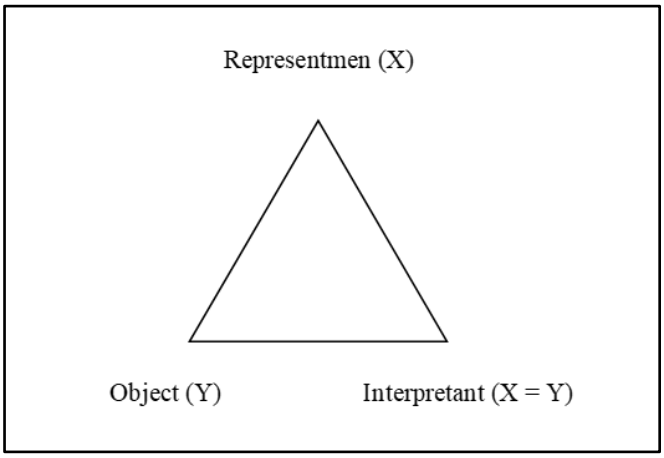


Figure 3.1 Pierce's Semiotic Theory (1839-1914)

By applying Peirce's categories of signs, this study is able to analyse how local language and visual elements work together to construct layered meanings that resonate with Malaysian audiences.

3.2.3 Application of Semiotic Theory in Graphic Design Research

Semiotic theory has been widely applied in graphic design research to examine how visual and textual elements communicate cultural values, social identities, and ideological meanings. In this study, semiotics serves not only as a theoretical foundation but also as an analytical lens that informs the interpretation of both visual artefacts and interview data.

The integration of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics enables a comprehensive analysis of design language by addressing both structural relationships between signs and the interpretive processes of audiences. This dual approach aligns with the findings presented in Chapter 4, where audience interpretation, emotional resonance, and cultural familiarity emerged as key themes, and supports the semiotic discussion developed further in Chapter 5.

Through semiotic analysis, local language embedded in graphic design is understood not merely as text, but as a culturally charged sign that interacts with visual form, audience perception, and ethical considerations. This theoretical orientation ensures that the study's methodological approach is coherent with its research objectives and provides a robust foundation for analysing how graphic design contributes to the preservation of Malaysian local identity.

3.3 Research Design and Case Study Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design employing a single-case study approach to explore how local language is integrated into graphic design and how this integration contributes to the communication and preservation of Malaysian local identity. A qualitative design is appropriate because the research seeks to understand meanings, interpretations, and cultural values embedded within design practices rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses.

Qualitative research enables an in-depth examination of subjective experiences and socially constructed meanings, which are central to the study of language, visual communication, and identity. As graphic design functions as a semiotic system shaped by cultural context, a qualitative approach allows the researcher to capture the complexity of how linguistic and visual elements interact within everyday merchandise.

3.3.1 Case Study Selection

A single-case study was selected to allow for a detailed and contextualised analysis of a specific design practice operating within the Malaysian cultural landscape. The case chosen for this study is APOM, a Malaysian lifestyle and merchandise brand that explicitly incorporates local language, slang, and culturally familiar expressions into its graphic design.

APOM was selected for several reasons. First, the brand consistently integrates Malay language, local slang, and hybrid linguistic forms across a range of everyday merchandise, including T-shirts, mugs, keychains, and tote bags. This makes it an appropriate case for examining how local language functions within graphic design as a cultural signifier. Second, APOM targets a predominantly young and urban audience, particularly Generation Z consumers, who were identified in Chapter 4 as being highly receptive to slang-based visual communication. Third, the brand's visibility in both physical retail spaces and online platforms allows for comprehensive visual analysis and contextual understanding.

The use of a single-case study does not aim to achieve statistical generalisation. Instead, it seeks analytical generalisation, whereby insights derived from the case contribute to theoretical understanding and framework development. This approach aligns with the study's objective of developing a conceptual framework rather than producing broadly generalisable findings.

3.3.2 Justification for a Single-Case Approach

The single-case approach enables a focused exploration of how local language and graphic design are integrated in practice, allowing for close examination of design choices, semiotic strategies, and audience interpretations. By concentrating on one brand, the study is able to examine design language holistically, considering consistency, variation, and repetition across multiple artefacts.

This depth of analysis would not be achievable through a multi-case approach within the scope of a Master by Research study. The selected approach ensures that the research remains methodologically rigorous while maintaining feasibility and analytical depth. Furthermore, the single-case study serves as a suitable foundation for the

framework proposed in Chapter 6. The framework is not intended as a prescriptive model limited to APOM alone, but as a conceptual guide that may be adapted to other contexts where local language and graphic design intersect to communicate cultural identity.

3.3.2.1 Why APOM Rather Than Another Malaysian Brand

APOM was not selected because it was convenient or accessible; it was selected because it satisfies a set of theoretical criteria that few Malaysian merchandise brands satisfy simultaneously. Four alternative categories of brand were considered and rejected. Heritage and craft-based souvenir producers were rejected because their cultural content is carried by material technique and motif rather than by language, which places them outside the research question. Tourism-oriented souvenir retailers were rejected because their language use is predominantly English and aimed at visitors rather than at a domestic audience, so they cannot illuminate how Malaysians read their own vernacular. Local streetwear labels were considered but rejected because their graphic repertoire is largely English-language and internationally derived. Food and beverage brands that carry Malay names were rejected because language functions there as nomenclature rather than as designed graphic content.

APOM meets the criteria set out in Table 3.1 on all counts, and is theoretically important for three reasons rather than merely available. First, it makes vernacular language the primary graphic object rather than a caption, which makes the relationship between linguistic and visual choice observable in a way that most brands do not permit. Second, its repertoire spans Malay, Manglish and borrowings from Hokkien and Tamil, which makes it a site where the tension between a Malay-centred and a multilingual account of Malaysian identity becomes visible rather than hypothetical. Third, it operates simultaneously as a cultural project and a commercial enterprise, which makes it an appropriate site for examining the preservation-versus-commodification tension identified in Section 2.6.7. In case-study terms this is a purposive, information-rich and revelatory case rather than a representative one (Yin, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Table 3.1
Case Selection Criteria and Their Satisfaction by APOM Malaysia

Selection criterion	Requirement	Basis for selecting APOM
Language as primary graphic content	Local language must be the central designed element, not an incidental label	Across the sampled items, the Malay or slang phrase occupies the dominant compositional position and determines typographic treatment (see Chapter 4)
Linguistic range	The repertoire must extend beyond standard Malay to slang, Manglish and cross-community borrowings	The sampled repertoire includes Malay slang, Manglish constructions and terms of Hokkien and Tamil origin
Product breadth	Language use must be observable across multiple product types to allow comparison	Nine product categories were available for sampling, permitting comparison of the same phrase across different objects
Domestic audience orientation	The brand must address Malaysians rather than only tourists	Product humour depends on prior cultural knowledge that a non-Malaysian audience would not share
Dual cultural and commercial character	The case must permit examination of the tension between cultural expression and commodification	The brand operates as a commercial retailer while explicitly framing its output in cultural terms
Accessibility for systematic analysis	A stable, documentable corpus must exist in both digital and physical form	A complete online catalogue and physical retail outlets allowed systematic sampling and verification

The limitation that follows from these criteria should be stated plainly. Because APOM was selected precisely for its concentrated and atypical use of vernacular language, it is by definition not representative of Malaysian merchandise design in general. The findings describe what is possible and what is at stake when language is

placed at the centre of design; they do not describe what is typical. Any transfer of these findings to other brands requires a judgement of contextual similarity by the reader rather than an assumption of generalisability.

3.3.3 Integration with Research Objectives

The research design directly supports the study's three research objectives. The visual analysis of APOM's merchandise addresses Objective 1 by identifying how local language is integrated into graphic design. The thematic analysis of interview data addresses Objective 2 by examining how graphic design elements communicate local language and shape identity interpretation. Finally, the synthesis of empirical findings and semiotic theory informs Objective 3, leading to the development of a conceptual framework for integrating local language and graphic design in representing local identity.

By combining visual artefact analysis with participant perspectives, the case study approach enables triangulation of data sources, strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings. This design ensures coherence across Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, supporting systematic progression from data collection to interpretation and framework development.

3.4 Research Instruments

This study employed two primary research instruments to support systematic data collection and analysis: (1) a visual content analysis framework for analysing graphic design artefacts, and (2) a semi-structured interview protocol for eliciting participants' perspectives on local language, graphic design, and cultural identity. These instruments were developed based on the research objectives, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and the semiotic analytical framework guiding the study.

The use of clearly defined research instruments ensures consistency, analytical rigour, and alignment between data collection procedures and the study's conceptual and theoretical foundations. The instruments were designed to capture both the structural features of graphic design (visual and linguistic elements) and the interpretative meanings constructed by designers and audiences

3.4.1 Visual Analysis Instrument (Content Analysis Framework)

A structured visual analysis framework was developed to guide the systematic examination of APOM merchandise. This framework was informed by semiotic theory and content analysis principles and was designed to ensure consistency in the identification and interpretation of visual and linguistic elements across merchandises.

The visual analysis instrument focused on the following categories:

a) Linguistic content (Malay language, slang, hybrid expressions, colloquial forms)
b) Typography (typeface style, hierarchy, emphasis, tone)
c) Colour schemes and their cultural associations
d) Layout and composition
e) Imagery and symbolic representations
f) Cultural references and everyday Malaysian experiences

This framework enabled the researcher to document and compare recurring design features and to identify how local language is visually framed as a cultural signifier. The structured instrument supports the semiotic analysis in Chapter 5 by ensuring systematic identification of signifiers and their potential cultural meanings.

3.4.1.1 Alignment Between the Visual Analysis Instrument and the Recording Schedule

The categories listed above are analytical categories. To ensure that they were applied consistently and that the recorded data in Chapter 4 correspond directly to the instrument described here, each category was operationalised into the specific fields used in the recording schedule reported as Table 4.1. Table 3.1 sets out this correspondence. Every column in Table 4.1 derives from a category in this instrument, and no column is recorded that is not specified here.

Table 3.2
Correspondence Between the Visual Analysis Instrument and the Fields Recorded in Table 4.1

Instrument category (Section 3.4.1)	**Field recorded in Table 4.1**	**What was recorded**
Linguistic content	Language (slang); Description	The specific term or phrase, its literal gloss, and its register (standard Malay, slang, Manglish, or borrowing)
Typography	Typography: serif / sans serif / decorative	The dominant typeface classification carrying the linguistic content
Colour schemes And cultural associations	Colour schemes	The dominant palette and whether it carried a recognised cultural association
Layout and composition	Layout: contrast, alignment, white space, hierarchy	Whether each compositional device was used to give the linguistic element visual priority
Imagery and symbolic representation	Visual	Presence and type of accompanying illustration or symbol
Cultural references and everyday experience	Local identity: visual; Description	The everyday Malaysian practice, stereotype or situation referenced by the item

Presenting the correspondence in this form addresses a consistency issue raised at examination, namely that the analytical scheme described in this chapter and the recording scheme used in Chapter 4 were not evidently the same. They are the same scheme; Table 3.1 makes the mapping explicit.

3.4.2 Interview Protocol (Semi-Structured Interview Guide)

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide the interview process. The interview guide was designed to align explicitly with the research objectives and the thematic areas identified in the literature review, including local language use, graphic design elements, identity representation, audience interpretation, and ethical considerations.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions organised into thematic sections, allowing participants to reflect on their professional experiences, interpretations, and cultural understandings. This structure ensured comparability across interviews while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues and participant-specific insights.

The full interview guide is provided in Appendix F. The use of a standardised interview protocol enhances the credibility and dependability of the qualitative data by ensuring that all participants were engaged with similar thematic prompts.

3.4.3 Expert Validation of Research Instruments

To enhance the content validity and clarity of the research instruments, expert validation was conducted prior to data collection. The interview protocol and visual analysis framework were reviewed by an expert in Bahasa Melayu with five years of professional experience in the field. Dr. Nurul Aisyah possesses extensive expertise in Malay language studies, language education, and academic writing, which is directly relevant to the focus of this study.

The expert reviewed the instruments to ensure linguistic accuracy, conceptual clarity, cultural appropriateness, and alignment with the research objectives. Particular attention was given to the suitability of terminology, sentence structure, and the consistency of concepts across the interview questions and analytical categories.

Based on the expert's feedback, revisions were made to improve the precision of wording, reduce ambiguity, and enhance overall coherence. These refinements strengthened the content validity of the research instruments and ensured their suitability for examining local language, graphic design, and cultural identity within the Malaysian context.

This validation process enhances the methodological rigour of the study by demonstrating that the instruments were systematically reviewed and refined prior to implementation.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

This study employs multiple qualitative data collection methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how local language is integrated into graphic design and how such integration contributes to the communication and preservation of Malaysian local identity. Data were collected through visual content analysis, semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observation, allowing for methodological triangulation and enhancing the credibility of the findings.

The use of multiple methods enables the study to examine graphic design practices from different perspectives: the artefacts themselves, the intentions and interpretations of designers and experts, and the perceptions of audiences. This approach ensures that the analysis captures both the production and interpretation of meaning within graphic design.

3.5.1 Visual Content Analysis of Merchandise

Visual content analysis was conducted on selected merchandise produced by APOM, including T-shirts, mugs, keychains, and other everyday items that prominently feature local language and graphic design elements. These products were selected because they represent commonly consumed cultural artefacts and function as accessible forms of visual communication in daily life.

The visual data were collected from two primary sources:

a) APOM's official website, which serves as a digital catalogue of the brand's merchandise, and

b) Physical products observed at APOM's retail outlets located within the Klang Valley.

Each selected item was analysed in terms of its linguistic content (use of Malay language, slang, hybrid expressions, and colloquial phrases) and visual design elements, including typography, layout, colour schemes, imagery, and compositional structure. Attention was given to how these elements interact to produce meaning and how they reference Malaysian cultural experiences, humour, and everyday practices.

The analysis was guided by semiotic principles, focusing on how visual and linguistic signs function as signifiers and how meanings are constructed through icon, index, and symbol relationships. This method directly supports the semiotic discussion in Chapter 5 and provides empirical grounding for the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4.

3.5.1.1 Sample Size, Inclusion and Exclusion for Visual Merchandises

A total of 72 merchandise items were analysed. These were distributed across nine product categories, as set out in Table 3.3. Each item was assigned a unique identifier following the coding system reported in Appendix E, so that every artefact referred to in Chapters 4 and 5 can be traced back to a specific catalogued object.

Table 3.3
Composition of the Visual Sample by the Product Category

Product category	Code prefix	Items analysed
T-shirts	APOM-TS	23
Mugs	APOM-MG	12
Phone cases	APOM-PC	10
Greeting cards	APOM-GC	6
Baby rompers	APOM-BR	5
Drink coasters	APOM-DC	5
Tote bags	APOM-TG	5
Tumblers	APOM-TB	4
Notebooks	APOM-NB	2
Total		72

Sampling was purposive rather than exhaustive, and the boundary of the sample was governed by explicit criteria. An item was included where it satisfied all four inclusion conditions and none of the exclusion conditions listed in Table 3.4. Items were reviewed against these criteria before analysis, and borderline cases were resolved by returning to the criteria rather than by discretion.

Table 3.4
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Visual Sample

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
The item carries at least one word or phrase in Malay, Malay slang, Manglish, or a locally circulating borrowing from another Malaysian language	The item is purely illustrative or ornamental, with no linguistic content
The linguistic content is a designed graphic element, integrated typographically into the composition rather than appearing only as branding, sizing or care information	The only text present is the brand name, a product label, or legally required product information
The item was available through the brand's official online catalogue or observed in its Klang Valley retail outlets during the data collection period	The item was a discontinued, third-party, resale or unverified listing that could not be confirmed against an official source
The item was documented at a resolution sufficient for typographic, colour and compositional features to be examined	Image quality was insufficient for typographic or compositional analysis, or the design was obscured by packaging or display
Where the same design appeared on more than one product type, each application was treated as a separate item, because the object changes the reading	Exact duplicates of the same design on the same product type differing only in size or colourway were counted once

Sampling continued until additional items ceased to introduce new linguistic categories, typographic strategies or compositional patterns. The final categories in the sequence, notebooks and drink coasters, reproduced design strategies already

documented in the apparel and drinkware categories, which was taken as an indication that the visual corpus had reached the point of redundancy for the analytical categories in use.

3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' perspectives on the use of local language and graphic design in communicating Malaysian identity. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore participants' unique experiences and insights.

Interview participants included graphic designers, art directors, academicians in art and design and Malay language studies, Generation Z consumers, expatriates, and members of the general public. This diversity of participants ensured that the study captured perspectives from both design producers and design interpreters, reflecting the multi-layered process of meaning-making in graphic design.

An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and literature review. Key topics included perceptions of local language in design, the role of typography and visual elements in reinforcing meaning, audience interpretation, cultural authenticity, and ethical considerations. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, depending on participant availability, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. The transcriptions formed the primary textual data for thematic analysis using NVivo software, as presented in Chapter 4.

3.5.2.1 Operational Details of the Interviews

The following operational details are reported so that the interview procedure can be assessed and, in principle, repeated. All six interviews were conducted by the researcher. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed via email about the interview procedure, including the purpose and arrangements of the interview. The interviews were conducted in the language preferred by each participant, with code-switching between Malay and English permitted and commonly occurring. This was appropriate given that the subject matter of the study concerns the use and integration of these languages. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts retained slang terms, fillers, and instances of code-switching in their original language rather than normalising them, as the participants' speech register was considered analytically relevant. The interview data were subsequently imported into NVivo for coding and thematic analysis. Selected data extracts generated from the NVivo analysis are presented in the findings chapters to illustrate the themes and patterns identified from the participants' responses. Where Malay expressions or slang terms appear in the data extracts, their original wording is retained, with English translations provided where necessary for clarity.

Table 3.5 records the mode, date, duration and language of each interview. Because these details are drawn from the researcher's interview log and audio records, the fields marked in this table must be completed from those records before submission.

Table 3.5
Interview Procedure by Participant

Participant	Role	Mode	Date	Duration	Language of interview	Translation required
P1	Academician (Malay Language)	face-to-face	4 December 2025	35 min	Malay	Yes
P2	Graphic Designer	face-to-face	18 December 2025	28 min	Malay	Yes
P3	Academician (Graphic Design)	Online	27 December 2025	1 hour	English	No
P4	Gen Z Designer / Illustrator	Online	15 December 2025	26 min	Malay	Yes
P5	Expatriate consumer	Online	15 December 2025	25 min	English	No
P6	Creative Director	Online	22 December 2025	30 min	English	No

3.5.3 Non-Participant Observation

Non-participant observation was employed to complement the visual and interview data. Observations were conducted in APOM retail environments to examine how merchandise featuring local language is displayed, contextualised, and interacted with by consumers. This method allowed the researcher to observe natural consumer engagement without interference.

Observational notes focused on factors such as product placement, visual prominence of language-based designs, customer reactions, and informal interactions surrounding the merchandise. These observations provided contextual insights that supported the interpretation of visual artefacts and interview responses.

3.5.4 Triangulation of Data Sources

The integration of visual content analysis, interviews, and observation enabled triangulation across data sources. Visual analysis revealed how local language is embedded within design artefacts, interviews provided insight into intention and interpretation, and observation contextualised how these designs function in real-world settings.

This triangulated approach strengthens the trustworthiness of the findings and ensures that interpretations are grounded in multiple forms of evidence. The combined data collection methods directly inform the thematic analysis in Chapter 4, the semiotic interpretation in Chapter 5, and the framework development in Chapter 6.

3.6 Sampling Strategy and Participants

This study employs a purposive sampling strategy, appropriate for qualitative research that seeks to explore meaning, interpretation, and cultural representation rather than statistical generalisation. Purposive sampling enables the deliberate selection of information-rich cases that directly address the research objectives, particularly in studies concerned with identity, language, and semiotic meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sampling strategy was therefore designed to support the key analytical themes developed in Chapter 4, namely language, local identity, and cultural preservation.

The central visual material for analysis comprises APOM merchandise, selected as a case study due to its consistent and explicit use of local language, slang, and culturally embedded expressions within its graphic design. APOM products provide a coherent and accessible corpus through which linguistic choices, visual signs, and cultural references can be examined in relation to the thematic concerns of the study. In particular, the merchandise enables the investigation of how local language is visually articulated, how Malaysian identity is constructed through everyday design, and how cultural meanings are preserved or recontextualised within commercial products.

Participants were drawn from two purposively selected groups to ensure analytical depth and triangulation. The first group consists of design practitioners, including graphic designers and individuals involved in branding or merchandise

design. These participants were selected because of their capacity to articulate design intentions, language selection processes, and cultural considerations embedded in visual communication. Their perspectives directly inform the Chapter 4 themes of language and identity, offering insight into how local linguistic forms are deliberately employed as design resources and how cultural values are negotiated within professional practice.

The second group comprises consumers and audiences of local merchandise, particularly individuals familiar with or who have engaged with APOM products. This group was included to examine audience interpretation, focusing on how local language and visual elements are read, understood, and emotionally experienced. Audience perspectives are essential for analysing how meanings related to identity and cultural preservation are not only designed but also interpreted and lived in everyday contexts. This aligns closely with the semiotic analysis in Chapter 5, which emphasises the role of the interpretant in meaning construction.

Participants were selected according to the following criteria:
(a) familiarity with Malaysian local merchandise;
(b) exposure to local language use in graphic design or everyday consumer culture; and
(c) the ability to reflect on issues of cultural meaning, identity, and representation. These criteria ensured that participants could meaningfully engage with the study's thematic focus on language, identity, and preservation.

The final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or interpretative insights emerged (Guest et al., 2012). This approach supports the depth of thematic and semiotic analysis required in Chapters 4 and 5, ensuring that interpretations of language use, identity construction, and cultural preservation are robust and well-supported.

3.6.1 Justification for a Sample of Six Participants

The sample of six participants requires justification, since it is small even by the standards of qualitative research. Three arguments support it. First, the study does not seek statistical generalisation, and the sample was never intended to represent a population; participants function as informed interpreters of a specific design practice rather than as a proxy for Malaysian consumers. Second, the sample was constructed for information power rather than for size (Malterud et al., 2016). Information power

holds that the number of participants required falls as the specificity of the aim, the density of participants' expertise and the quality of the dialogue rise. All three conditions apply here: the aim is narrowly specified to one brand and one linguistic phenomenon; the participants include an academician with over fifty years in Malay language education, an academician with over thirty years in design and local identity, and a creative director with over twenty years in national branding; and the interviews were extended and dialogic rather than survey-like.

Third, the sample is structurally rather than numerically justified. It was designed to cover the full communicative circuit that the research question requires: production is represented by the graphic designer, the illustrator and the creative director; linguistic authority by the Malay language academician; design-theoretical authority by the design academician; and outside-in reception by the expatriate participant, whose limited access to the vernacular provides a control against the assumption that these designs are self-evident. Adding further participants from a category already represented would have increased the sample without extending this circuit.

The limitation nevertheless stands and is not offset by these arguments. Six participants cannot capture the range of Malaysian audience response, and the study accordingly makes no claims about audience attitudes at population level. Where consumer response is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, it is reported as the interpretation of specific informed participants and is triangulated against the visual and observational data rather than treated as evidence of general audience behaviour. Section 6.6 recommends survey-based or experimental reception research as the appropriate means of testing these interpretations at scale.

Overall, the sampling strategy and participant selection were explicitly aligned with the study’s analytical framework. Further details of participant backgrounds are provided in Appendix C. By incorporating both design practitioners and audiences, the research captures multiple layers of meaning production and interpretation, enabling a comprehensive examination of local language as a semiotic resource for expressing Malaysian identity and supporting cultural preservation through graphic design merchandise.

3.7 Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-method data collection strategy designed to support the semiotic analysis presented in Chapter 5. Data collection was structured to capture both visual signs and interpretative meanings, recognising that semiotics requires attention not only to designed artefacts but also to how meanings are produced, negotiated, and understood within specific cultural contexts (Chandler, 2004; Hall, 1997). Accordingly, three complementary sources of data were collected: graphic design artefacts, semi-structured interviews, and documentary materials.

3.7.1 Visual Design Materials

The primary data source for this study consists of APOM merchandise, selected for its consistent use of local language, slang, and culturally embedded expressions within graphic design. These visual design materials include apparel, printed merchandise, and visual promotional materials that prominently feature linguistic and visual elements central to the study's focus. The materials were collected purposively to ensure representation of recurring design features such as typography, lexical choices, colour schemes, layout, and symbolic imagery.

In alignment with Chapter 5, these visual design materials are treated as semiotic texts for the purposes of analysis. Each item was documented through high-resolution photographic records and catalogued systematically to facilitate close reading and comparative analysis. This process enabled the identification of signifiers (visual and linguistic forms), signified meanings (cultural, social, and emotional associations), and broader mythic or ideological narratives, following the semiotic frameworks proposed by Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes. The collection thus provides the empirical foundation for analysing how local language operates as a semiotic resource within contemporary branded merchandise and everyday visual culture.

3.7.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected design practitioners with professional experience in graphic design and visual communication, and consumers (including Gen Z and expatriate participants) who have been exposed to and engaged with APOM products and branding, as outlined in Section 3.5. Interviews were designed to elicit participants' reflections on the use of local language, visual design choices, and cultural meanings embedded in merchandise. This method allows for depth and flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency across participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

From a semiotic perspective, interviews function as a means of accessing the interpretant, that is, the meanings generated by individuals when engaging with signs (Peirce, 1931–1958). Designers were invited to discuss their intentions, creative decisions, and cultural considerations, providing insight into the production of signs. Consumers were asked to reflect on their interpretations, emotional responses, and sense of identity when engaging with the merchandise, revealing how meanings are decoded and negotiated in everyday contexts.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The interview data directly support the analysis in Chapter 5 by enabling triangulation between designed meanings and audience interpretations, thereby strengthening the validity of the semiotic readings.

3.7.3 Documentary and Contextual Materials

To enhance interpretative depth, relevant documentary materials were also collected. These include brand statements, social media captions, promotional texts, and publicly available design narratives related to APOM. Such materials provide contextual insight into how language and identity are framed discursively beyond the physical merchandise.

In semiotic terms, these documents contribute to understanding the intertextual environment in which meanings are produced and circulated. They support the identification of recurring cultural themes and ideological positions that inform both the

visual and linguistic construction of the brand, complementing the artefact and interview data analysed in Chapter 5.

3.7.4 Data Preparation for Semiotic Analysis

All collected data were organised and prepared systematically to facilitate semiotic analysis. Visual artefacts were coded according to recurring linguistic and visual features, while interview transcripts and documents were thematically organised around concepts of language, identity, and cultural preservation. This preparation ensured coherence between data collection and the analytical procedures outlined in Chapter 5, where semiotic analysis is applied to examine how meanings are constructed, communicated, and interpreted.

Overall, the data collection process was explicitly designed to support a multi-layered semiotic analysis, enabling the study to examine graphic design merchandise not merely as visual products, but as cultural texts through which Malaysian identity and local language are negotiated and preserved.

3.8 Data Analysis

This study employs a qualitative semiotic analysis to examine how local language is interpreted and communicated through graphic design in Malaysian merchandise. The data analysis process is explicitly structured to align with the semiotic framework presented in Chapter 5, ensuring methodological coherence between data collection, analytical procedures, and thematic interpretation.

Semiotic analysis is particularly appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth examination of how visual and linguistic signs operate together to convey cultural meanings, identity, and ideological values (Saussure, 1983; Peirce, 1931–1958; Barthes, 1977). The analysis was conducted in four sequential stages, each corresponding directly to the analytical structure adopted in Chapter 5.

3.8.1 Identification of Semiotic Resources

The first stage of analysis involved the systematic identification of semiotic resources within the collected visual artefacts. These resources include linguistic elements (words, phrases, slang, code-mixing), typographic treatments, colour schemes, layout structures, and symbolic imagery.

Each merchandises was examined to identify recurring visual and textual features that function as signifiers. This stage establishes the descriptive foundation for the analysis in Chapter 5, where graphic design elements are treated as cultural signs embedded within everyday merchandise. The categorisation of these elements enabled the study to isolate how local language is visually framed and positioned within design compositions.

3.8.2 Denotative Analysis (Level of Description)

The second stage focused on denotative analysis, which examines the literal and descriptive meanings of the identified signs. At this level, the analysis remains close to observable features without interpretative inference, describing what is visibly present in each design artefact.

For linguistic elements, denotative analysis involved identifying the literal meanings of words, phrases, and expressions used in the merchandise. For visual elements, this included describing typographic styles, colour usage, layout organisation, and imagery. This stage corresponds to the descriptive layer of analysis in Chapter 5, providing a neutral baseline upon which deeper interpretation is constructed.

3.8.3 Connotative Analysis (Cultural and Symbolic Meaning)

The third stage involved connotative analysis, where the cultural, social, and emotional meanings associated with the signs were interpreted. At this level, signs were analysed in relation to Malaysian cultural contexts, linguistic practices, and social norms.

Local language expressions were examined for their associations with informality, humour, familiarity, resistance, or cultural pride, while visual elements were analysed for their role in reinforcing identity, locality, and shared cultural knowledge. This stage aligns directly with the thematic sections in Chapter 5, particularly those addressing language, identity, and preservation.

Interview data were integrated at this stage to support and refine interpretations. Designers' explanations informed the intended meanings behind visual and linguistic choices, while consumers' responses provided insight into how these meanings were decoded and experienced. This triangulation strengthens the validity of the connotative readings.

3.8.4 Myth and Ideological Interpretation

The final stage of analysis examined how recurring signs and meanings contribute to broader myths and ideological narratives, following Barthes' concept of myth as the naturalisation of cultural values (Barthes, 1977). At this level, the analysis moved beyond individual artefacts to identify dominant narratives surrounding Malaysian identity, local pride, cultural preservation, and resistance to homogenised global design aesthetics.

This stage corresponds explicitly to the interpretive synthesis in Chapter 5, where findings are discussed in relation to semiotic theory and cultural identity frameworks. The analysis demonstrates how everyday merchandise functions not merely as consumer goods, but as cultural texts that reinforce and circulate ideas about locality, belonging, and national identity.

3.8.5 Thematic Structuring and Synthesis

Following semiotic interpretation, findings were organised into thematic categories reflecting the research objectives and conceptual framework. These themes form the structural basis of Chapter 5 and include:

a) Local language as a communicative and symbolic resource
b) Graphic design as a medium of identity construction
c) Merchandise as a site of cultural preservation and negotiation

This thematic synthesis enables a coherent presentation of findings while maintaining close alignment with the semiotic analytical process. The analysis thus moves from detailed sign-level interpretation to broader cultural insights, ensuring analytical depth and conceptual clarity.

3.8.6 Step-by-Step Coding Procedure and Theme Development

The semiotic stages described above account for the treatment of the visual merchandises. The interview data were analysed through a separate but parallel procedure, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis, operationalised in NVivo. Phase 1, familiarisation. Each recording was listened to in full before transcription and again after transcription against the written text. Transcripts were then read twice without coding, and initial impressions were recorded as memos in NVivo rather than as codes, so that early interpretations remained separable from the data.

Phase 2, generating initial codes. Transcripts were imported into NVivo and coded line by line. Coding was predominantly inductive and semantic at this stage: codes stayed close to participants' own wording, and a code was created whenever a segment expressed an idea not already captured. Each code was defined in the codebook at the point of creation, with an inclusion rule and an anchor example, so that the same code could be applied consistently across later transcripts. Coding of the first transcript was repeated after a two-week interval and the two passes were compared, in order to test the stability of the researcher's own coding decisions before proceeding.

Phase 3, searching for themes. Codes were exported and sorted into candidate categories on the basis of shared conceptual reference rather than shared vocabulary. Codes concerning emotional response to slang, for example, were grouped with codes concerning familiarity and belonging, because all referred to the affective function of language rather than to its form. Candidate categories were mapped in NVivo and revised as codes were moved, merged and, in several cases, split.

Phase 4, reviewing themes. Candidate themes were tested against two criteria: internal homogeneity, meaning that the coded extracts within a theme cohered, and external heterogeneity, meaning that themes were distinguishable from one another.

Each candidate theme was then read back against the full dataset. Two candidate themes were collapsed at this stage because their extracts proved indistinguishable, and one was discarded because it was supported by a single participant only and could not be sustained across the dataset.

Phase 5, defining and naming themes. Each retained theme was given a definition stating what it does and does not include, together with a statement of its relationship to the research objectives. The four final themes, together with their constituent sub-themes, Phase 6, producing the report. Themes were written up with supporting evidence and then re-examined semiotically in Chapter 5, so that thematic findings and semiotic interpretation remain distinguishable rather than merged.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology adopted to investigate how local language is integrated into graphic design merchandise to communicate and preserve Malaysian local identity. Grounded in semiotic theory, particularly the works of Saussure and Peirce, the methodological framework provides a systematic approach for analysing the interaction between linguistic and visual elements as cultural signifiers within a specific social context.

A qualitative case study design was employed, focusing on APOM Malaysia as an information-rich example of a local merchandise brand that actively incorporates Malay language and slang into its design practice. This approach enabled an in-depth and contextualised exploration of meaning-making processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods. Data were collected through two complementary methods: visual content analysis of selected APOM merchandise and semi-structured interviews with designers, academicians, Malaysian consumers, and expatriates, allowing for triangulation and the inclusion of both insider and outsider perspectives.

Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software, was used to analyse both visual and interview data. Themes were generated inductively and interpreted through a semiotic lens to uncover denotative and connotative meanings embedded within design elements and linguistic choices. Measures to ensure trustworthiness, including triangulation, thick description, and reflexivity, were applied throughout the research process to enhance the credibility and rigour of the study.

Overall, the methodology outlined in this chapter provides a robust foundation for addressing the research objectives and supports a systematic examination of how local language and graphic design interact to construct and communicate Malaysian local identity. The following chapter presents the findings derived from this methodological approach.

CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS ON THE ROLE AND INTEGRATION OF LOCAL LANGUAGE AND GRAPHIC DESIGN IN REPRESENTING MALAYSIAN LOCAL IDENTITY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and analyses the empirical findings of the study on the integration of local language and graphic design in Malaysian local merchandise, with a specific focus on Apom Malaysia as the case study. The analysis directly addresses the research objectives outlined in Chapter 1: (i) to identify how local language is integrated with graphic design in existing local merchandise, (ii) to analyse the role of graphic design elements in communicating local language and reflecting local identity, and (iii) to develop a framework that explains how the integration of language and design can support the preservation of Malaysian local identity. The findings reported in this chapter respond to these objectives and their corresponding research questions by examining both the visual characteristics of the merchandise and the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in, or affected by, these designs.

The chapter is organised around two principal data sets: the visual artefacts (APOM merchandises) and the interview transcripts generated from academicians, industry practitioners, business owners, Gen-Z consumers and expatriates. The merchandise was examined through qualitative content analysis guided by Stokes' (2003) Semiotic Analysis, with particular attention to physical elements such as typography, colour, symbols, imagery and written messages. This approach enabled a systematic identification of how local language particularly Malay and Malay slang is embedded within the design language of the products and how these elements collectively construct meanings associated with Malaysian identity.

The interview data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The themes that emerged from this process provide insight into how different groups interpret the use of local language and graphic design in merchandise, how they perceive its role in representing Malaysian culture, and how they evaluate its effectiveness in preserving local identity. These perspectives offer an

interpretive layer that complements the visual analysis by illuminating both the intentions of designers and brand owners and the responses of users and observers.

Taken together, the content analysis and thematic analysis provide a triangulated understanding of the relationship between local language, graphic design and local identity within the context of Apom Malaysia. The subsequent sections of this chapter first describe the overall profile of the case study and the sampled merchandise, followed by detailed findings from the visual analysis and the interview themes. The chapter concludes with an integrated discussion that links the empirical findings to the theoretical framework and research objectives, thereby preparing the ground for the development of the proposed framework in the following chapter.

4.2 Objective 1: To Identify the Integration of Local Language and Graphic Design in Existing Local Merchandise

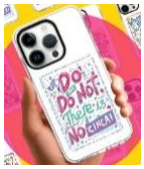
4.2.1 Data Overview and Organization for Objective 1

This section addresses the first research objective by examining how local language is integrated with graphic design in APOM Malaysia's merchandise. The analysis is based on a set of products that includes tumblers, phone cases, drink coasters, greeting cards, notebooks, tote bags, T-shirts and mugs. Each item combines a local word or phrase often slang or colloquial expression with specific typographic, colour and layout choices. The findings reveal that local language is not merely added as a caption or label; rather, it is systematically positioned as the central visual element around which the overall design is constructed

Table 4.1
Overview of APOM Malaysia Merchandise Sampled

Merchandise	Graphic Design								Local Identity		Description
	Colour Schemes	Typography			Layout				Visual	Language (Slang)	
		Serif	Sans Serif	Decorative	Contras	Alignment	White Space	Hierarchy			
Tumbler											
APOM-TB01 			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		Lah	Lah Malaysia **Lah**:The development of "lah" follows the trend of other slang or casual expressions that carry social meaning, showing changes in group identity and emotional connection.
APOM-TB02 			✓		✓		✓	✓		Lepak	Just Lepak Lah **Lepak**: hang out
APOM-TB03 			✓		✓		✓	✓		Bodoh	Kopi Kaw Kurang Bodoh. **Bodoh:** Stupid

APOM-TB04			✓		✓		✓ ✓	Tauke	The Coolest Tauke Ever. **Tauke:** The owner of any shop
				Baby Rompers					
APOM-BR01				✓	✓		✓	Pokai	MamyPokai **Pokai:** No money
APOM-BR02			✓		✓	✓	✓ ✓	Alamak	Alamak (Means Oh My God) Alamak, I pooped again. **Alamak:** Shoot
APOM-BR03			✓	✓	✓		✓ ✓	Lah	Lah Malaysia **Lah**: The development of "lah" follows the trend of other slang or casual expressions that carry social meaning, showing changes in group identity and emotional connection.
APOM-BR04				✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓	Kaw	When there is kopi kaw there is a way **Kaw**: Thick

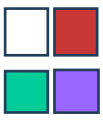
APOM-BR05			✓		✓		✓	✓	Tauke	The Coolest Tauke Ever **Tauke:** The owner of any shop
		Phone Case								
APOM-PC01				✓	✓		✓	✓	Pokai Doh	Pokai Doh I'm broke bro **Pokai:** No money
APOM-PC02			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Makcik Bawang	Makcik Bawang @ Membawang **Makcik Bawang:** A group of aunts that swearing or love saying things which not good about others.
APOM-PC03			✓		✓		✓	✓	Lepak	Just Lepak Lah **Lepak**: hang out
APOM-PC04				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Cincai	Do or Do Not, there is no Cincai **Cincai**: Arbitrarily, not careful

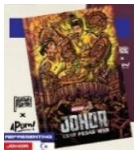
APOM-PC05			✓		✓		✓ ✓	Cun	The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia. **Cun**: Gorgeous
APOM-PC06			✓		✓		✓ ✓	Onz	The Most Onz Dad in Malaysia **Onz**: Agreed
APOM-PC07			✓		✓		✓ ✓	Tauke	The Coolest Tauke Ever **Tauke:** The owner of any shop
APOM-PC08			✓		✓		✓ ✓	Terrer	The Most Terrer Mom in Malaysia **Terer:** Great
APOM-PC09				✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓	Kaw	When there is kopi kaw there is a way **Kaw**: Thick
APOM-PC10			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ ✓ ✓	Jalan Bapak Kau	جالن بافق كاو Jalan Bapak Kau Your Father's Road Ah **Jalan Bapak Kau**: A Malay slang insult used to mock someone

								who acts as if a public road or space belongs to them (arrogant or blocking others)
Drink Coaster								
APOM-DC01			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Wa Lao	Wa Lao (Means self-amusing or OMG What the!!) Wa Lao! This food is so spicy! **Wa Lao**: An exclamation of amazement/ wonder/marvel
APOM-DC02			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Syok Sendiri	Syok Sendiri (Means self-amusing or entertaining oneself) Wow, I'm impressed by my own cooking. **Syok Sendiri**: Indulge Yourself
APOM-DC03			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Kantoi	Kantoi (Means you just got busted) Why are you drinking here?Aren't you supposed to be at work? **Kantoi:** A secret that known by others
APOM-DC04			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Lah	Lah (Asuffix to place emphasis on the sentences or word before), Wow the food today is so good lah! **Lah**: The development of "lah" follows the trend of other slang or

									casual expressions that carry social meaning, showing changes in group identity and emotional connection.
APOM-DC05			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Macha	Macha (Means bro) Hey macha, this drink is really good! **Macha**: buddy or brother
				Greeting Card						
APOM-GC01			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Makcik Bawang	Makcik Bawang @ Membawang **Makcik Bawang:** A group of aunts that swearing or love saying things which not good about others.
APOM-GC02			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Lepak	Mr Lepak A piece of Malaysia **Lepak**: hang out
APOM-GC03				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Cincai	Do or Do Not, There is no Cincai **Cincai**: Arbitrarily, not careful
APOM-GC04			✓		✓		✓	✓	Bini	The Most Syok Bini in Malaysia. **Bini**: Wife

APOM-GC05			✓	✓	✓	✓	Tauke	The Coolest Tauke Ever **Tauke:** The owner of any shop
APOM-GC06			✓	✓	✓	✓	Terrer	The Most Terrer Mom in Malaysia **Terer:** Great
				Mug				
APOM-MG01			✓	✓	✓	✓	Bodoh	Kopi Kaw Kurang Bodoh. **Bodoh:** Stupid
APOM-MG02			✓	✓	✓	✓	Buaya	Buaya Danger **Buaya**: A man/woman who likes to change his female/male partner
APOM-MG03			✓	✓	✓		Gilelah	Gilelah **Gilelah:** Too crazy
APOM-MG04			✓	✓	✓	✓	Lepak	Just Lepak Lah **Lepak**: hang out

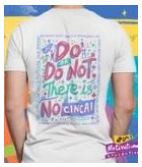
APOM-MG05			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Makcik Bawang @ Membawang **Makcik Bawang:** A group of aunts that swearing or love saying things which not good about others.
APOM-MG06				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Merry Christmas Macha **Macha**: buddy or brother
APOM-MG07			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Syok Sendiri (Means self-amusing or entertaining oneself) I look damn good drinking this. **Syok Sendiri**: Indulge Yourself
APOM-MG08			✓		✓		✓	✓	The Most Onz Dad in Malaysia **Onz**: Agreed
APOM-MG09			✓		✓		✓	✓	The Most Terrer Mom in Malaysia **Terer:** Great
APOM-MG10				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Do or Do Not, There is no Cincai **Cincai**: Arbitrarily, not careful

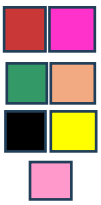
APOM-MG11			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Lepak	Mr Lepak **Lepak**: hang out
APOM-MG12			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Tai Tai	Miss Tai Tai **Tai Tai**: A wealthy lady's fortune of marrying a rich man
Notebook										
APOM-NB01			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Mantap	Mantap Lah Ek **Mantap**: Good, beautiful, and perfect.
APOM-NB02			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Syiok	You come I belanja Nasi Ganja confirm syiok sing song, **Syiok**: Indicates the object as superlatively good.
Tote Bag										
APOM-TG01				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Cincai	Do or Do Not, there is no Cincai **Cincai**: Arbitrarily, not careful

APOM-TG02		✓		✓		✓	✓	Lah	Lah (Asuffix to place emphasis on the sentences or word before) Malaysia is the best country in the world lah! **Lah**: The development of "lah" follows the trend of other slang or casual expressions that carry social meaning, showing changes in group identity and emotional connection.
APOM-TG03		✓		✓		✓	✓	Terrer	The Most Terrer Mom in Malaysia **Terer:** Great
APOM-TG04		✓		✓		✓	✓	Cun	The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia. **Cun**: Gorgeous
APOM-TG05		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Makcik Bawang	Makcik Bawang @ Membawang **Makcik Bawang:** A group of aunts that swearing or love saying things which not good about others.
T-Shirt									

APOM-TS01			✓		✓		✓	✓	Buaya	Buaya Danger **Buaya**: A man/woman who likes to change his female/male partner
APOM-TS02				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Tapau	Cha Tapau The Ais Satu! **Tapau**: Wrap, Buy
APOM-TS03			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Rempit	Little Miss Rempit **Rempit:** Motorcycles activities in group for illegal racing activities or doing dangerous stunts.
APOM-TS04			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Makcik Bawang	Makcik Bawang @ Membawang **Makcik Bawang:** A group of aunts that swearing or love saying things which not good about others.
APOM-TS05			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Paloi	Sabah and Sarawak is part of Malaysia lah Paloi **Paloi:** Stupid
APOM-TS06			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Pokai	I just bought PS4, pokai already **Pokai:** No money

APOM-TS07			✓	✓		✓		✓	Sap sap sui	"Bro…late already sure can make it ah?' Sap Sap Sui **Sap Sap Sui:** Easy
APOM-TS08			✓		✓		✓	✓	Cun	The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia. **Cun**: Gorgeous
APOM-TS09			✓		✓		✓	✓	Onz	The Most Onz Dad in Malaysia **Onz**: Agreed
APOM-TS10			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Slumber	The Most Slumber Uncle in Malaysia **Slumber:** Laid-back or not serious
APOM-TS11			✓		✓		✓	✓	Terrer	The Most Terrer Mom in Malaysia **Terer:** Great
APOM-TS12			✓		✓		✓		Gilelah	Gilelah **Gilelah:** Too crazy

APOM-TS13			✓	✓		✓		✓	Pokai Doh I'm broke bro **Pokai**: No Money
APOM-TS14			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Chup! Don't eat first, let me insta **Chup**: Pause
APOM-TS15			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Cincai	Do or Do Not, There is no Cincai **Cincai**: Arbitrarily, not careful
APOM-TS16			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Fuiyoh (An expression of amazement) Fuiyoh, I didn't fail my exam ! **Fuiyoh**: Approvement and encouragement
APOM-TS17			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	Haiyah (An expression of frustration) Haiyah, why so much homework? **Haiyah**: Disaproveme nt and disappointed
APOM-TS18			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Lah (Asuffix to place emphasis on the sentences or word before) Malaysia is the best country in the world lah!

									Lah: The development of "lah" follows the trend of other slang or casual expressions that carry social meaning, showing changes in group identity and emotional connection.
APOM-TS19			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ Tai Tai	Miss Tai Tai **Tai Tai**: Tai Tai refers to a wealthy lady's fortune of marrying a rich man
APOM-TS20			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Stylo	APOM Stylo **Stylo**: Style
APOM-TS21			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓ Tapau	The Tarik Tapau **Tapau**: Wrap, Buy
APOM-TS22			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓ Buaya	The world's biggest buaya **Buaya**: A man who likes to change his female partner

APOM-TS23			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	Hijabster	Little Miss Hijabster A Piece of Malaysia **Hijabster**: A stylish, usually urban young Muslim woman who wears the hijab as both a sign of modesty and a fashion statement, often using branded or luxury hijab products.

4.2.2 Local Slang as the Primary Visual Focus

Table 4.2
Local Slang Terms and Associated Phrases

No.	Local term	Full slogan	Product type	Short meaning
1	Lepak	Just Lepak Lah	Mug	hang out
2	Pokai	I just bought PS4, pokai already	T-shirt	No money
3	Mak Cik Bawang	Makcik Bawang	Tote bag	Women who gossip a lot
4	Gilelah	Gilelah	T-Shirt	Very crazy
5	Syok Sendiri	Syok Sendiri (Means self-amusing or entertaining oneself) Wow, I'm impressed by my own cooking.	Mug	Indulge Yourself
6	Macha	Merry Christmas Macha	Drink Coaster	Buddy or brother

A consistent pattern across the dataset is the use of a single, prominent slang term or colloquial phrase as the main visual focus of each design. Words such as *lah*, *lepak*, *pokai*, *bodoh*, *makcik bawang*, *rempit*, *tapau*, *gilelah*, *syok sendiri*, *onz*, *cincai* and *macha* appear repeatedly on different product types. In many cases, this key term is extended into a short phrase such as “Just Lepak Lah”, “Kopi Kaw Kurang Bodoh”, “Merry Christmas Macha”, or “You come I belanja nasi ganja confirm syiok sing song”.



(a) Large central slang text on mug (APOM-MG01)



(b) Emphasised slang lettering on tote bag (APOM-TB01);



(b) Dominant slang word as focal element on T-shirt (APOM-TS07

Figure 4.1 Examples of Slang as Central Headline in APOM Merchandise

Visually, these words are placed at the centre or upper portion of the composition and are rendered in the largest, boldest type. This establishes them as the primary point of attention, with all other elements supporting text, icons, and decorative motifs arranged around them. The language element therefore functions as the conceptual and visual anchor of each design. Rather than illustrating an image and adding text as a secondary label, APOM's products treat the local word itself as the "image"; the typography performs the role traditionally played by graphic illustration.

This strategy ensures that local language is highly visible and immediately recognisable, foregrounding it as the core of the brand's design language.

4.2.3 Typographic Treatment of Local Language

Table 4.3
Typographic Classification by Item

No.	Local term	Type of merchandise	Serif	Sans serif	Decorative
1	Lah	Tumbler		✓	
2	Lepak	Tumbler		✓	
3	Bodoh	Tumbler		✓	
4	Tauke	Tumbler		✓	
5	Pokai	Baby Rompers			✓
6	Alamak	Baby Rompers		✓	
7	Lah	Baby Rompers		✓	✓
8	Kaw	Baby Rompers			✓
9	Tauke	Baby Rompers		✓	
10	Pokai Doh	Phone Case			✓
11	Makcik Bawang	Phone Case		✓	✓
12	Lepak	Phone Case		✓	
13	Cincai	Phone Case			✓
14	Cun	Phone Case		✓	
15	Onz	Phone Case		✓	
16	Tauke	Phone Case		✓	
17	Terrer	Phone Case		✓	
18	Kaw	Phone Case			✓
19	Jalan Bapak Kau	Phone Case		✓	✓
20	Wa Lao	Drink Coaster		✓	

21	Sendiri	Drink Coaster	✓	
22	Kantoi	Drink Coaster	✓	
23	Lah	Drink Coaster	✓	
24	Macha	Drink Coaster	✓	
25	Makcik Bawang	Greeting Card	✓	✓
26	Lepak	Greeting Card	✓	✓
27	Cincai	Greeting Card		✓
28	Bini	Greeting Card	✓	
29	Tauke	Greeting Card	✓	
20	Terrer	Greeting Card	✓	
21	Bodoh	Mug	✓	
22	Buaya	Mug		
23	Gilelah	Mug	✓	
24	Lepak	Mug	✓	
25	Makcik Bawang	Mug	✓	
26	Macha	Mug	✓	
27	Syok Sendiri	Mug	✓	
28	Onz	Mug	✓	
29	Terrer	Mug	✓	

30	Cincai	Mug		✓
31	Lepak	Mug	✓	✓
32	Tai Tai	Mug	✓	✓
33	Mantap	Notebook	✓	✓
34	Syiok	Notebook	✓	✓
35	Cincai	Tote Bag		✓
36	Lah	Tote Bag	✓	
37	Terrer	Tote Bag	✓	
38	Cun	Tote Bag	✓	
39	Makcik Bawang	Tote Bag	✓	
40	Buaya	T-Shirt	✓	
41	Tapau	T-Shirt		✓
42	Rempit	T-Shirt	✓	✓
43	Makcik Bawang	T-Shirt	✓	✓
44	Paloi	T-Shirt	✓	
45	Pokai	T-Shirt	✓	
46	Sap sap sui	T-Shirt		✓
47	Cun	T-Shirt	✓	
48	Onz	T-Shirt	✓	

49	Slumber	T-Shirt	✓	
50	Terrer	T-Shirt	✓	
51	Gilelah	T-Shirt	✓	
52	Pokai Doh	T-Shirt		✓
53	Chup	T-Shirt	✓	
54	Cincai	T-Shirt		✓
55	Fuiyoh	T-Shirt	✓	
56	Haiyah	T-Shirt	✓	
57	Lah	T-Shirt	✓	
58	Tai Tai	T-Shirt	✓	✓
59	Stylo	T-Shirt	✓	✓
60	Tapau	T-Shirt	✓	✓
61	Buaya	T-Shirt	✓	
62	Hijabster	T-Shirt	✓	✓

The typographic choices further reinforce the centrality of local language. The coding of the merchandise shows a strong preference for sans serif and decorative typefaces, while conventional serif fonts are almost entirely absent. Sans serif typefaces contribute to a contemporary, informal and approachable aesthetic that aligns with the colloquial nature of the language used. Decorative treatments such as customised lettering, exaggerated strokes, playful curves or stylised outlines transform slang terms into distinctive wordmarks that resemble logos or badges.



a) Plain sans serif treatment of the slang *"Just Lepak Lah"*on a mug.



b) playful sans serif rendering of *"Makcik Bawang"*on a tote bag



c) decorative display lettering for *"Gilelah"*on a T-shirt

Figure 4.2 Comparative Examples of Typographic Styles

For example, words like *Lepak*, *Gilelah* or *Makcik Bawang* are often presented in bold, condensed sans serif or stylised decorative fonts that emphasise their rhythm and sound. This typographic emphasis not only enhances legibility but also visually

"performs" the attitude associated with the term relaxed, exaggerated, sarcastic or humorous. In this way, typography becomes a key mechanism through which local language is integrated into graphic design; the slang word is not simply written but visually interpreted.

4.2.4 Layout and Hierarchy as Framing Devices

In addition to typography, layout and visual hierarchy play a crucial role in integrating local language into the overall design. The content analysis indicates that contrast, alignment, white space and hierarchy are systematically utilised across the products. The main slang word is typically positioned as the headline, occupying the most prominent space, while secondary information appears below or around it in smaller text. In other words, the composition is structured so that the local term functions as the primary entry point for the viewer, and all other elements are visually subordinated to it.



Figure 4.3 Annotated Example of Layout and Hierarchy: the Slang Term "Kepochi" Appears as the Primary Headline, While the Smaller Explanatory Text Functions as Secondary Caption

This structure is evident in designs where a central slang term is followed by a brief explanation or example sentence in English or standard Malay. As summarised in Table 4.2, many products pair a single slang term with a short definition (e.g. *"Pokai: No money"; "Cun: Gorgeous"*) or contextual usage (for example, an accompanying line such as *"Why are you drinking here? Aren't you supposed to be at work?"* for *kantoi*). The "headline caption" arrangement effectively turns each piece of

merchandise into a micro-dictionary entry: the local word is foregrounded visually, and its meaning is anchored through subordinate text.

This framing is illustrated in Figure 4.3, where the slang term operates as the primary headline (local slang term) and the smaller line functions as secondary text (definition/explanation). The deliberate use of hierarchy demonstrates that layout is not neutral; it organises how viewers read and interpret the design. By visually privileging the slang term and using secondary text to clarify or expand its meaning, the layout supports comprehension and invites both insiders (who already know the expression) and outsiders (who may encounter it for the first time) to engage with the local language. In this way, visual hierarchy becomes a key mechanism through which graphic design frames, explains and circulates Malaysian vernacular language in everyday merchandise.

4.2.5 Multilingual and Multi-ethnic Repertoires

Table 4.4
Linguistic and Script Repertoire across Merchandise

No.	Local term	Language origin	Script used	Translation
1	Lepak	Malay slang	Rumi	No
2	Wa Lao	Hokkien-origin exclamation	Rumi	No
3	Macha	Tamil-influenced slang	Rumi	No
4	Jalan Bapak Kau	Malay slang phrase	Rumi+Jawi + English	yes
5	Pokai	Malay slang (also common in Manglish)	Rumi	Yes
6	Alamak	Malay/Manglish exclamation	Rumi	Yes
7	Makcik Bawang	Malay slang (social stereotype)	Rumi	No
8	Syiok	Hokkien/Manglish derived slang	Rumi	No

9	Sap sap sui	Hokkien phrase	Rumi	No
10	Rempit	Malay slang	Rumi	No

The notion of "local language" in APOM's merchandise extends beyond standard Malay. The dataset demonstrates the use of a hybrid, multi-ethnic linguistic repertoire that includes Malay slang, Manglish, Hokkien- and Tamil-influenced expressions, as well as English phrases. Terms such as *lepak, pokai, rempit, makcik bawang* and *buaya* coexist with expressions like *wa lao, haiyah, sap sap sui, syiok* and *macha*, while full English or Manglish phrases (for example, *"Just lepak lah"*, *"Chup! Don't eat first, let me insta"*, *"You come I belanja nasi ganja confirm syiok sing song"*) frequently appear alongside them. As summarised in Table 4.4, this repertoire draws simultaneously from Malay, Chinese and Indian vernaculars, indicating that "local language" is constructed as a shared, cross-ethnic resource rather than as a single ethnolinguistic code.



Figure 4.4 APOM's "Jalan Bapak Kau" Design Integrating Rumi, Jawi and English, Visually Expressing Malaysia's Multilingual and Multiscript Cultural Landscape

A particularly illustrative example is the *"Jalan Bapak Kau"*design, in which the phrase is presented in both Rumi and Jawi scripts and accompanied by an English/Manglish translation (*"Your father's road ah?"*), as shown in Figure 4.4. The deliberate combination of scripts and languages within a single composition visually enacts Malaysia's multilingual and multiscript reality. It signals an openness to multiple audiences at once: Malay-literate viewers can read both Rumi and Jawi, while English readers are still able to access the meaning through translation. This suggests that APOM's integration of language is not confined to formal national discourse; instead, it embraces the heterogeneity of everyday speech across ethnic and linguistic communities and normalises code-mixing as part of "being Malaysian."

In this context, the graphic design becomes a site where a hybrid Malaysian vernacular is visually codified, circulated and celebrated. By juxtaposing slang from different language families and layering Rumi, Jawi and English within a single artefact, the merchandise performs an inclusive, multi-ethnic identity while also reinforcing the legitimacy of informal, non-standard speech in public visual culture. At the same time, this strategy implicitly positions those familiar with such hybrid expressions as insiders, raising questions about how far these designs remain accessible to foreigners or to Malaysians who are less fluent in urban vernaculars.

4.2.6 Everyday Objects as Carriers of Local Language

The integration of local language into graphic design is also shaped by the types of products on which the language appears. As summarised in Table 4.1, APOM's designs are applied to everyday, mobile objects such as tumblers, mugs, notebooks, phone cases, tote bags, greeting cards and T-shirts. These are items that are used, carried, worn or displayed in daily life rather than kept as rare collectibles. Figure 4.5 illustrates this variety, showing how the same repertoire of slang is reproduced across drinkware, apparel and personal accessories.



Figure 4.5 Variety of APOM Merchandise (Mug, T-shirt, Notebook and Phone Case) Featuring Local Slang, Illustrating How Colloquial Language is Embedded into Every Day, Mobile Objects Rather than Limited to Formal or Ceremonial Items

By placing local language on such objects, APOM effectively embeds colloquial expressions into the routines of drinking coffee, commuting, working, gifting or dressing. The merchandise thus functions as a carrier of language in public and semi-public spaces: a tote bag with *"Lepak Lah"* printed in large type, or a phone case reading *"Jalan Bapak Kau"*, introduces these phrases into cafés, offices and social gatherings. The integration of language and design therefore extends beyond the aesthetic surface of the product; it shapes the social circulation of local expressions in both physical and digital environments (for example, when such items are photographed and shared on social media).

At the same time, the use of everyday merchandise as a platform for local language is not entirely neutral. It selectively amplifies particular slang associated with urban youth culture and humour, while other registers of Malaysian language remain invisible. In other words, the choice of products and phrases not only helps to normalise a playful, colloquial Malaysian identity, but also commercialises it, targeting consumers who recognise and are comfortable with this vernacular repertoire.

4.2.7 Semantic Fields and Everyday Malaysian Identity

Table 4.5
Semantic Categorisation of Slang Terms

No.	Local term	Short meaning	Semantic field
1	Lepak	Hang out / relax	Leisure / Lifestyle
2	Syiok	Very enjoyable/ satisfying	Emotion / Positive feeling
3	Wa Lao	Expression of shock or surprise	Exclamation / Emotion
4	Alamak	Oh no! / Exclamation of worry	Exclamation Emotion
5	Pokai	No money / broke	Economic struggle
6	Rempit	Illegal street racer	Social type subculture
7	Makcik Bawang	Gossiping aunty / busybody	Social role / stereotype
8	Macha	Buddy / brother	Social relationship
9	Sap sap sui	Very easy / effortless	Leisure / Lifestyle
10	Jalan Bapak Kau	"Your father's road?" (insult)	Exclamation/ Confrontational phrase

Table 4.5 groups the slang terms according to their semantic fields, revealing clear patterns in how APOM constructs Malaysian identity through language. Out of ten terms, two relate primarily to leisure and lifestyle (*lepak, sap sap sui*), while four belong to the broader field of emotion and exclamation (*syiok, wa lao, alamak, jalan bapak kau*). A further three terms index social types, stereotypes or relationships (*makcik bawang, rempit, macha*), and only one term directly references economic struggle (*pokai*). This distribution is visualised in Figure 4.6, which shows that emotional/exclamatory and social categories dominate the repertoire.

This pattern indicates that APOM's language repertoire is overwhelmingly oriented towards informal, humorous and relational aspects of Malaysian life. Rather than foregrounding formal national symbols, the brand draws on the everyday vocabulary of hanging out, reacting, teasing, complaining and socialising activities that

cut across ethnic boundaries in urban Malaysia. The dominance of leisure-related, emotional and socially oriented expressions suggests that local identity is framed through humour, playfulness and shared social experiences, rather than through institutional or political narratives.

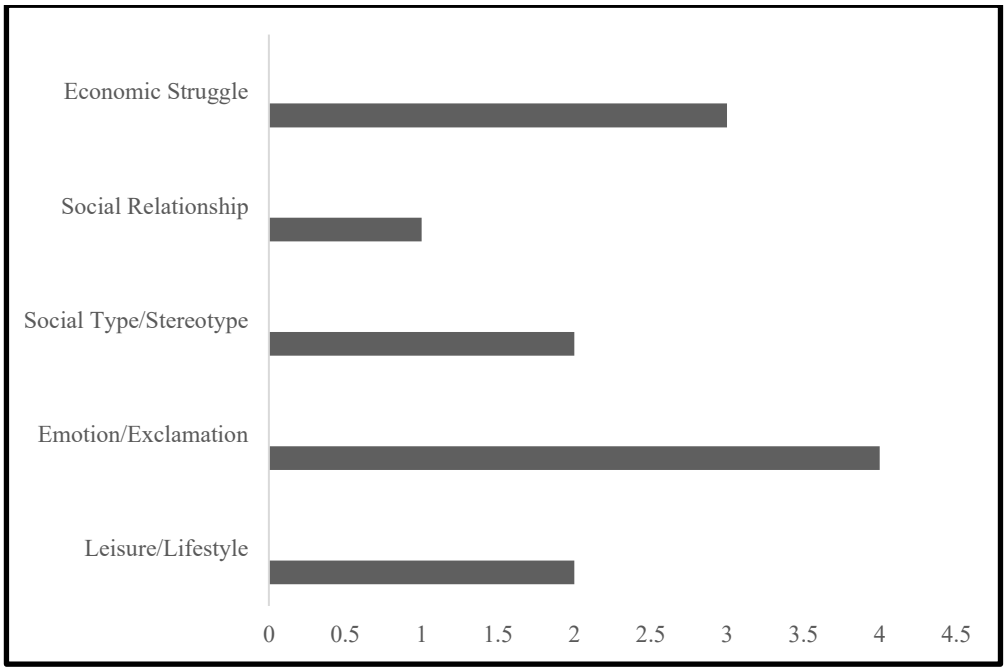


Figure 4.6 Distribution of Semantic Fields across APOM's Slang Terms

Moreover, the presence of terms tied to specific ethnic subcultures (for example *macha*and *wa lao*) reflects Malaysia's multicultural setting, where vernacular expressions from Tamil, Hokkien and Malay circulate fluidly in everyday conversation. These hybridised expressions illustrate a lived Malaysian identity shaped by multilingual interaction. APOM's merchandise captures this linguistic hybridity by visually codifying it into design, transforming casual speech into recognisable cultural symbols.

Overall, the semantic categorisation highlights that APOM's design language celebrates a version of Malaysian identity grounded in urban colloquialism, shared humour and social intimacy, rather than in formal, ethnic or state-defined notions of culture. In doing so, the products normalise a playful, vernacular register as a legitimate

marker of "being Malaysian," even as they simultaneously commercialise this everyday linguistic repertoire.

4.2.8 Distinguishing Slang, Colloquial Speech, Dialect, Code-Switching and Multilingual Script.

The preceding sections have used the term slang as a convenient shorthand. That shorthand now requires correction, because the sample does not consist of a single linguistic phenomenon. At least five distinct phenomena are present, they arise from different sociolinguistic processes, and treating them as equivalent obscures precisely what is interesting about the material. Table 4.6 defines each and illustrates it from the sample.

Table 4.6
Linguistic Phenomena Present in the Sample, Distinguished and Defined

Phenomenon	Definition as used in this study	Example from the sample	Why the distinction matters for design
Slang	Informal vocabulary that marks in-group membership, typically originating with a specific social group and often short-lived	Pokai, cun, onz, cincai	Carries the strongest in-group signal and the highest risk of dating; comprehension is generational as well as cultural
Colloquial expression	Widely shared informal usage that is not restricted to any particular group and is stable over time	Lepak, kopi kaw	Understood across generations, so it broadens rather than narrows the addressed audience
Discourse particle	A grammatical particle carrying pragmatic rather than lexical meaning, marking attitude, softening or emphasis	Lah, doh	Cannot be glossed by translation; its meaning is entirely a function of use, which makes typographic emphasis carry the pragmatic load
Dialect and regional variety	Forms specific to a geographic variety of Malay rather than to a social group	Perak, Sabah,	Regional forms narrow the addressed audience geographically rather than socially; their

			scarcity in the sample is itself a finding
Code-switching and code-mixing	Alternation between languages within a single utterance, drawing on the speaker's full multilingual repertoire	Pokai Doh I'm broke bro; The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia	Requires competence in more than one language to decode fully; excludes monolingual readers of either language
Cross-community borrowing	Terms originating in one Malaysian language and circulating in the speech of other communities	Macha (Tamil origin), wa lao (Hokkien origin), tauke (Hokkien origin), amoi (Cantonese origin)	The clearest evidence in the sample of a multilingual rather than Malay construction of local identity

Three consequences follow from this disaggregation. First, the sample is not uniformly slang. A substantial part of it consists of colloquial expression and discourse particles, which are more stable and more widely shared than slang and which therefore address a broader audience than the youth-oriented reading of the brand suggests. Second, the presence of cross-community borrowing is analytically significant and was understated in the earlier account: terms of Tamil, Hokkien and Cantonese origin appear alongside Malay ones, which indicates that the identity constructed is at least partly multilingual rather than exclusively Malay. This point is developed in Section 5.7. Third, the near-absence of regional dialect forms is itself a finding rather than an omission: the vernacular reproduced is that of the urban Klang Valley, and the linguistic evidence therefore supports the limitation on geographic claims stated in Section 1.7.

Where the terms slang, colloquial and vernacular are used in the remainder of this thesis, they are used in the specific senses defined in Table 4.6 rather than interchangeably.

4.3 Objective 2: To Analyse the Role of Graphic Design Elements in Communicating the Local Language in Reflecting Local Identity.

4.3.1 Overview of Thematic Analysis for Objective 2

This section presents findings related to Objective 2, which aims to analyse the role of graphic design elements in communicating local language and reflecting local identity. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo (latest version). The analysis resulted in four main themes that illustrate how local language is embedded, visually amplified, interpreted by audiences, and ethically managed within graphic design practices. Figure 4.7 illustrates the thematic structure of interview findings generated through NVivo analysis, highlighting the four main themes and their corresponding sub-themes related to Objective 2.

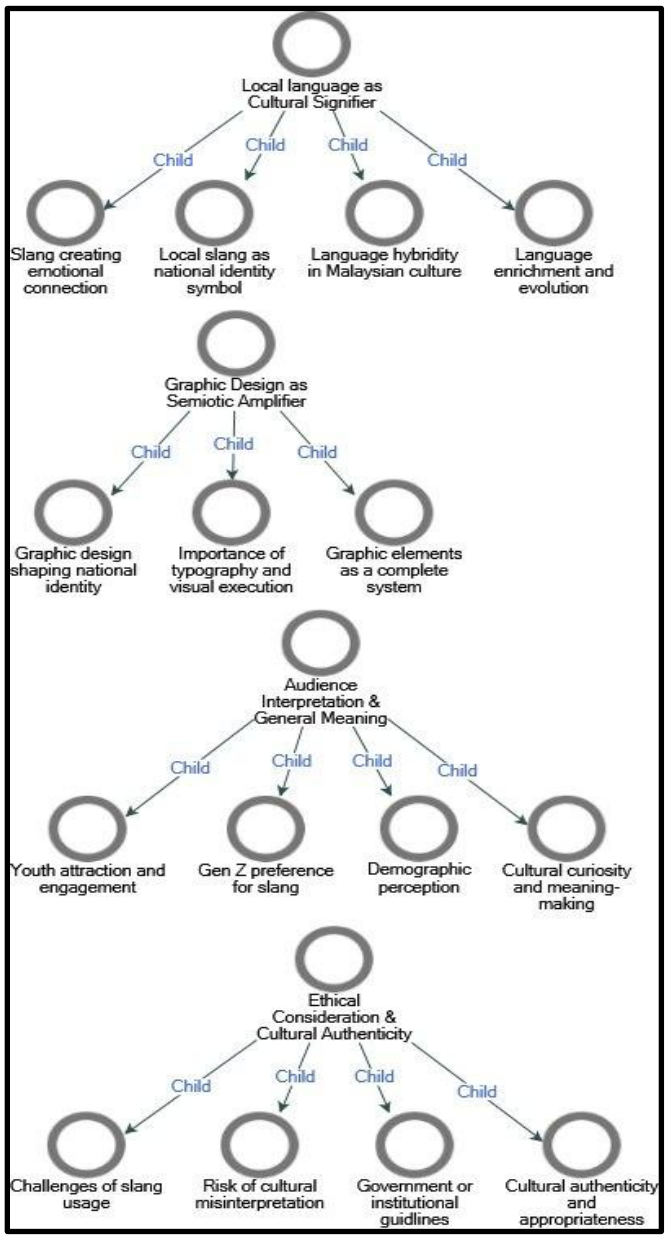


Figure 4.7 Thematic Structure of Interview Findings for Objective 2

4.3.2 Theme 1: Local Language as Cultural Signifier

This theme highlights the role of local language and slang as cultural signifiers within graphic design communication. Participants consistently described local language not merely as a linguistic tool, but as a symbolic representation of cultural identity, shared values, and national belonging. The use of slang and hybrid language forms was perceived as a means of expressing familiarity, authenticity, and cultural

closeness, particularly within the Malaysian context where multilingual influences shape everyday communication.

NVivo analysis revealed several sub-themes under this category, including *local slang as a national identity symbol*, *language hybridity in Malaysian culture*, *slang creating emotional connection*, and *language enrichment and evolution*. Collectively, these sub-themes indicate that local language functions as a meaningful cultural marker that reinforces identity representation when embedded within graphic design outcomes.

Participants from both design and academic backgrounds emphasised that the inclusion of local slang enables audiences to recognise cultural cues embedded in visual communication. Designers viewed slang as a familiar and relatable element that resonates with local audiences, while language experts highlighted its role in reflecting cultural hybridity and linguistic evolution in contemporary Malaysian society.

For instance, one graphic designer noted that local slang "creates an immediate sense of connection with the audience," while an academic participant explained that the use of hybrid language reflects "the natural evolution of Malaysian cultural identity." These perspectives suggest that local language operates beyond surface-level communication, serving as a culturally embedded signifier within design practice.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that local language serves as a powerful cultural signifier in graphic design, contributing to the communication of identity through linguistic familiarity, emotional resonance, and cultural symbolism.

4.3.3 Theme 2: Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier

This theme reflects participants' views on the role of graphic design elements in enhancing the communicative impact of local language. Participants described graphic design as an essential medium that visually amplifies linguistic meaning, enabling local language and slang to be conveyed more effectively. Visual elements such as typography, layout, and composition were perceived not as decorative features, but as functional tools that enhance the visibility, clarity, and memorability of local language within design outcomes.

NVivo analysis identified several sub-themes supporting this theme, including *graphic design shaping national identity*, *importance of typography and visual execution*, and *graphic elements as a complete system*. These sub-themes suggest that

visual design operates as an integrated system in which multiple elements work collectively to reinforce the expression of local language and cultural identity.

Designers and art directors emphasised that typography plays a critical role in reinforcing the tone and cultural context of local language. The selection of typefaces, visual hierarchy, and stylistic execution was viewed as influential in shaping how audiences perceive and interpret local slang. Participants noted that when visual elements align coherently with linguistic content, the intended cultural message becomes clearer, more engaging, and more impactful.

One art director explained that effective typography "gives character to the language and makes it visually speak," while another participant highlighted that design elements must function together "as a system to support the meaning of the words used." These insights underscore the importance of visual coherence in amplifying linguistic meaning through design.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that graphic design functions as a visual amplifier that strengthens the communication of local language, reinforcing cultural meaning and contributing to the reflection of local identity.

4.3.4 Theme 3: Audience Interpretation and General Meaning

This theme focuses on how audiences interpret graphic design that incorporates local language and slang, highlighting the role of audience characteristics in shaping meaning. Participants emphasised that the effectiveness of local language in graphic design is closely linked to how different audience groups perceive, decode, and emotionally respond to both linguistic and visual elements. Interpretation was described as a dynamic process influenced by age, cultural background, and familiarity with slang usage.

NVivo analysis identified several sub-themes under this category, including *youth attraction and engagement*, *Gen Z preference for slang*, *demographic perception*, and *cultural curiosity and meaning-making*. These sub-themes indicate that audience interpretation plays a significant role in determining whether the use of local language in graphic design successfully communicates cultural identity or results in ambiguity.

Participants widely agreed that younger audiences, particularly Gen Z, are more receptive to the use of slang in graphic design. Designers noted that slang-based visuals tend to capture attention, generate interest, and foster engagement among younger viewers who are accustomed to informal and expressive forms of communication. In contrast, older or more conservative audience groups were perceived to interpret slang-based designs differently, sometimes requiring clearer visual cues to fully grasp the intended meaning.

In addition to generational differences, participants highlighted the importance of cultural familiarity in shaping interpretation. When audiences possess prior knowledge of local slang or cultural references, the design message is more easily understood and appreciated. Conversely, limited cultural exposure may prompt curiosity, encouraging audiences to seek meaning through visual elements, typography, or contextual cues embedded within the design. This process of meaning-making reflects how audiences actively engage with graphic design rather than passively receiving information.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that audience interpretation is a crucial factor in the communication of local language through graphic design. The findings suggest that while slang can enhance engagement and cultural resonance, its impact depends on audience demographics, cultural awareness, and the clarity of visual support. As such, designers must consider audience diversity when incorporating local language to ensure that intended meanings are effectively communicated and culturally understood.

4.3.5 Theme 4: Ethical Consideration and Cultural Authenticity

This theme addresses participants' concerns regarding the ethical use of local language and slang in graphic design, particularly in relation to cultural authenticity and responsible representation. Participants acknowledged that while local language can enhance cultural resonance and audience engagement, its misuse or overuse may lead to misinterpretation, stereotyping, or dilution of cultural meaning. As such, ethical consideration was viewed as an essential component when integrating local language into design practices.

NVivo analysis identified several sub-themes under this category, including *challenges of slang usage*, *risk of cultural misinterpretation*, *cultural authenticity and appropriateness*, and *institutional or guideline considerations*. These sub-themes indicate that ethical awareness functions as a moderating factor that shapes how local language is applied within graphic design to ensure that cultural identity is represented accurately and respectfully.

Participants from academic and professional backgrounds emphasised the importance of contextual sensitivity when using slang. Designers noted that slang which is meaningful within one social or cultural group may be misunderstood or perceived as inappropriate by others if presented without adequate visual or contextual support. Language experts further highlighted that excessive stylisation or commercialisation of slang may weaken its cultural significance, transforming meaningful expressions into superficial design elements.

Several participants also referred to the need for ethical judgement and professional responsibility in design decision-making. This included consideration of cultural boundaries, audience diversity, and alignment with social or institutional norms. In some cases, participants suggested that designers should be guided by cultural knowledge, research, and, where applicable, institutional guidelines to prevent cultural misrepresentation or unintended offence.

Overall, this theme demonstrates that ethical consideration and cultural authenticity are critical in ensuring that the use of local language in graphic design contributes positively to the reflection of local identity. The findings suggest that meaningful communication through local language requires not only creative expression, but also cultural sensitivity and ethical awareness to preserve the integrity of cultural representation.

4.4 Finding from Non- Participant Observation

Non-participant observation, described in Section 3.5.3 as one of the three data collection methods, provides contextual insights into how the selected designs function within their retail setting and how consumers encounter them in a natural environment. These observations complement the artefact and interview data by providing evidence of the designs in their intended context of use.

4.4.1 Conduct of the Observation

Observation was conducted in APOM retail outlets within the Klang Valley. The researcher was present as an ordinary member of the public and did not interact with customers, intervene in their behaviour or record any identifying information. Field notes were written contemporaneously in a structured schedule covering four categories: how merchandise was displayed and grouped, which items received visual prominence, how customers moved through and attended to the space, and what customers said aloud to companions while handling merchandise. Notes were expanded immediately after each visit.

4.4.2 Observed Pattern

The non-participant observation provided contextual insights into the presentation of APOM Malaysia merchandise and consumers' interactions with the selected designs within the retail environment. The observations focused on four areas: display and grouping, visual prominence, consumer attention and handling, and spontaneous verbal responses.

The arrangement of the merchandise was observed to examine whether products were organised according to product type, linguistic expression, or thematic association. Particular attention was given to whether the linguistic elements influenced the grouping of merchandise or whether the display was primarily organised according to product function. The positioning of merchandise featuring repeated slang expressions across different product types was also observed to determine how recurring linguistic elements were presented within the retail environment.

Observation also focused on the visual positioning of the selected designs within the retail space. This included the placement of merchandise at prominent locations such as eye level, near the entrance, or within window displays, as well as items positioned in less prominent areas. These observations provided contextual evidence regarding the visibility of particular slang expressions and their role in communicating the brand's local identity.

Consumer interactions with the merchandise were observed, particularly instances where customers stopped to examine an item, picked it up, photographed it, or showed it to another person. Attention was also considered in relation to whether consumers appeared to respond primarily to the linguistic expression, the visual design, or the product itself. These observations provided additional contextual evidence to complement the interview findings concerning the role of vernacular language in attracting consumer attention.

Where observable, spontaneous verbal responses from consumers were recorded in the field notes without identifying individual customers. These included instances of customers reading slang expressions aloud, laughing, expressing recognition, explaining a phrase to a companion, or indicating that a particular expression was unfamiliar. Such observations provided contextual evidence of how Malaysian slang was encountered and interpreted naturally within the retail environment, complementing the accounts obtained through interviews.

4.4.3 Contribution of the Observational Data

The observational data provided contextual evidence that complemented the findings from the visual analysis and participant interviews. While the visual analysis examined the design elements and use of local language within the selected APOM Malaysia merchandise, the observations provided insight into how the designs were displayed and encountered within the retail environment. The observational findings therefore offered an additional contextual perspective that could not be obtained solely through the visual analysis or participants' accounts. Rather than serving as independent evidence of consumer interpretation, the observations helped situate the visual and interview findings within the natural setting in which the merchandise was presented.

Overall, the observational data contributed to the triangulation of the findings and supported a more contextualised understanding of the relationship between local language, graphic design, and Malaysian local identity.

4.5 Interpretation of the Findings: Why These Findings Matter

The sections above report what was found. This section states what follows from it, since a description of design features does not by itself establish significance. Four implications arise, and each carries a qualification.

First, the findings indicate that language is functioning here as a designed object rather than as content placed within a design. Across the sample, the linguistic element determines the typographic treatment, occupies the dominant compositional position, and is supported rather than accompanied by illustration. This matters because it inverts the conventional relationship assumed in much design literature, in which visual form communicates and text labels. If vernacular language can carry the primary communicative load in this way, then design education's customary separation of typography from linguistic and cultural study is difficult to sustain. The qualification is that this inversion is demonstrated for one brand that was selected precisely because it works in this way, and cannot be assumed to hold generally.

Second, the findings indicate that cultural transmission is occurring through commercial rather than institutional channels. The phrases reproduced on this merchandise are not taught, curated or officially sanctioned; they circulate because they sell. This matters for cultural policy, because it suggests that a significant share of the everyday reproduction of Malaysian vernacular identity now takes place in retail and social media environments that cultural institutions do not reach and do not shape. The qualification is that commercial transmission is selective in ways institutional transmission is not: what circulates is what is marketable, which is not necessarily what is culturally significant.

Third, the findings indicate that decoding is unevenly distributed, and that this unevenness is constitutive rather than incidental. The material works precisely because not everyone can read it: the pleasure of recognition depends on the existence of those who do not recognise. This matters because it means that the inclusive reading of vernacular design, in which shared language draws a community together, is only half

the account. The same mechanism that includes the culturally fluent excludes the culturally distant, and the expatriate participant's difficulty is not a failure of the design but a demonstration of how it works. The qualification is that this claim rests on a single participant occupying that position, and requires testing on a larger and more varied sample.

Fourth, the findings indicate that the identity being reproduced is narrower than the term Malaysian identity implies. The sample foregrounds urban, youthful, humorous and largely Klang Valley registers, and although cross-community borrowings are present, the linguistic base is predominantly Malay. This matters because it means that claims of cultural preservation made for work of this kind require specification: what is being kept in circulation is a particular register of Malaysian urban life, not Malaysian culture as such. This qualification is not a criticism of the practice, which does not claim otherwise, but it constrains what this thesis can claim on its behalf, and it is the reason the framework in Chapter 6 is presented as case-derived.

Taken together, these implications reframe the study's central question. The useful question is not whether graphic design can preserve local identity, which invites an affirmative answer that the evidence cannot support, but under what conditions, for which audiences and at what cost the vernacular is kept in circulation through commercial design. Chapter 5 pursues that question semiotically.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings of the study based on the visual analysis of selected APOM Malaysia merchandise and the thematic analysis of interview data supported by NVivo. The findings demonstrate that local language, particularly Malay and local slang, is intentionally integrated into graphic design through the strategic combination of textual and visual elements to communicate Malaysian local identity.

The analysis shows that linguistic elements such as slang, humour, and colloquial expressions are reinforced by graphic design components including typography, colour, layout, and imagery. Together, these elements form a cohesive design language that enhances familiarity, cultural resonance, and a sense of belonging among audiences. Participants consistently perceived such integrations as authentic representations of everyday Malaysian culture when the designs reflected common language use and culturally recognisable visual cues.

The chapter has also reported the non-participant observation findings in Section 4.5 and, in Section 4.6, set out the wider implications of the findings together with the qualifications that attach to each. Overall, this chapter addresses Research Objectives 1 and 2 by identifying how local language is embedded in graphic design and analysing the role of graphic design elements in communicating local identity. The findings presented here provide a clear empirical foundation for the semiotic discussion in Chapter 5, which will further examine how meaning is constructed and interpreted through the interaction of language and visual design.

CHAPTER 5
SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a semiotic interpretation of the findings discussed in Chapter 4, focusing on how graphic design elements communicate local language in reflecting local identity. Building upon the thematic analysis derived from interview data, this chapter addresses Objective 2, which aims to analyse the role of graphic design elements in communicating local language and local identity. While Chapter 4 outlined the key themes emerging from participants' perspectives, this chapter interprets those findings through the lens of semiotic theory in order to deepen understanding of how meaning is constructed within graphic design practices.

Semiotics provides a theoretical framework for examining how signs both linguistic and visual produce meaning within specific cultural contexts. Specifically, this analysis employs Saussure's foundational concepts of the signifier and signified, alongside Barthes' exploration of denotative and connotative meanings, to unravel the layered forms of communication embedded within graphic design elements (Manu & Hikmaharyanti, 2024, p. 159; Mardhatillah et al., 2025, p. 186). Within graphic design, elements such as local language, slang, typography, imagery, and layout function as signifiers that convey cultural values, identity, and social meaning. By applying semiotic principles, this chapter explores how these elements operate collectively to encode cultural messages and how such messages are subsequently decoded by different audiences. This interpretive approach enables a nuanced understanding of how visual and linguistic signs contribute to the construction of local identity within a globalised design landscape (Itanghi et al., 2023, p. 183).

The discussion in this chapter is structured around the four themes identified in the thematic analysis: local language as a cultural signifier, graphic design as a semiotic amplifier, audience interpretation and meaning-making, and ethical considerations and cultural authenticity. Each theme is examined to reveal how linguistic and visual signs interact to communicate meaning, as well as how cultural identity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated through graphic design practices. This examination

highlights the complex interplay between design elements and cultural contexts, demonstrating how semiotic analysis can effectively deconstruct the multiple layers of meaning embedded within visual communication (Mudyiwa & Mokgoatšana, 2021, p. 2).

Overall, this chapter extends the empirical findings by offering a theoretical interpretation of how local language is visually represented and culturally understood within graphic design. The semiotic analysis provides insight into the mechanisms through which graphic design not only conveys information, but also reinforces cultural identity, emotional connection, and ethical responsibility within contemporary Malaysian visual communication.

5.2 Semiotic Framework for Analysing Graphic Design and Language

Semiotics provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining how graphic design elements and local language function together to communicate meaning and cultural identity. This framework is particularly valuable for deconstructing how visual elements and linguistic expressions, such as slang or culturally specific phrases, operate as signs that evoke deeper connotations and shared understandings among a target audience (Bin et al., 2019, p. 169). At its core, semiotics is concerned with the ways in which signs function within social and cultural contexts to produce meaning.

In the context of this study, both linguistic elements (such as local language and slang) and visual elements (such as typography, layout, and graphic composition) are understood as signs that convey cultural values, identity, and social meaning. From a semiotic perspective, language functions as a system of signs in which words and expressions act as signifiers that point to culturally shared meanings, or signifieds. Similarly, in graphic design, visual components such as typography, imagery, and layout also operate as signifiers, with meanings that are deeply embedded within the cultural landscape of contemporary Malaysia (Gan, 2011). As a result, local language and slang do not merely communicate literal meanings, but also evoke associations related to identity, familiarity, belonging, and lived cultural experience.

When incorporated into graphic design, these linguistic signifiers are visually framed and reinforced through design elements, allowing meaning to be intensified, modified, or contextualised. Graphic design itself operates as a semiotic system

composed of visual signs. Elements such as typography, colour, layout, imagery, and composition serve as signifiers that shape how linguistic content is perceived and interpreted. These visual cues, alongside verbal elements, create a multimodal rhetorical presentation that communicates messages in an efficient and impactful manner (Bahrudin & Bakar, 2022, p. 1078). Typography, for instance, may signal tone, emotion, or cultural orientation, while layout and visual hierarchy guide attention and influence meaning-making processes. When combined with local language, these visual signifiers contribute to a layered communication process in which meaning is constructed through the interaction between text and image.

Meaning within semiotic analysis extends beyond literal interpretation to include connotative and cultural dimensions. While denotative meaning refers to the immediate or surface-level interpretation of a sign, connotative meaning involves deeper cultural associations shaped by shared knowledge and social experience. In graphic design, the interplay between denotation and connotation is crucial for understanding how local language elements resonate with audiences, as a sign may stand for something beyond its immediate representation (Bin et al., 2019, p. 170).

In graphic design that incorporates local language, connotation plays a particularly significant role, as slang and hybrid language forms often carry culturally specific meanings that may resonate differently across audiences. These meanings are not fixed, but are shaped by cultural context, generational experience, and familiarity with local linguistic practices. This dynamic interplay necessitates a comprehensive analytical approach that accounts for both explicit and implicit layers of communication (Harun et al., 2023, p. 2).

Audience interpretation is therefore central within the semiotic framework. Meaning is not solely embedded within the design itself but is actively constructed by audiences as they decode signs based on their cultural background, social identity, and personal experience. This highlights the subjective nature of semiotic reception, whereby the same design elements may evoke diverse interpretations depending on the viewer's semiotic competence and cultural literacy (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023, p. 97). Consequently, identical combinations of language and visual design may be interpreted differently by different audience groups, a finding that aligns with the variations in audience responses discussed in Chapter 4.

Ethical considerations further extend the semiotic framework by acknowledging that signs carry cultural responsibility. The use of local language and cultural symbols in graphic design requires sensitivity to authenticity, contextual appropriateness, and the potential for misinterpretation. From a semiotic standpoint, unethical or inappropriate use of signs may distort cultural meaning, reinforce stereotypes, or weaken cultural significance. Ethical awareness therefore forms an integral part of semiotic analysis when examining how graphic design communicates local identity, requiring a critical approach to design practices that ensures respectful and accurate representation of cultural nuances embedded within local linguistic expressions (Yudhanto et al., 2023).

Overall, this study adopts a semiotic framework to interpret how linguistic and visual signs interact within graphic design to construct meaning and reflect local identity. By applying semiotic principles to the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter seeks to explain how local language functions as a cultural signifier, how graphic design amplifies meaning, how audiences interpret these signs, and how ethical considerations shape responsible visual communication. The following sections elaborate on each of these aspects through a detailed semiotic discussion of graphic design practices and their embedded local linguistic elements.

5.3 Semiotic Interpretation of Local Language as Cultural Signifier

Within a semiotic framework, local language and slang function as symbolic signs that communicate cultural identity beyond their literal meanings. This involves analysing how the selection of specific linguistic forms, such as colloquialisms, dialectal variations, or instances of code-switching, not only conveys messages but also indexes shared cultural experiences and in-group affiliations (Moore et al., 2023, p. 191). As discussed in Chapter 4, participants perceived local language not merely as a communicative tool, but as a representation of shared cultural values, social belonging, and national identity.

From a semiotic perspective, this positions local language as a signifier that evokes culturally embedded meanings, or signifieds, associated with identity, familiarity, and collective experience. Local slang, in particular, operates predominantly at the level of connotation, where meaning is shaped by cultural

knowledge and social context rather than dictionary definition. While the denotative meaning of slang may appear informal or colloquial, its connotative meaning often reflects cultural intimacy, emotional resonance, and social proximity. When incorporated into graphic design, these linguistic signs activate shared cultural understanding among audiences who are familiar with the language, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging and identity.

This phenomenon is particularly evident within multimodal linguistic landscapes, where the integration of regional or local languages alongside other linguistic influences enables designers to engage specific demographic groups through culturally resonant communication (Lestariningsih et al., 2023, p. 3330). The findings presented in Chapter 4 further indicate that hybrid language forms combining Malay with other linguistic influences are especially significant in reflecting Malaysian cultural identity. Semiotic theory suggests that such hybridity functions as a cultural sign representing the lived reality of a multilingual society, rather than signalling linguistic inconsistency (Harun et al., 2023, p. 7).

Instead, hybrid language signifies cultural adaptability and the coexistence of multiple identities within everyday communication. In graphic design, the visual presentation of hybrid language further reinforces its symbolic meaning by situating linguistic signs within culturally recognisable visual forms. This visual framing allows hybrid language to function as a powerful semiotic resource that communicates complex socio-cultural identities in ways that resonate strongly with local audiences.

Emotional connection, identified as a key sub-theme in the thematic analysis, can also be understood through a semiotic lens. Language that resonates emotionally functions as an affective sign, triggering feelings of familiarity, nostalgia, or cultural pride (Margareta et al., 2025, p. 1112). These emotional responses are not inherent within the language itself, but are produced through culturally learned associations and shared social experiences. Graphic design enhances this process by visually framing linguistic signs in ways that intensify their emotional and cultural impact, thereby strengthening audience engagement.

From a broader semiotic standpoint, the role of local language in graphic design extends beyond surface-level representation towards the construction of cultural narratives. Through repeated use in visual communication, local language becomes naturalised as a marker of identity, contributing to ongoing cultural meaning-making

within contemporary design practices. This process enables language to function as a stabilising sign that reinforces collective identity, particularly within marketing and branding contexts where culturally embedded linguistic elements can resonate deeply with target audiences (Rasit et al., 2019).

Overall, the semiotic interpretation of Theme 1 demonstrates that local language operates as a powerful cultural signifier within graphic design. By functioning as a sign that carries connotative and symbolic meanings, local language enables designers to communicate cultural identity, emotional connection, and social belonging. These findings directly support Objective 2 by illustrating how graphic design, through its interaction with linguistic signs, contributes meaningfully to the reflection of local identity.

5.4 Close Semiotic Reading of Four Key Merchandises

The discussion so far has proceeded at the level of the theme. This section descends to the level of the object, because a semiotic argument is only as strong as its readings of particular signs. Four artefacts were selected from the sample for extended analysis. They were chosen to represent the range of linguistic phenomena distinguished in Table 4.6 rather than to represent the sample proportionally: one discourse particle, one colloquial expression, one cross-community borrowing and one confrontational phrase. Each is read across four levels: denotative, connotative, mythic and ideological.

The analysis proceeds artefact by artefact and is summarised in Table 5.1. Because the reading depends on close attention to typographic and compositional detail, each artefact should be reproduced as a figure immediately above its analysis, at a size sufficient for the typographic treatment to be visible.

Table 5.1
Four-level Semiotic Reading of Four Selected Merchandises

Level of analysis	APOM-TB01-Lah Malaysia	APOM-PC03-Just Lepak Lah	APOM-PC02-Makcik Bawang	APOM-PC05-The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia
Denotative: what is literally present	The design uses a sans serif/decorative typographic treatment with the slang "Lah" as the main visual element. The word is given strong typographic emphasis and positioned prominently as the central focus of the tumbler.	The design uses a bold, condensed sans serif treatment. "Lepak" is visually emphasised, while "Just" and "Lah" provide supporting text. The phrase is positioned prominently as the main textual element.	The design uses a playful sans serif treatment for "Makcik Bawang". The phrase is given strong visual emphasis and positioned as the main textual element, with "@ Membawang" functioning as supporting text.	The design presents "Cun" as the main slang element within the phrase "The Most Cun Amoi in Malaysia." The slang is visually emphasised and positioned as the main focal text, with the remaining words functioning as supporting text.
Connotative: culturally shaped associations	The prominent treatment of "Lah" suggests familiarity, informal Malaysian speech and shared local identity.	The bold and casual treatment of "Lepak" suggests relaxation, informality, friendship and everyday Malaysian social life.	The playful typography suggests humour, informality and familiarity with Malaysian gossip culture.	The combination of "Cun", "Amoi" and English suggests beauty, humour, multilingualism and Malaysian multicultural interaction.
Mythic: what is naturalised	The design makes the use of "Lah" as a marker of Malaysian everyday identity appear natural and familiar.	It makes lepak as an ordinary part of Malaysian social life appear natural and recognisable.	It makes the "Makcik Bawang" character and gossip behaviour appear as a familiar and recognisable part of everyday Malaysian culture.	It makes mixed-language expressions and multicultural identities appear as a normal feature of Malaysian culture.
Ideological: whose interests are served, who is included and excluded	The representation serves the brand by turning recognisable Malaysian slang into a commercial marker of local identity. Audiences unfamiliar with "Lah" may have less access to its cultural meaning.	The representation serves the brand by associating its merchandise with a relaxed and socially connected Malaysian lifestyle. Audiences unfamiliar with "Lepak" may be excluded from the intended cultural reading.	The representation serves the brand through humour and recognisable Malaysian social stereotypes, but may reinforce a stereotype of women, particularly "aunties", as gossipers.	The representation serves the brand by presenting multicultural and multilingual Malaysian identity as commercially appealing. Audiences unfamiliar with "Cun" or "Amoi" may not fully understand the intended meaning.

Two observations follow from reading at this level of detail. The first is that the ideological content of these merchandises is not uniform and does not always align with the brand's evident intent. APOM-TB01 and APOM-PC05 perform an inclusive gesture, locating Malaysian identity in shared speech and in multilingual mixing. APOM-PC02 and, in a different way, APOM-PC05 simultaneously reproduce social stereotypes that operate at someone's expense. A thematic analysis conducted at the level of the theme records these items as instances of the same phenomenon, which is the integration of local language into graphic design. A semiotic reading at object level shows that they are doing markedly different cultural work. This is the principal analytical value of descending to the artefact.

The second observation concerns the relationship between typographic treatment and semiotic function. Where the linguistic element is a discourse particle carrying pragmatic rather than lexical meaning, typography must supply what translation cannot, and the design accordingly invests heavily in weight, scale and isolation. Where the linguistic element is lexically substantive, typographic treatment is comparatively restrained. Typography, in other words, compensates for what the words themselves cannot carry. This is a specific and testable claim about how graphic design amplifies language, and it is more precise than the general claim advanced in Section 5.3.

5.5 Graphic Design as a Semiotic Amplifier

From a semiotic perspective, graphic design functions as a system of visual signs that amplifies, shapes, and contextualises linguistic meaning. This amplification occurs through the deliberate arrangement of design elements such as typography, colour, imagery, and layout, which collectively form a visual “grammar” that influences audience perception and reflects broader social and cultural values (András & Balázs, 2025, p. 640). As demonstrated in the findings presented in Chapter 4, participants perceived graphic design not merely as a decorative layer, but as an active mechanism that strengthens how local language is communicated and understood.

Within semiotic theory, graphic design elements including typography, layout, and visual composition function as signifiers that modify and intensify the meaning carried by linguistic content. Typography, in particular, plays a central role in this

process. Typefaces are not neutral carriers of text; rather, they signal tone, emotion, and cultural orientation. For example, bold or ornamental typefaces may evoke a sense of tradition or authority, while minimalist sans-serif fonts often suggest modernity and simplicity. The material form of a sign, including its typographic treatment, is subject to evaluation within social practice, generating meaning through interaction and contributing to pragmatic social interpretation based on context (Chernyavskaya, 2022, p. 74).

When local language or slang is presented through specific typographic styles, additional layers of meaning are produced. Informal or expressive typefaces may reinforce the casual, familiar nature of slang, while more structured or traditional typographic forms may signal cultural seriousness, legitimacy, or authenticity. This dynamic interplay between linguistic content and visual presentation demonstrates how graphic design operates as a powerful semiotic amplifier, transforming words into culturally resonant visual statements. Furthermore, the strategic use of visual elements such as imagery and graphic motifs in conjunction with local linguistic expressions creates a multimodal synergy that significantly enhances the communicative impact and emotional resonance of the message (Dewi & Juniartha, 2024, p. 236).

Layout and visual hierarchy further contribute to meaning construction by directing attention and shaping reading pathways. The spatial arrangement of elements on a page or product surface establishes relationships between linguistic and visual signs, guiding audiences through a visual narrative and emphasising particular aspects of the message (Al-Naimat, 2019, p. 61). From a semiotic standpoint, these design elements function as organisational signs that prioritise certain meanings over others. When local language is positioned prominently within a composition, it is framed as a central signifier of identity. Conversely, when it is supported by complementary visual elements, its meaning may be reinforced through association rather than dominance. This observation aligns with the findings in Chapter 4, where participants emphasised the importance of coherence between linguistic content and visual structure.

Graphic design also operates as an integrated semiotic system, in which individual elements derive meaning through their relationship with one another rather than in isolation. Colour, imagery, typography, and spatial arrangement work collectively to construct a unified visual message. This holistic approach to meaning-making highlights how graphic design transcends aesthetic appeal to become a powerful

mechanism for cultural expression and social situatedness. Typographic and visual choices are therefore deeply intertwined with socio-cultural norms and communicative competence (Carlsson & Harari, 2023, p. 2; Chernyavskaya, 2023, p. 89). Semiotic theory suggests that meaning emerges through the interaction of signs within a system, rather than from isolated elements.

In the context of this study, graphic design amplifies local language by embedding linguistic signs within a coherent visual system that reinforces cultural associations and identity cues. The amplification of meaning extends beyond denotation to include connotative and culturally embedded meanings. Visual styling can evoke cultural memory, emotional response, and social identity, thereby enhancing the symbolic power of local language. When visual signs align closely with linguistic content, the resulting message becomes more culturally resonant and emotionally engaging. This explains why participants perceived graphic design as essential in translating local language into impactful visual communication.

The semiotic analysis reveals how graphic design elements, ranging from typography to layout, transform linguistic expressions into culturally embedded messages that engage audiences beyond literal comprehension (González & Salinas, 2025, p. 3; Smith, 1994). Overall, the semiotic interpretation of Theme 2 demonstrates that graphic design functions as a semiotic amplifier that strengthens the communicative impact of local language. By shaping how linguistic signs are visually presented and culturally framed, graphic design actively contributes to the construction and reinforcement of local identity. This process involves a complex interplay of visual rhetoric and semiotic resources, in which visual elements often reiterate and exemplify verbal messages, resulting in cohesive and meaningful communication that transcends purely linguistic decoding (Denti, 2021, p. 101). These findings directly support Objective 2 by illustrating that design elements participate actively in meaning-making rather than merely supporting textual content.

5.6 Audience Decoding and Meaning Construction

Within semiotic theory, meaning is not produced solely by designers, but is actively constructed by audiences through processes of interpretation and decoding.

This dynamic process is influenced by audiences' cultural background, prior experiences, and levels of semiotic competence, all of which shape how visual and linguistic signs are perceived and internalised (Simungala & Ndalama-Mtawali, 2023, p. 140). As highlighted in the findings presented in Chapter 4, participants emphasised that the effectiveness of graphic design incorporating local language depends largely on how different audiences interpret and make sense of linguistic and visual signs. This reinforces the semiotic view that meaning is negotiated rather than fixed, and that interpretation is shaped by cultural background, generational experience, and familiarity with local language usage.

From a semiotic perspective, audiences engage in decoding visual and linguistic signs based on their social and cultural knowledge. Local language and slang function as signifiers whose meanings are culturally learned rather than universally understood. This suggests that the effectiveness of graphic design strategies employing local language relies heavily on the audience's ability to recognise and interpret culturally specific codes embedded within the design (Shaw et al., 2023, p. 152). When audiences possess familiarity with the linguistic and cultural context of the signs used, the intended meanings are more readily decoded. Conversely, limited cultural exposure or linguistic familiarity may result in alternative interpretations, ambiguity, or partial understanding, demonstrating that meaning is contingent upon the audience's interpretive framework.

The findings in Chapter 4 further indicate that younger audiences, particularly Generation Z, are more receptive to the use of slang and informal language in graphic design. This generational preference reflects a dynamic evolution in semiotic competence, where contemporary linguistic forms are increasingly integrated into visual communication to enhance relevance and resonance (Bahrudin & Bakar, 2022, p. 1085). Semiotic theory explains this phenomenon through the concept of shared cultural codes, whereby meaning is produced through symbols that are commonly understood within specific social groups. For Gen Z audiences, slang operates as a culturally embedded sign that aligns with everyday communicative practices, resulting in dominant or preferred readings of the design message. In contrast, older audiences may interpret the same signs differently, producing negotiated or less immediate readings. This divergence in interpretation highlights the polysemic nature of signs and underscores the importance of audience studies in understanding varied responses to multimodal communication (Adams, 2022, p. 32).

Audience interpretation is also shaped by the interaction between linguistic and visual signs. Visual elements such as typography, layout, imagery, and colour provide contextual cues that guide decoding processes. When visual design supports and clarifies linguistic content, audiences are more likely to interpret meanings in line with the designer's intentions. However, when visual cues are ambiguous, contradictory, or culturally misaligned, the decoding process becomes more complex, increasing the likelihood of varied or unintended interpretations. This highlights the role of graphic design as a mediating force in audience understanding, where semiotic alignment between visual and linguistic elements is essential for effective communication.

The interplay between visual and linguistic components therefore directly influences message reception, often resulting in dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional readings depending on the audience's cultural background, generational position, and prior experiences (Rachmasari & Permatasari, 2020, p. 147). This reinforces the semiotic assertion that meaning is not inherent within design elements themselves but emerges through the interaction between signs and audience interpretation.

Meaning construction also involves emotional and experiential dimensions. Semiotic analysis recognises that signs evoke affective responses based on personal and collective memory. For instance, vernacular graphic design styles incorporating familiar colours, hand-drawn illustrations, or decorative lettering may trigger nostalgic sentiments and cultural memories among audiences (Ayu et al., 2025). Similarly, the use of familiar local language can evoke feelings of recognition, belonging, or cultural pride among certain audience groups, while generating curiosity or emotional distance among others. These affective responses contribute significantly to meaning-making by imbuing signs with deeper significance beyond their denotative function, often fostering a sense of social connection within particular communities (Puspita & Ardianto, 2024).

5.6.1 Differentiated Decoding across Audience Group

The account above establishes that decoding varies. It does not yet establish how it varies, which was raised at examination as a limitation. Applying Hall's (1997) encoding and decoding model to the participant data allows the variation to be specified:

the same sign is read differently, and the differences are patterned by position rather than random. Table 5.2 sets out the positions represented in this study.

Table 5.2
Differentiated Decoding Positions Among Participant Group

Audience position	Represented by	Characteristic decoding of the same sign	Reading position (Hall)
Design practitioners	P2, P4, P6	Read the sign as a set of craft decisions. Attention falls on typographic execution, hierarchy and whether the visual treatment succeeds in carrying the phrase; the cultural content is largely presupposed	Dominant, with a professional inflection: the encoded meaning is accepted and evaluated on execution
Language and design academicians	P1, P3	Read the sign against a normative frame. Attention falls on linguistic correctness, register and the cultural consequences of commercial reproduction; more likely to identify risk than opportunity	Negotiated: the cultural value is accepted while the commercial framing is questioned
Generation Z consumers	P4 and the generational accounts reported by other participants	Read the sign as social currency. The phrase is recognised instantly, its humour registers before its meaning is examined, and the item is valued for what it signals to peers	Dominant: encoding and decoding align most closely in this group
Culturally	P5,	Read the visual sign but cannot complete the linguistic one. The	Aberrant or incomplete: the sign is received but the code is

distant readers	expatriate	design is legible as design while its meaning remains inaccessible, producing curiosity rather than recognition	unavailable
Non-addressed Malaysian readers	Reported indirectly by participants rather than directly represented	May decode the phrase fully yet decline the identity it offers, whether because the register is felt to be crude, because the community referenced is not their own, or because the depiction is of themselves	Oppositional: the code is shared but the reading is refused

Three points follow. First, decoding position is not reducible to nationality. A Malaysian designer and a Malaysian academician read the same artefact differently, and the difference tracks professional and normative position rather than cultural membership. Second, the culturally distant reader is not simply a failed reader. The expatriate participant's response demonstrates that the visual and linguistic sign systems can be decoupled: the design remains legible as design while its cultural content is withheld, which confirms that graphic design does not simply translate language for those who lack it. Third, and most significant for this study's claims, the oppositional position is under-represented in the data. No participant in this study occupied the position of a Malaysian who fully understands the phrase and rejects what it offers, and the sample as constructed could not readily include one. This is a limitation of the audience findings rather than evidence that such readings do not exist, and Section 5.7 considers what the absence of that position means for the argument.

Overall, the semiotic interpretation of Theme 3 demonstrates that audience decoding is a critical component in the communication of local language through graphic design. Meaning is constructed through the interaction between linguistic and visual signs and the audience's cultural knowledge, rather than being inherent in design elements alone. This finding supports Objective 2 by illustrating that the role of graphic

design in reflecting local identity is contingent upon how audiences decode and negotiate meaning within their cultural and social contexts. Consequently, these insights underscore the importance of considering target audience demographics, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic familiarity during the design process to ensure effective communication and meaningful resonance (Arbuckle, 2016, p. 19).

5.7 Ethical Semiotics and Cultural Authenticity

From a semiotic perspective, ethical considerations arise from the recognition that signs carry cultural meaning and social responsibility. This necessitates a critical examination of how graphic design, particularly when incorporating vernacular aesthetics and local language, can either reinforce cultural authenticity or, conversely, lead to misinterpretation and the perpetuation of stereotypes through the uncritical adoption of visual and linguistic codes (Rath, 2020, p. 17; Rothewelle, 2019, p. 2). As demonstrated in the findings presented in Chapter 4, participants expressed concerns that while the use of local language and slang in graphic design is culturally powerful, it must be approached with sensitivity, contextual awareness, and ethical consideration.

Semiotic theory emphasises that signs do not merely represent culture but actively shape how culture is perceived, understood, and reproduced. Designers therefore bear an ethical obligation to ensure that their visual and linguistic choices accurately reflect cultural values and avoid reductive or appropriated representations (Rasit et al., 2019; Saraswati et al., 2024). Consequently, the ethical use of linguistic and visual signs is essential to ensure that cultural identity is communicated authentically rather than distorted. Local language, in this regard, functions as a culturally loaded sign whose meaning is shaped by historical, social, and communal contexts.

When local language is removed from its original cultural context or excessively stylised for commercial purposes, its signified meaning may shift or weaken. Semiotic analysis suggests that this process can result in misrepresentation, whereby signs no longer reflect lived cultural realities but instead produce simplified or stereotypical interpretations. Participants' concerns regarding cultural dilution and misinterpretation reflect this risk, highlighting the importance of contextual integrity in design practice. This perspective aligns with Kress's emphasis on design as a future-oriented practice,

in which designers' decisions have lasting effects on meaning and cultural representation (Yang et al., 2022, p. 83).

Graphic design further intensifies ethical considerations by amplifying linguistic signs through visual representation. This amplification has the potential either to enhance or to distort intended meanings, underscoring designers' responsibility to maintain the fidelity of cultural communication (Adami et al., 2022, p. 6; Moore et al., 2023, p. 201). Typographic treatment, imagery, and stylistic choices can either reinforce cultural authenticity or contribute to misleading or culturally insensitive interpretations. From a semiotic standpoint, inappropriate visual framing may alter the connotative meaning of local language, resulting in unintended associations or cultural offence. This reinforces the importance of alignment between linguistic content and visual representation in ethical semiotic practice.

These ethical challenges are particularly salient within a globalised design landscape, where visual communication is often intended for diverse audiences. In such contexts, designers must carefully consider how local linguistic and visual elements may be interpreted across different cultural settings in order to minimise miscommunication and promote ethical representation (Barreto, 2007). Audience diversity therefore plays a significant role in ethical semiotics. As meaning is decoded differently across social and cultural groups, designers must anticipate potential dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings and account for varying levels of cultural familiarity when making design decisions.

Ethical responsibility becomes even more complex with the increasing integration of artificial intelligence in graphic design practices. As highlighted by recent studies, biased training data and automated design processes can perpetuate stereotypes or misrepresent cultural heritage if not carefully managed (Koc, 2025, p. 5; S, 2025). These concerns emphasise the importance of community control over linguistic and cultural data, as well as critical human oversight in design processes, to ensure authenticity and prevent digital disenfranchisement.

Participants also highlighted the importance of professional judgement and, where applicable, institutional or cultural guidelines in guiding ethical design practice. This often requires meaningful engagement with the communities whose cultures are being represented, emphasising co-creation and participatory design approaches to ensure that visual outcomes genuinely reflect local identities rather than imposed

interpretations (Tham & Thominet, 2022, p. 91). From a semiotic perspective, such frameworks function as regulatory mechanisms that help stabilise meaning and prevent the misuse of culturally significant signs.

5.7.1 Specific Ethical Risks in Vernacular Design

The discussion of ethical semiotics above proceeds at the level of principle. Principles are difficult to act on, and this section therefore specifies the risks concretely, since a designer requires a description of what can go wrong before a commitment to authenticity becomes usable. Five risks are identified, each with an indicator drawn from the present case.

Table 5.3
Specific Ethical Riks in the Semiotic Use of Local Language

Risk	How it operates semiotically	Indicator in the present case	What reduces it
Stereotyping	A social type is fixed as a sign, and the fixing removes the internal variation of the people it denotes	Items invoking recognised social characters such as makcik bawang or rempit; the humour requires the depicted group to be absent from the addressed audience	Ask whether the depicted group is among the intended purchasers. Where it is not, the item is being sold at their expense
Vulgarity and register misjudgement	A phrase acceptable in one setting is relocated to another where its force is different and cannot	Confrontational phrases such as jalan bapak kau, which carry an aggressive charge in speech that a printed	Consider the setting in which the object will be seen. Print removes the prosodic and relational cues that make such speech

	be softened by tone or relationship	surface cannot modulate	acceptable between friends
Commodification and semantic depletion	Repeated commercial reproduction detaches a sign from its context of use; the phrase persists while the meaning attenuates	The most reproduced terms in the sample recur across many product types with identical treatment	Vary treatment with context rather than reproducing a single lockup across a catalogue; retain the phrase's association with a specific situation
Exclusion of non-Malay identities	A repertoire drawn predominantly from one language presents itself as national, so other communities are positioned as visitors to their own identity	The linguistic base of the sample is predominantly Malay, with cross-community borrowings present but comparatively few	Audit the repertoire by language of origin. Borrowing terms from other communities is not the same as representing those communities
Misreading by outside audiences	A sign whose meaning depends on unavailable local knowledge is decoded on the visual channel alone, and may be read as representative of the culture as a whole	The expatriate participant's incomplete decoding; tourist purchase of items whose humour is not accessible	Where an item is likely to reach outside audiences, consider whether the design carries any interpretive support, and accept that some material is not intended for that audience

These risks are not equally weighted, and they are not independent of one another. Commodification and semantic depletion may be the price of continued circulation, so that avoiding the risk entirely would mean withdrawing the vernacular from the commercial sphere in which it now largely lives. Stereotyping and exclusion, by contrast, are not the price of anything: they are avoidable design outcomes. The framework proposed in Chapter 6 accordingly treats ethical consideration as a set of specific questions to be asked of particular artefacts rather than as a general disposition of goodwill.

Overall, the semiotic interpretation of Theme 4 demonstrates that ethical considerations and cultural authenticity are integral to the effective communication of local identity through graphic design. The findings suggest that meaningful and responsible use of local language requires designers to balance creative innovation with cultural sensitivity. This necessitates a deep understanding of the semiotic nuances embedded within specific linguistic and visual contexts, ensuring that design choices resonate authentically with target audiences and avoid cultural appropriation (Sherin et al., 2024, p. 12). These insights support Objective 2 by illustrating that the role of graphic design elements in reflecting local identity is shaped not only by aesthetic and communicative effectiveness, but also by ethical awareness in semiotic decision-making. This ethical awareness is particularly crucial in light of the growing role of artificial intelligence in graphic design, which introduces additional challenges related to authorship, bias, and transparency (Dedijer et al., 2025; Özyanıkoğlu, 2023, p. 1).

5.8 Interrogating the Contradictions

The analysis to this point has largely worked with the grain of the material. Two contradictions run through it that a coherent account should not smooth over, and a third question was raised at examination that bears directly on the study's premises. This section addresses all three without resolving them prematurely, since their irresolution is part of what the case demonstrates.

5.8.1 Preservation versus Commodification

This thesis has argued that commercial merchandise keeps vernacular language in circulation. The same evidence supports a less comfortable reading. What circulates commercially is what sells, and what sells is not necessarily what matters culturally. The sample bears this out: the repertoire is weighted towards humour, leisure and exclamation, and largely omits registers that are harder to make marketable, including formal, ceremonial, religious and occupational vocabulary. If commercial design is now a significant channel of vernacular reproduction, it is a channel with a filter, and the filter is legibility to a young urban market with disposable income.

The two positions can be stated sharply. On the preservationist reading, a phrase reproduced on a thousand tote bags is a phrase that a generation encounters daily and continues to use; visibility sustains vitality. On the critical reading, a phrase reproduced on a thousand tote bags has been detached from the situations that gave it meaning and converted into a style signal; what survives is the form, while the pragmatic competence that made it meaningful is not transmitted by a printed surface. Both readings are supported by the data gathered here. Participants described slang on merchandise as generating recognition and emotional connection, which supports the first; participants also expressed concern that commercialisation weakens cultural significance, which supports the second.

This study's position is that the two are not alternatives but a single process viewed at different timescales. Commercial reproduction extends the reach of a form while narrowing its depth. Whether the outcome counts as preservation depends on what is being preserved: if the object of preservation is the lexical item, commercial circulation preserves it efficiently; if the object is the communicative competence in which the item is embedded, commercial circulation cannot preserve it at all, because a printed phrase carries no instruction in its own use. This is the principal reason the thesis title has been revised from preserving to representing. Representation is what the evidence supports; preservation is a stronger claim that the evidence does not reach.

5.8.2 Malay Centred Identity versus Multilingual Malaysia

The second contradiction concerns whose identity is being represented. The study describes its object as Malaysian local identity, while the linguistic base of the sample is predominantly Malay. These are not the same thing, and the difference has consequences.

The evidence points in two directions. In support of a multilingual reading, the sample contains terms of Hokkien, Cantonese and Tamil origin circulating without translation or explanation, which indicates a repertoire genuinely shaped by more than one community. The recurrent code-switching between Malay and English also reflects lived multilingual practice rather than an official monolingual norm. Against that reading, borrowing is not representation. Terms of Chinese and Indian origin appear in the sample as items absorbed into a Malay-language matrix, and the syntactic and pragmatic frame within which they appear remains Malay or Malaysian English. A Malaysian whose primary language is Tamil or Mandarin may recognise a borrowed term while finding that the repertoire as a whole is not addressed to them. East Malaysian languages are, on the evidence of this sample, essentially absent.

The honest formulation is therefore narrower than the one this thesis began with. What the case demonstrates is the representation of a Malay-language-mediated, urban, multi-ethnically inflected register of Malaysian identity. That register is genuinely cross-communal in its vocabulary and genuinely Malay-centred in its structure, and both descriptions are accurate simultaneously. Section 1.7 has been revised so that the claims made in this thesis are bounded accordingly, and Section 6.6 identifies research with Chinese-Malaysian, Indian-Malaysian and East Malaysian brands and audiences as the necessary next step.

5.8.3 The Question of ‘Broken” Malay and Mixed Language Forms

A question raised at examination requires direct address: whether celebrating slang and code-mixed language carries a negative connotation, given that such forms are widely regarded as broken or corrupted Malay. The question deserves an answer rather than avoidance, because it goes to the study's premises.

The concern is real and has institutional weight behind it. Malay holds constitutional status as the national language, and language planning bodies have long worked to maintain standard Malay against the encroachment of mixed and informal forms. From that standpoint, merchandise that renders code-mixing attractive and desirable may be seen as normalising deviation from a standard whose maintenance is a matter of national policy, particularly where the audience is young and where the medium is one of aspiration and identity display. Educators may reasonably observe that students already struggle to separate registers, and that commercial celebration of the informal register does not assist them.

The sociolinguistic position that this study adopts differs, and the difference should be stated openly rather than assumed. Contemporary sociolinguistics does not treat colloquial and code-mixed varieties as degraded versions of a standard; it treats them as rule-governed varieties in their own right, appropriate to particular domains, which competent speakers deploy alongside the standard rather than instead of it. Code-switching in particular is now well established as a marker of multilingual competence rather than of deficiency, since it requires command of more than one system and of the pragmatic conditions for moving between them. On this view, a Malaysian who writes formal Malay in an examination and says "just lepak lah" to a friend is not two-thirds competent in one language; they are competent in several registers of several languages.

Three qualifications keep this position from becoming complacent. First, the sociolinguistic argument concerns description rather than policy: to observe that a variety is systematic is not to conclude that a state should be indifferent to which varieties its education system transmits. Second, register competence requires that speakers can move between registers, and a commercial environment that makes only the informal register attractive does not by itself develop that capacity. Third, this study analyses a design practice and does not evaluate its linguistic consequences, which would require longitudinal sociolinguistic research beyond its scope.

The position taken here is accordingly bounded. This thesis treats the vernacular forms in the sample as legitimate varieties carrying genuine cultural meaning, and analyses how design gives them visual form. It does not claim that their commercial celebration is beneficial to Malay language maintenance, and it does not dismiss the concerns of language educators and planning bodies, whose object of concern is different from this study's object of analysis. Both positions can be held: these forms

can be linguistically legitimate and culturally meaningful, and their commercial amplification can still warrant attention from those responsible for the standard language.

5.9 Integration of Semiotic Theory and Empirical Findings

This section integrates the semiotic concepts discussed in the preceding sections with the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4, in order to demonstrate how linguistic and visual signs operate collectively within graphic design to communicate local identity. By synthesising semiotic theory with participants' perspectives, this section provides a holistic understanding of how meaning is constructed, interpreted, and regulated through graphic design practices that incorporate local language.

From a semiotic perspective, the empirical findings confirm that local language functions as a culturally loaded sign that carries meanings shaped by historical, social, and communal contexts. Participants' responses indicate that the use of local language and slang in graphic design is not merely stylistic, but operates symbolically to evoke shared cultural experiences, familiarity, and national belonging. This aligns with semiotic theory, which emphasises that signs derive meaning not in isolation, but through culturally shared systems of signification. The findings therefore support the view that local language functions as a powerful signifier whose meaning extends beyond denotation to include culturally embedded connotations (Rasit et al., 2019; Saraswati et al., 2024).

The integration of graphic design elements further reinforces this semiotic process. As discussed in Sections 5.3 and 5.4, typography, layout, imagery, and colour act as visual signifiers that amplify and contextualise linguistic meaning. Empirical evidence from Chapter 4 demonstrates that participants perceived coherence between language and visual presentation as essential for effective communication. This observation aligns with semiotic theory, which posits that meaning emerges through the interaction of signs within a system rather than from individual elements alone (Yang et al., 2022, p. 83). When linguistic and visual signs are aligned, graphic design becomes a cohesive semiotic system that strengthens cultural meaning and identity expression.

Audience interpretation further mediates this process of meaning construction. The findings indicate that meaning is actively negotiated by audiences based on generational experience, cultural background, and familiarity with local language. Semiotic theory accounts for this variability through the concept of polysemy, where signs may generate dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings depending on the audience's interpretive framework. The empirical data support this theoretical position by demonstrating differing responses between younger and older audiences, reinforcing the importance of considering audience semiotic competence in design practice.

Ethical considerations also emerge as a critical point of integration between theory and empirical findings. Participants expressed concerns regarding cultural dilution, misrepresentation, and the potential misuse of local language when removed from its cultural context or excessively commercialised. These concerns align with semiotic perspectives that emphasise designers' responsibility in shaping meaning and cultural representation (Rath, 2020; Rothewelle, 2019). The findings underscore that ethical semiotic practice requires sensitivity to context, authenticity, and audience diversity in order to preserve the integrity of cultural signs.

Furthermore, the integration of semiotic theory highlights the increasing complexity of ethical decision-making within contemporary graphic design, particularly in relation to globalised audiences and the growing use of artificial intelligence. As noted by participants and supported by recent scholarship, biased systems and automated design processes may distort cultural meaning if not guided by ethical awareness and human oversight (Koc, 2025; S, 2025). This reinforces the need for designers to adopt reflexive and responsible approaches when employing local language as a semiotic resource.

Overall, this section demonstrates that the empirical findings of the study strongly support semiotic theory in explaining how graphic design elements and local language interact to construct, negotiate, and regulate meaning. The integration of theory and data reveals that local identity is communicated not through isolated linguistic or visual components, but through their dynamic interaction within culturally situated design systems. This synthesis strengthens the analytical foundation of the study and reinforces the relevance of semiotic theory as an effective framework for understanding the role of graphic design in reflecting and preserving local identity.

5.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a semiotic discussion of the findings derived from the thematic analysis in Chapter 4, addressing Objective 2, which aimed to analyse the role of graphic design elements in communicating local language and reflecting local identity. By applying semiotic theory, the chapter has provided a deeper interpretation of how linguistic and visual signs interact within graphic design to construct meaning, communicate cultural values, and shape audience understanding.

The discussion demonstrated that local language functions as a cultural signifier, carrying connotative meanings related to identity, belonging, and shared cultural experience. Through a semiotic lens, the use of local slang and hybrid language was shown to operate symbolically rather than purely linguistically, reinforcing cultural narratives when embedded within visual communication. These linguistic elements, when framed through graphic design, enable local identity to be communicated in ways that resonate with everyday cultural practices.

Graphic design elements, including typography, layout, imagery, and visual composition, were interpreted as semiotic amplifiers that shape and intensify linguistic meaning. Rather than serving a purely decorative function, these elements actively contribute to meaning making by transforming language into visually expressive cultural signs. The analysis revealed that coherence between linguistic content and visual presentation is essential in strengthening the communication of local identity.

The chapter further highlighted the importance of audience decoding and meaning construction, emphasising that meaning is not fixed but actively negotiated by audiences based on cultural knowledge, generational experience, and familiarity with local language. Semiotic interpretation revealed that the effectiveness of graphic design in reflecting local identity depends on shared cultural codes between designers and audiences, as well as the alignment between visual and linguistic signs.

In addition, ethical considerations and cultural authenticity were discussed as integral components of semiotic practice. The findings demonstrated that the responsible use of local language and culturally embedded visual elements is essential in preventing misrepresentation and preserving cultural integrity. Designers were shown to play a critical role in balancing creative expression with ethical awareness, particularly within a globalised and increasingly digital design environment.

Overall, this chapter has integrated empirical findings with semiotic theory to provide a comprehensive understanding of how graphic design elements contribute to the communication of local language and the reflection of local identity. By extending the analysis beyond aesthetic considerations to include cultural, social, and ethical dimensions, this chapter establishes a strong theoretical foundation for the concluding chapter. The following chapter will synthesise the overall findings of the study, present the proposed framework for integrating local language and graphic design, and outline the study's contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research and practice.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study by synthesising the empirical findings and theoretical discussions presented in the preceding chapters. It revisits the research objectives and demonstrates how each objective has been systematically addressed through qualitative thematic analysis (Chapter 4), semiotic interpretation (Chapter 5), and the development of a conceptual framework that integrates local language and graphic design.

Beyond summarising the study, this chapter critically reflects on the significance of the findings, articulates the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of the research, and discusses its limitations. By situating the findings within broader debates on visual communication, semiotics, and cultural identity, this chapter positions the study as a meaningful contribution to graphic design scholarship and culturally grounded design practice in Malaysia.

6.2 Summary of the Study Key Findings

This study was undertaken to examine how the integration of local language and graphic design supports the communication and preservation of local identity within the Malaysian context. In response to the growing presence of local slang and hybrid language in contemporary merchandise and visual culture, the study sought to understand how linguistic choices, visual design strategies, audience interpretation, and ethical considerations collectively shape meaning making in graphic design.

In addressing Objective 1, the findings revealed that local language and slang function not merely as communicative tools, but as culturally embedded signifiers. Participants consistently described slang, hybrid expressions, and informal linguistic forms as markers of familiarity, emotional connection, and shared cultural experience. Within Malaysia's multilingual environment, these linguistic forms were understood as

reflections of lived social realities rather than linguistic deviation, reinforcing local identity through everyday visual communication.

With regard to Objective 2, NVivo-supported thematic analysis identified four interconnected themes:

(a) local language as a cultural signifier,

(b) graphic design as a semiotic amplifier,

(c) audience interpretation and meaning construction, and

(d) ethical consideration and cultural authenticity.

The findings demonstrated that graphic design elements such as typography, layout, visual hierarchy, and composition play a critical role in amplifying linguistic meaning. However, the effectiveness of this amplification is not universal; rather, it is shaped by audience characteristics, including generational positioning, cultural familiarity, and exposure to slang. Importantly, ethical sensitivity emerged as a key concern, highlighting the risk of misinterpretation, stereotyping, or cultural dilution when local language is employed without sufficient contextual awareness.

Finally, Objective 3 was addressed through the development of a conceptual framework that integrates local language and graphic design as a structured meaning-making process. This framework synthesises empirical insights and semiotic principles, demonstrating that the preservation of local identity is achieved through the interaction of language, visual form, audience decoding, and ethical responsibility, rather than through aesthetic design alone.

6.3 Proposed Framework for Integrating Local Language and Graphic Design

To address Objective 3, this study proposes a conceptual framework that illustrates how local language and graphic design can be integrated to support the preservation of local identity. The framework is derived from the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4 and is theoretically grounded in semiotic principles discussed in Chapter 5.

As illustrated in Figure 6.1, the framework consists of five interconnected components: (1) Local Language as Cultural Signifier, (2) Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier, (3) Audience Interpretation and Meaning Construction, (4) Ethical Consideration and Cultural Authenticity, and (5) Preservation of Local Identity.

Together, these components represent a sequential process through which linguistic and visual elements interact to produce culturally meaningful design communication. Together, these components represent a sequential yet interrelated process through which linguistic and visual elements interact to produce culturally meaningful design communication.

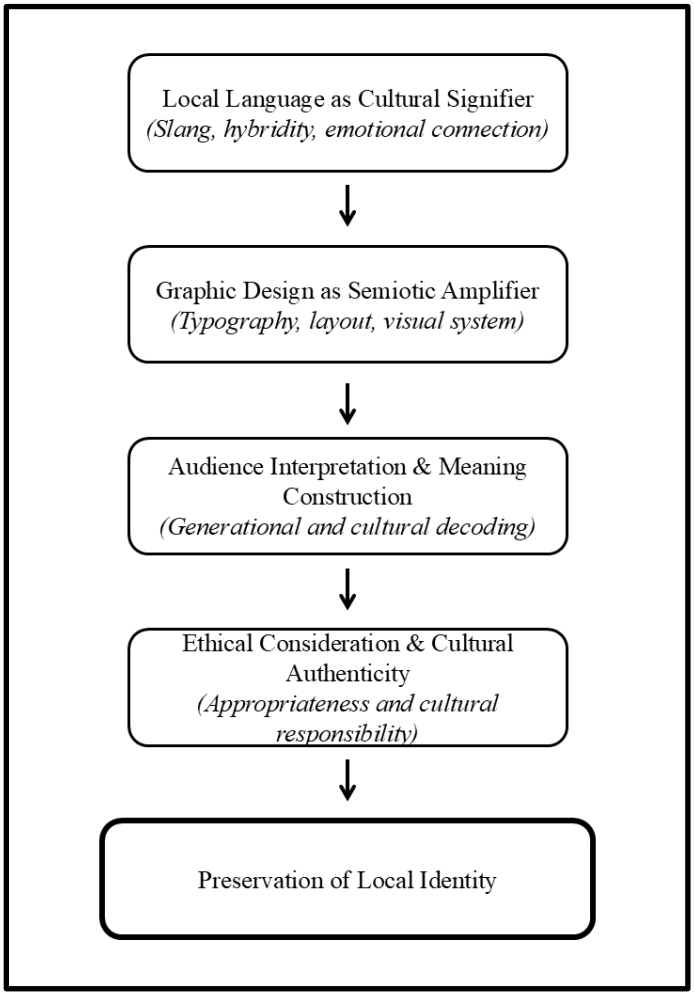


Figure 6.1 Proposed Framework for Integrating Local Language and Graphic Design in Supporting the Preservation of Local Identity

6.3.1 Status and Limitations of the Proposed Framework

The status of this framework requires explicit statement before its components are described, because a diagram of interconnected components can easily be read as a validated model. It is not one. Three qualifications define what the framework is and is not.

First, the framework is conceptual rather than empirical. It organises and abstracts the findings of this study into a coherent structure; it has not been tested against data other than the data from which it was derived. No independent case has been analysed using it, no designer has applied it in practice and reported the outcome, and no audience study has confirmed that its stages describe how meaning is actually constructed. A model derived from a dataset and illustrated by the same dataset has not been validated, and this framework is at that stage.

Second, the framework is case-derived. Its components reflect what was salient in one Klang Valley merchandise brand working predominantly in Malay and Manglish for a young urban market. A brand working in Tamil or Mandarin, in East Malaysia, in a different product category, or for an older audience might generate a framework with different components or a different ordering. The framework is offered as transferable in the qualitative sense, meaning that readers may judge its applicability to contexts they know, rather than as generalisable.

Third, the sequence the framework depicts is analytical rather than temporal. The five components are presented in an order that makes the argument legible; they do not describe a procedure a designer follows in time. In practice ethical consideration and audience anticipation operate throughout rather than at defined stages, and designers work iteratively rather than sequentially.

Accordingly, the framework should be read as a reflective instrument rather than a prescriptive method: a structured set of questions to ask of a design that uses local language, not a set of steps that produces a culturally responsible outcome if followed. Section 6.6 sets out how it might be empirically validated, which is the necessary next stage of this work.

6.3.2 Local Language as Cultural Signifier

Within the framework, local language functions as the foundational semiotic resource. It encompasses diverse linguistic phenomena, ranging from established indigenous languages and regional dialects to contemporary slang and hybrid language forms, all of which carry embedded cultural narratives and social associations that contribute to a distinct local identity (Li et al., 2024). Slang, language hybridity, and emotionally resonant expressions operate as signifiers that carry culturally specific meanings shaped by shared history, social practice, and everyday experience. In the Malaysian context, these linguistic forms signify belonging, familiarity, and cultural authenticity, particularly within informal and youth-oriented visual communication. This resonates with observations that translanguaging practices reflect broader sociocultural shifts and contribute to the active formation of ethnic identities in multilingual settings (Wu & Huang, 2024).

From a semiotic perspective, local language does not merely denote meaning but actively constructs identity through connotation. The integration of local language within graphic design therefore serves as a powerful means of resemiotisation, transforming linguistic signs into visual ones that reinforce cultural values and narratives (Bradley & Moore, 2018, p. 93). When embedded in graphic design, linguistic elements signal cultural proximity and shared understanding, establishing the initial layer of meaning upon which visual amplification operates. This strategic integration allows graphic design to harness the inherent cultural capital of local linguistic forms, translating nuanced socio-cultural meanings into visually accessible messages that resonate deeply with the target audience (Ding & Goh, 2023; Lestariningsih et al., 2023, p. 3335). As such, local language is positioned not merely as a communicative tool, but as a key semiotic mode that, when visually integrated, reinforces cultural identity and heritage within diverse linguistic landscapes (Lestariningsih et al., 2023, p. 3332).

6.3.3 Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier

Graphic design functions as a semiotic amplifier by visually reinforcing and extending linguistic meaning. It translates the inherent cultural capital of local language into visually compelling forms by leveraging elements such as typography, colour, layout, and imagery to deepen the impact and resonance of the linguistic message (Kweldju & Tjandra, 2023, p. 3). Design elements strengthen the relationship between the signifier (language) and the signified (cultural meaning). Typography, for example, conveys tone, personality, and cultural positioning, while layout and hierarchy guide interpretation and emphasis. Moreover, the strategic application of colour palettes and visual systems can evoke culturally specific associations and emotional responses, thereby enhancing the communicative power of linguistic content (Qulub et al., 2025, p. 234).

This study demonstrates that graphic design does not operate independently of language; rather, it intensifies linguistic meaning by making it more visible, emotionally resonant, and memorable. This multimodal approach transforms linguistic content into a layered visual experience, facilitating a deeper connection between the message and its intended audience (Bradley & Moore, 2018, p. 110; Saad, 2023, p. 241). In this sense, design functions as a visual translation of cultural language, converting words into experiential meaning. This interaction forms a semiotic assemblage in which linguistic and visual components converge to produce a richer and more complex interpretation, comparable to how bilingual resources and symbolic systems operate within broader semiotic environments (Biró, 2022, p. 82).

6.3.4 Audience Interpretation and Meaning Construction

Meaning within the framework is not fixed at the point of design production but is actively constructed through audience interpretation. This dynamic process involves decoding the interaction between linguistic and graphic semiotics, drawing upon individual cultural backgrounds, shared social experiences, and cognitive frameworks to derive meaning from designed communication (Biró, 2022, p. 82; Dobson & Dobson, 2017, p. 6). The findings indicate that audiences interpret linguistic and visual signs based on generational positioning, cultural knowledge, and prior exposure to slang.

Younger audiences, particularly Generation Z, were found to be more receptive to slang-based design, while other demographic groups relied more heavily on visual cues for interpretation. This highlights the subjective nature of semiotic reception, where the effectiveness of combined linguistic and visual elements is mediated by the interpretive lenses of diverse audience segments (Biró, 2022, p. 83).

This stage reflects core semiotic principles, which posit that meaning emerges through interpretation rather than simple transmission. The success of design communication therefore depends on designers' ability to anticipate and strategically account for varied interpretive frameworks within their semiotic constructions (Удріс-Бородавко et al., 2023). The framework thus recognises audiences as active participants in meaning-making, reinforcing the importance of culturally and demographically informed design decisions. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to design that manages multiple modes of meaning-making, including experience, history, and ideology (Han, 2023, p. 3137).

6.3.5 Ethical Consideration and Cultural Authenticity

Ethical consideration functions as a moderating layer within the framework, ensuring that the use of local language remains culturally respectful and contextually appropriate. This component examines authenticity by acknowledging that designers must navigate the complex interplay between linguistic, social, and political factors that shape brand identity in bilingual and multicultural contexts (Biró, 2022, p. 70). Participants expressed concern that the misuse or over-commercialisation of slang could lead to cultural trivialisation or misrepresentation. This underscores the importance of designers critically considering cultural implications and potential negative audience perceptions when incorporating semiotic elements, particularly slang, into marketing communication (Liu et al., 2019).

This component highlights professional responsibility in design practice, requiring designers to balance creative expression with cultural sensitivity. Ethical engagement extends beyond avoiding offence to necessitate a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural significance of linguistic choices, fostering genuine cultural connection rather than superficial appropriation (Dalamu, 2020, p. 20; Zárate & Esparza, 2018, p. 1087). By positioning ethics as an integral component rather than an

afterthought, the framework extends traditional semiotic models to incorporate social accountability and cultural stewardship. This expanded perspective aligns with contemporary discussions on decolonial design, which emphasise reflexivity, inclusivity, and recognition of diverse cultural contributions within co-design processes (Schon & Celi, 2024, p. 128).

6.3.6 Preservation of Local Identity

The final outcome of the proposed framework is the preservation of local identity. When local language is meaningfully embedded within graphic design, visually amplified through coherent design elements, appropriately interpreted by audiences, and ethically managed, graphic design functions as a medium of cultural continuity. This approach ensures that design operates not merely as a commercial tool, but as an instrument for safeguarding and celebrating linguistic heritage within contemporary visual culture (Ajani et al., 2024).

Preservation in this study is understood not as static conservation, but as an active and evolving process in which identity is continually re-articulated through contemporary design practices. In the Malaysian context, where identity is shaped by linguistic hybridity and everyday cultural experiences, the use of local language in graphic design allows cultural meanings to be translated into accessible visual forms that resonate with daily life. This process contributes to nation branding by reinforcing distinctive cultural identity at both local and national levels (Gan et al., 2012).

From a semiotic perspective, preservation occurs through repeated circulation and recognition of culturally meaningful signs. Local language operates as a signifier carrying embedded cultural values, while graphic design elements such as typography, layout, and visual hierarchy stabilise and reinforce these meanings visually. Meaning is ultimately constructed through audience interpretation, where familiarity, emotional connection, and cultural recognition contribute to identity affirmation. This iterative process supports the continued vitality of cultural memory and vernacular aesthetics within contemporary branding strategies (Ayu et al., 2025). Ethical consideration further ensures that this process remains respectful and authentic, preventing superficial or exploitative representations. Collectively, these processes demonstrate how graphic design can contribute meaningfully to the preservation of Malaysian local identity while

allowing it to evolve within a globalised environment, aligning with the principles of glocalisation in emergent nations (Gan et al., 2012; Jalil et al., 2024, p. 5). This component should be read with the qualification developed in Section 5.7.1. What the evidence of this study supports is that graphic design keeps selected vernacular forms in visible circulation and gives them a form in which younger audiences readily encounter them. It does not support the stronger claim that design preserves cultural competence, since a printed phrase transmits the form of an expression without transmitting the situational knowledge that makes it meaningful. Within the framework, therefore, this final component denotes the continued circulation and symbolic representation of selected forms of Malaysian urban identity, and is labelled accordingly rather than as preservation in an unqualified sense.

6.4 Contributions of the Proposed Framework

This study contributes a conceptual framework that integrates local language and graphic design through a semiotic lens in order to examine how local identity is represented and kept in circulation.The framework is grounded in empirical findings from Chapter 4 and theoretically informed by the semiotic discussion in Chapter 5, thereby bridging the gap between theory, data, and practice.

Unlike existing models that treat language or visual design as separate communicative systems, the proposed framework demonstrates how linguistic and visual elements operate as interdependent semiotic resources within graphic design. By positioning local language as a cultural signifier and graphic design as a semiotic amplifier, the framework clarifies how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and stabilised within everyday merchandise design.

Importantly, the framework also foregrounds audience interpretation and ethical consideration as integral stages in the meaning-making process. This reflects the empirical findings that meaning is not fixed at the point of design production, but is shaped through generational, cultural, and social decoding. By incorporating ethical consideration and cultural authenticity as a distinct component, the framework extends conventional semiotic models to address issues of responsibility, misinterpretation, and cultural dilution within commercial design contexts.

Overall, the framework offers one culturally grounded way of understanding how graphic design can function as a medium for identity representation as well as a commercial and aesthetic practice. It is a contribution to an existing conversation rather than a replacement for existing models, and its distinctiveness lies in the specificity of its context rather than in the novelty of its components: audience interpretation and ethical reflexivity are already present in social semiotics and in decolonial design scholarship, and this study's contribution is to bring them together around the particular problem of vernacular language in Malaysian merchandise design. It provides a structured way to conceptualise the dynamic relationship between language, design, audience, and ethics within the Malaysian context.

6.4.1 Theoretical Contribution

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to graphic design and visual communication scholarship by extending semiotic theory into a culturally specific, practice-oriented framework. While classical semiotic models by Saussure and Peirce explain how signs generate meaning, they often remain abstract and detached from real-world design practices. This study operationalises semiotic theory by demonstrating how sign systems function within contemporary Malaysian graphic design.

By conceptualising local language as a culturally embedded signifier and graphic design as a visual mechanism that amplifies meaning, the framework advances understanding of how semiotic processes operate within multilingual and postcolonial contexts. The inclusion of ethical consideration further enriches semiotic discourse by recognising that meaning-making in design is not value-neutral but is shaped by cultural responsibility and power relations.

In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing debates in design semiotics, cultural identity theory, and visual communication by proposing a model that accounts for cultural hybridity, audience agency, and ethical reflexivity.This represents a modest theoretical extension rather than an advancement beyond existing scholarship. The claim made here is narrow: that classical semiotic categories remain serviceable when applied to a multilingual commercial context, and that doing so requires the addition of

an explicit ethical dimension. Whether that addition constitutes a genuine theoretical contribution or a useful applied restatement is a judgement this study leaves open.

6.4.2 Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, this research demonstrates the effective integration of NVivo-supported thematic analysis with semiotic interpretation in qualitative design research. The systematic coding process provided transparency and rigour in identifying themes related to language, design, identity, audience interpretation, and ethics.

The use of NVivo visual outputs, such as thematic structures and coding summaries, supports the credibility of the analytical process and provides clear evidence of systematic data handling. More importantly, the study illustrates how qualitative findings can be synthesised into a conceptual framework, moving beyond thematic description towards theory development.

This methodological approach contributes to design research by offering a replicable model for scholars seeking to translate qualitative data into conceptual or theoretical outputs. It also demonstrates how semiotic analysis can be embedded within qualitative methodologies to deepen interpretation and enhance analytical coherence.

6.5 Practical and Cultural Contributions

6.5.1 Contribution to Graphic Design Practice

In practical terms, the proposed framework offers valuable guidance for graphic designers, creative practitioners, and brand strategists who engage with local language in visual communication. Rather than relying on intuition or trend-driven approaches, designers can use the framework as a reflective tool to evaluate how linguistic choices, visual treatments, and audience interpretation interact to produce meaning.

The framework encourages designers to consider typography, layout, and visual systems not merely as aesthetic decisions, but as semiotic devices that shape cultural interpretation. By foregrounding ethical consideration, the framework also promotes responsible design practices that respect cultural authenticity and reduce the risk of stereotyping or superficial representation.

6.5.2 Contribution to Design Education and Professional Development

The findings of this study have implications for graphic design education by highlighting the importance of semiotic literacy, cultural awareness, and ethical sensitivity. Design programmes may integrate the proposed framework into teaching and learning activities to help students critically analyse how language and visual elements function together in identity-based design.

By equipping future designers with conceptual tools to understand meaning-making processes, design education can move beyond technical skill development towards culturally informed and socially responsible practice.

6.5.3 Contribution to Cultural Preservation

At a broader cultural level, this study demonstrates that graphic design can function as a meaningful platform for preserving and transmitting local identity, particularly within everyday consumer contexts. Through the strategic integration of local language, graphic design becomes a vehicle for sustaining cultural narratives and values in contemporary forms that resonate with younger generations.

The framework supports cultural preservation by emphasising authenticity, audience engagement, and ethical responsibility, ensuring that local identity is represented in ways that are both relevant and respectful. This contribution aligns with national cultural objectives in Malaysia that seek to balance modernisation with heritage preservation within the creative industries.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research and professional practice.

6.6.1 Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies may build upon this research by adopting mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative or experimental methods. For example, audience reception studies, surveys, or eye-tracking experiments could be employed to examine how different demographic groups decode local language and visual elements in graphic design more empirically. Such approaches would complement the interpretive findings of this study and strengthen understanding of audience meaning-making processes.

The most immediate priority is empirical validation of the framework itself, which this study has not undertaken. Three routes are available. The framework could be applied by an independent researcher to a different brand, in a different language community or region, to test whether its five components remain adequate or require modification. It could be given to practising designers as a reflective instrument during a live project, with their use of it documented, to test whether it is usable rather than merely coherent. Or its audience-interpretation component could be tested directly through a reception study with a sample large enough to support inference, examining whether the decoding positions set out in Table 5.2 hold beyond the six participants from whom they were derived. Until at least one of these has been carried out, the framework remains a proposal.

Comparative research across multiple brands or design contexts is also recommended. Examining different types of merchandise, regional brands, or cultural sectors would allow for broader insights into how local language and graphic design operate across diverse Malaysian settings. Cross-cultural comparisons with other multilingual societies could further illuminate how local language functions as a semiotic resource within globalised design environments.

In addition, future research could extend the semiotic framework developed in this study to digital and interactive media, such as social media campaigns, mobile applications, or motion graphics. As visual communication increasingly occurs within digital platforms, understanding how local language and graphic design function within these spaces is essential for sustaining cultural relevance among younger audiences.

Further investigation into ethical dimensions of design practice is also recommended. While this study identifies ethical consideration as a key component of meaning-making, future research may explore how designers negotiate ethical decision-making in commercial environments, including tensions between cultural authenticity, market demand, and brand profitability.

6.6.2 Recommendations for Graphic Design Practice and Education

For professional practice, designers are encouraged to engage more critically with local language as a cultural resource, rather than treating it as a stylistic trend or decorative feature. The framework proposed in this study may serve as a practical guide for evaluating how linguistic choices, visual amplification, audience interpretation, and ethical responsibility interact within design outcomes.

Design education institutions may incorporate semiotic analysis, cultural theory, and ethical awareness more explicitly into graphic design curricula. By equipping students with conceptual tools to understand language, symbolism, and audience interpretation, future designers can develop culturally informed practices that contribute meaningfully to identity preservation.

Industry stakeholders and policymakers may also consider developing guidelines or best practices for the use of local language in visual communication, particularly in culturally sensitive or nationally representative contexts. Such initiatives could support responsible design practices while encouraging creative innovation grounded in local identity.

6.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the final stage of the research by developing a conceptual framework that integrates local language and graphic design to support the preservation of local identity. Drawing upon the empirical findings discussed in Chapter 4 and the semiotic interpretation established in Chapter 5, the framework synthesises data-driven insights and theoretical principles into a coherent model that explains how meaning is constructed through graphic design practice.

The proposed framework conceptualises local language as a cultural signifier that carries shared meanings, emotional resonance, and cultural familiarity. Graphic design is positioned as a semiotic amplifier that enhances and clarifies these meanings through typographic treatment, layout, visual hierarchy, and system coherence. Audience interpretation is recognised as a dynamic process shaped by generational and cultural decoding, highlighting the active role of audiences in meaning-making. Ethical consideration and cultural authenticity are foregrounded as essential moderating factors that ensure responsible and respectful representation of local identity within commercial design contexts. When these components function collectively, graphic design emerges as a meaningful medium for sustaining and communicating local identity in everyday life.

Through the development of this framework, Objective 3 of the study has been successfully achieved. The framework contributes theoretically by extending semiotic approaches within graphic design to include cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility as integral dimensions of meaning-making. Methodologically, it demonstrates how qualitative data analysed through NVivo can be systematically translated into a conceptual model. Practically, the framework offers guidance for designers, educators, and creative practitioners seeking to integrate local language into graphic design in ways that are culturally meaningful, communicatively effective, and ethically sound. Overall, this chapter consolidates the research contributions of the thesis and affirms the role of graphic design as a culturally embedded practice rather than a purely aesthetic or commercial activity. By linking language, design, audience interpretation, and ethical awareness, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how local identity can be preserved and communicated through contemporary graphic design within the Malaysian context.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title: The Role and Integration of Local Language and Graphic Design in Representing Malaysian Local Identity

This interview aims to explore participants' perspectives on the use of local language in graphic design, particularly in relation to Malaysian identity, audience interpretation, and ethical considerations. The questions are designed to support the study's qualitative thematic analysis (Chapter 4) and semiotic interpretation (Chapter 5).

Section 1: Background Information

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your background or expertise in graphic design, language, branding, cultural studies, or related fields?
2. Have you encountered the use of local language or slang in graphic design or branding before? If so, in what context?

Section 2: Graphic Design and Local Identity

3. In your opinion, how does graphic design contribute to the expression and preservation of Malaysian identity?
4. How does the use of local language or slang in graphic design influence the representation of Malaysian culture and identity?

Section 3: Graphic Design Elements and Meaning

5. Which graphic design elements (such as typography, colour, imagery, symbols, and messaging) do you find most effective in expressing Malaysian identity?
6. How do visual elements such as typography, layout, or imagery influence the way local language is understood or interpreted by audiences?

Section 4: Audience Interpretation

7. How do you think different audience groups (for example, younger generations, older audiences, locals, or expatriates) interpret the use of local language in graphic design?
8. In your experience, does the use of slang or informal language strengthen audience engagement? Why or why not?

Section 5: Ethical Considerations and Cultural Authenticity

9. What challenges or ethical concerns may arise when using local language or slang in graphic design?
10. How can designers ensure that the use of local language remains culturally appropriate and does not lead to misinterpretation or cultural dilution?

Section 6: Future Directions and Recommendations

11. How can graphic designers, brands, and educators effectively integrate local language into design while maintaining cultural authenticity?
12. In your view, what is the future role of graphic design in promoting and preserving Malaysian language and local identity?

Closing Question

13. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding the relationship between graphic design, local language, and Malaysian identity?

Notes

- Interviews were conducted in English or Malay, depending on participant preference.
- Follow-up questions were asked where necessary to clarify or expand responses.
- All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

APPENDIX B
NVIVO CODING STRUCTURE (NODE LIST)

Name	Description
Audience Interpretation & General Meaning	
Cultural curiosity and meaning-making	
Demographic perception	
Gen Z preference for slang	
Youth attraction and engagement	
Challenges and Ethical Consideration in Slang Usage	
Demographic differences in slang interpretation	
Ethical Consideration & Cultural Authenticity	
Challenges of slang usage	
Cultural authenticity and appropriateness	
Government or institutional guidlines	
Risk of cultural misinterpretation	
Future and Institutional Support for Identity-Based Design	
Economic and Industry impact	
Future of graphic design in language preservation	
Government and public support	
Graphic Design as a Medium of	Graphic design elements and local

Name	Description
Malaysian Identity	language as tools for expressing Malaysian identity
Cultural representation and branding	
Graphic design promoting national identity globally	
Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier	
Design as cultural representation	
Graphic design shaping national identity	
Graphic elements as a complete system	
Importance of typography and visual execution	
Visual impact in consumer decision-making	
International branding impact	
Local language as Cultural Signifier	
Language enrichment and evolution	
Language hybridity in Malaysian culture	
Local slang as national identity symbol	
Slang creating emotional connection	
Risk of cultural misinterpretation	
Role of Local Language and Slang in Design Communication	Use of slang and local language in graphic design to communicate meaning and identity
Authenticity in design	

Name	Description
Difficulty translating slang into visuals	
Slang as innovation and creativity	
Slang increasing Memorability	
Used of Local slang in graphic design	
Youth empowerment through slang	

APPENDIX C
NVIVO CODING SUMMARY

Sub-theme	Parent Theme	Files	References
Slang creating emotional connection	Local Language as Cultural Signifier	5	8
Language hybridity in Malaysian culture	Local Language as Cultural Signifier	4	6
Graphic design shaping national identity	Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier	6	11
Typography and visual execution	Graphic Design as Semiotic Amplifier	5	7
Youth attraction and engagement	Audience Interpretation	5	8
Cultural authenticity and appropriateness	Ethical Consideration	4	8

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANTS BIODATA

Participant Code	Role / Background	Area of Expertise	Years of Experience	Relevant Background to Study
P1	Academician (Malay Language)	Malay Language Education	Over 50 years	Extensive experience in teaching and research related to Malay language use, cultural discourse, and linguistic identity
P2	Graphic Designer	Branding and visual communication	3 years	Professional experience in branding campaigns incorporating Malaysian festive elements and cultural themes
P3	Academician (Graphic Design)	Design Management, Local Identity and Culture	Over 30 years	Academic publications and consultancy work related to Malaysian design identity and cultural representation
P4	Gen-Z Designer / Illustrator	Illustration, visual literacy, local identity	5 years	Active involvement in design projects integrating Malay language, proverbs, and culturally embedded narratives

P5	Expatriate	Comparative education	10 years	International perspective gained through professional experience in Malaysia, contributing an external viewpoint on local identity
P6	Creative Director	Creative strategy, art direction, branding	Over 20 years	Leadership in national-level branding and identity projects highlighting Malaysian culture and visual identity

APPENDIX E
VISUAL DATA AND MERCHANDISE SAMPLES

Description

This appendix presents selected visual samples of APOM Malaysia merchandise analysed in this study. The items were chosen based on their explicit use of local language, slang, and culturally embedded expressions within graphic design.

Coding System for Visual Data

To ensure systematic analysis and clarity, each merchandise item was assigned a unique code based on product type:

- **APOM-TS** – T-Shirts
- **APOM-MG** – Mugs
- **APOM-TG** – Tote Bags
- **APOM-TB** – Tumblers
- **APOM-BR** – Baby Rompers
- **APOM-PC** – Phone Cases
- **APOM-DC** – Drink Coasters
- **APOM-GC** – Greeting Cards
- **APOM-NB** – Note Book

Example:
APOM-TS01 refers to the first T-shirt sample analysed.

These codes are used consistently throughout Chapters 4 and 5 to support thematic analysis and semiotic interpretation.

APPENDIX F
CERTIFICATION OF CONTENT VALIDATION OF INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

CERTIFICATION OF CONTENT VALIDATION OF INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Date: _____

I, the undersigned,

Name : _____
Position : _____
Institution : _____
Area of Expertise:. _____

hereby certify that I have reviewed and evaluated the content validity of the interview protocol to be used by:

Student Name: Noor Sahirah binti Md Nayan
Programme : Master of Art & Design
University : Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

for the research entitled:

"Graphic Design Matters: Defining the Role and Integration of Local Language and Graphic Design in Preserving Malaysian Local Identity."

The review was conducted to ensure that the interview instrument is linguistically accurate, clear, culturally appropriate, and aligned with the research objectives. Particular attention was given to the suitability of terminology, sentence structure, clarity of questions, and conceptual consistency with the scope and purpose of the study.

Based on my review, the interview instrument is considered appropriate for use in this research. Several suggestions for improvement were provided to enhance clarity and precision of wording, and the necessary revisions have been made by the researcher. Therefore, I confirm that the interview protocol demonstrates adequate content validity and is suitable for data collection in this study.

Yours sincerely,

.....
Name : _____
Position : _____
Institution: _____

AUTHOR'S PROFILE



Noor Sahirah binti Md Nayan graduated with First Class Honours and was placed on the Rector's List for the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in *Malay for International Communication* at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 2023. She is currently pursuing a Master of Art & Design at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Her Master's thesis, entitled *"Graphic Design Matters:* Defining the Role and Integration of Local Language and Graphic Design in Representing Malaysian Local Identity*,"* adopts a qualitative research approach using a case study of a Malaysian local merchandise brand. The study employs content analysis and thematic analysis to develop a multi-layered understanding of how local language and graphic design interact in contemporary merchandise. It further proposes a conceptual framework explaining how this integration can contribute to the preservation of Malaysian local identity. Noor Sahirah has begun disseminating her research through academic publications and conference presentations. She is a co-author of the article *"The Impact of Graphic Design and Local Language (Slang) in Strengthening Local Identity: A Case Study of the APOM Malaysia Brand,"* published in the *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences* (Special Issue INCOED 4.0, 2024). She has also presented related research in the paper *"Peranan Bahasa Reka Bentuk dalam Menonjolkan Identiti Tempatan: Kajian Kes oleh Jenama Tempatan (APOM Malaysia)"* at a conference on education, language, and linguistics organised by PERSADA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Mohamed Salim, N. A., Md Nayan, N. S., Mohamad Shafiee, N. S., & Kamrozzaman, N. A. (2025). The impact of graphic design and local language (slang) in strengthening local identity: A case study of the APOM Malaysia brand. *Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences, 7*(4).