

How Advertising Speaks to Consumers: A Case of Youth Language in Local Commercial Discourse

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Abstract:

Like other developing countries, especially Malaysian urban youths, are continuously creating their “own language” to set themselves apart from the older generation. Referred to as Generation Z or Gen Z (post-millennials), these group of youths use slang that takes the form of code-mixing, abbreviations and ‘nonstandard variety’ of languages. First, this study aimed to reveal the patterns of youth language incorporated into local commercial discourse to attract young-adult consumers. The focus of this study is to determine how youth language is used and at the same time bring forth the different linguistic strategies employed in fashion articles. Secondly, this study investigated the perception of fellow Malaysians, especially young adults, regarding the existence of a youth language, especially code-mixing, in local fashion magazines. This was a qualitative descriptive study, but numbers and percentages were also used to support the findings. The various types of youth language patterns used were gathered based on titles of 60 commercial articles published in 3 famous local fashion magazines, namely Remaja (Youth), Keluarga (Family) and Nona (Woman). The findings showed a high usage of non-standard language and code-mixing in local advertisements. The main reason for using youth language in advertising is to attract and engage the attention of potential target consumers within the Gen Z age group. On the other hand, it was found that most respondents had positive perceptions regarding these kinds of advertisements and consider it as a good marketing skill.

Keywords: *advertisement, youth language, code-mixing, linguistic strategies*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Youth language” can be considered as an urban phenomenon and McLaughlin (2009) strongly supports this perspective by suggesting that “youth languages generally originate with borrowing lexicons from other languages or a variety of slangs, including the argots of crime and delinquencies and exhibit high variation. After it becomes established as a youth language and its speakers grow older, it might be adopted by the general urban population and subsequently become urban vernaculars itself” (p. 9). According to Pujolar (2008), youth language is normally used by adolescents and right up to those in the mid-twenties. Research on language and youths has been growing over recent decades (Rampton, 1995; Appadurai, 1996 and Pujolar, 2008). Rampton (1995) for instance, scrutinized linguistic and cultural diversity among adolescent youths in the United Kingdom. The findings showed the existence of a variety of English used in the communication amongst youths, or between youths and adults.

In line with this trend, advertisement and commercial discourse in fashion magazines targeting Gen Z have incorporated youth language, such as code-mixing, non-standard language, digital abbreviations, etc., to attract its target consumers. Without doubt, several primary factors such as the advent of information and communication technologies, the emergence of cultural industries, and the multitude of phenomena associated with globalization are responsible for the prolific use of a variety of linguistics in commercial discourse. Since language forms the core of all advertising, Tanaka (1999) asserted that advertisers use rhetorical devices, techniques and strategies to achieve their goals in attracting, engaging and changing the attitude of their target consumers.

Based on previous studies, one important question is why modern commercial discourses in a multilingual language setting, like in Malaysia, chose to use youth language with a linguistic variety and not just one standard language, like conventional advertisements? Does this strategy attract the interest of our young society?

In contrast to some multilingual countries, in Malaysia, the Malay language is used across the country daily. Even though English has had an important role and influence on the language situation in Malaysia, Malay is still the language chosen for street signs, was for a long time the main language used in print media, and was traditionally used for spoken interactions at all levels of society, from shopping to government discussions. However, in recent years, the language scene in Malaysia has changed due to the effects of globalization and modernization. In this case, the importance of English was brought about by globalization and modernization. Since then, English has been used for written purposes and as a spoken language, especially in urban areas like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru. In other words, urban areas are characterized by high cultural and linguistic diversity that stems from increased political awareness and immigration (Wiese, 2017).

One trend is the notable increase in the use of English as a written language, including Malaysia's linguistic landscape, which reflects a growing salience of English as a marker of group identity. The change in Malaysia's sociolinguistic context, particularly in advertising, drives this study to reveal the patterns of youth language such as funky English, code-mixing and code-switching, street slang, teen-talk, initials and hashtags, with a focus on how the language is used and at the same time expose the different linguistic strategies employed in Malay commercial discourse.

According to Cook (2008), advertising's language creativity makes it a particularly rich source for language and discourse analysis. Hence, this paper intended to scrutinize the language patterns used in the title of Malay fashion articles and studied the perception regarding such advertisements among Malaysian consumers. The research questions posed by this study were:

1. What are the characteristics of youth language normally found in Malay commercial discourse?
2. What is the perception of Malaysian consumers regarding youth language in local commercial discourse?
3. What are the reasons for their perception regarding the use of youth language in commercial discourse?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach; however, numbers and percentages were also used to report and support the findings. The convenient sampling technique was used to identify, collect and select data. According to Salkind (1997), data sampling is a process of classifying and selecting a small part of information or data to be studied.

There were two parts to data collection in this study. First, characteristics of youth language were gathered from the titles of 60 articles published in three popular Malay fashion magazines, namely *Remaja* [Youth], *Keluarga* [Family] and *Nona* [Woman]. The samples were purposively collected, and the advertisements were then categorized based on the patterns of youth language used. Second, the perception of Malaysian consumers regarding the use of youth language in advertisements was obtained through a questionnaire. Participants in this study were local students studying in a public institution of higher education in 2018 and were all aged between 20 – 43 years old. A total of 75 respondents, comprising 57 female and 18 male students were randomly selected to answer the questionnaire. All respondents were local students undertaking Bachelors, Masters or PhD studies at public institutions of higher education. The convenient sampling method was used in this study for selecting participants to ensure the reliability of the results and to gather authentic answers. However, the questionnaire analysis results cannot be generalized as the samples cannot be considered as representative of youths in

Malaysia. Besides, the scale of study was also small so the results cannot be generalised to represent a larger population.

The questionnaire was made up of two sections. The first section focuses on demographic questions aimed at obtaining an overview of participants' backgrounds. The second section intended to obtain respondents' perceptions regarding the use of youth language in Malay language advertisements. There are 7 questions in this section and respondents were required to rate the statements using the prepared Likert scale ranging from (1) to (5), whereby (1) represents "Strongly Disagree", and (5) represents "Strongly Agree".

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is divided into two parts. The first part describes the language patterns that appear in the data and its sociolinguistic position in the Malaysian context. The second section deals with the perception of Malaysian consumers regarding the use of youth languages, such as code-mixing and non-standard language in local advertisements.

3.1 The Youth Language Patterns Used in Malay Advertisements

Easy access to the internet and satellite television in Malaysia exposes society, especially teenagers and young adults, to extensive worldwide content. This exposure is not limited to just contact with diverse cultures and lifestyles but also a variety of languages and dialects, hence, leading to the use of mixed codes, funky language, street slang, teen talk, hashtags, *inter alia*. To stay relevant, advertisers must create advertisements that are more language-oriented as it is more effective at communicating added value to potential buyers (Mary Wangui, 2013). Also, the use of youth language, especially code-mixing in advertisements, is considered persuasive and a good marketing tool (Sulaiman et al., 2013). Nevertheless, advertisers should also be aware of the different needs and perceptions of consumers, in general.

The following section describes of various forms of youth language patterns found in local advertisements, from single words to substantial strings of sentences, but with only one language mixing/switching. Hence, the data analysis exposed at least three characteristics of youth language in Malay advertisements, such as high usage of English words or expressions, the existence of syllabic shortening or 'clipping', semantic innovation and new words influenced by the English language and slang / non-standard words.

3.2 High Usage of English Words or Expressions

Data showed that most of the English words used appeared in code-switching style. The Malay language was the dominant language used in advertising in these selected fashion magazines. However, in Malaysia, English has become the next most

frequently used language when delivering messages to target consumers. Although data were from a monolingual Malay language magazine, it was clear that advertisements in it were not monolingual as almost half of the advertisements were bilingual because it used code-mixing as one of the marketing strategies to attract the interest of target consumers.

However, when considering the current situation of using the Malay language, the dominance of English in advertisements is not surprising, which is perceived as the norm rather than the exception (Canut, 2009), given that it appears in Malay language magazines. The appearance of English expressions, code-switching and digital abbreviations in Malay commercial discourse are shown below.

Figure 1. Foreign words and code-switched in local advertisements



Figure 1 shows the existence of English expressions in Malay advertisements using the code-switching style. The Malay language is found in the main body of the text; providing information addressed to target readers of the advertisement. In some cases, English appears at the beginning of the text, and a few more words are inserted in the middle of the sentences in the Malay language.

- a. English expressions appear at the beginning of the text:
 - i. Original text : Back to 60’s! Mutiara bukan aksesori nenek-nenek tapi gaya ini klasik selama-lamanya.
 Translation : [Back to the 60s! Diamonds are not grandmothers’ accessories but it will be forever a classic style.]
- b. English expressions are inserted in the centre of the Malay sentences:
 - i. Original text : Panduan bergaya bawah panas terik, a big no untuk kasut tanpa stoking!
 Translation : [The guideline for being stylish under the sun, is a big no to wearing shoes without socks]

- ii. Original text : Indahnya berlian Hearts on fire, aksesori mewah idaman setiap wanita.
Translation : [The Hearts on Fire diamond is so beautiful, luxurious accessories are the dream of every woman.]
- iii. Original text : Cantik from head to toe dengan kuasa aloe vera. Jom tiru 7 trik ekspres cantik ini.
Translation : Beautiful from head to toe due to the power of the aloe vera. Let's try 7 express beauty tricks
- c. English expressions appear at the beginning and are inserted in the centre of the Malay sentence:
- i. Original text : A dress to remember. Busana untuk first dance perkahwinan Yuna ini rupanya direka oleh pereka muda!
Translation : [A dress to remember. A dress for the first dance during Yuna's marriage was actually designed by a young designer!]
- ii. Original text : Setelah lama menunggu kolaborasi hangat, hello fashion people! Inilah rekaan eksklusif Erdem x H&M.
Translation : [After a long much-awaited collaboration, hello fashion people! This is the exclusive creation by Erdem H&M.]
- d. English words appear at the end of the sentence:
- i. Original text : Kita dikenali kerana gaya kita. Pereka fesyen Linda Isa kongsi tip gaya lokal yang awesome!
Translation : [We are recognised because of our style. Linda Isa, a fashion designer, shared a few awesome tips on local styles!]
- ii. Original text : Jenuh tunggu rambut panjang. Mujur ada petua bagus untuk cecutkan prosesnya. Try-lah!
Translation : [Tired of waiting for your hair to grow. Luckily, we have tips to speed up the process. Let's try it!]
- e. English words that appear at the beginning and at the end of the Malay sentence:
- i. Original text : Good hair day every day. Tiru 5 trik rambut beralun lembut & sihat ini. No 3 tu rare.
Translation : [Good hair day every day. Try these five tricks for smooth, wavy and healthy hair. No 3 is rare.]

All these advertisements represent innovative strategies in advertising. As suggested by Torkington (2009), since English is not the community's native language, it still appears in most local advertisements, which might indicate the symbolizing of foreign taste, modernity, high social status or globalization. According to the contemporary communicative situation, this is an acceptable phenomenon since

English is a common language used by Malaysian youths. Code-mixing in local advertising was invented by e-advertisers to attract the interest of target consumers. According to Cook (2011), shared information between e-target consumers and advertisers plays an essential role, to the extent that advertisements create an atmosphere of intimacy and informality.

3.3 Syllabic Shortening or ‘clipping’

Another variety of a language pattern that appears in local advertisements is syllabic shortening or ‘clipping’, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Syllabic shortening or ‘clipping’ in local advertisements



Data show that the Malay advertisement is bombarded with the use of syllabic shortening or ‘clipping’.

- i. Original text : 5 trik untuk kelihatan lebih stylish & up to date. Petik jari jer rupanya.
Translation : [Five tricks to look more stylish and up to date. It is as easy as snapping your fingers.]
- ii. Original text : Ibu yang sering letih, segera minum air jus ni sebagai booster. Lebih fit & fresh.
Translation : [Mothers who frequently feel tired, try this juice as a booster. It makes you feel more fit and fresh.]
- iii. Original text : Badan dah kurus tapi kulit pula flabby. Lakukan 20 cara efektif ini untuk mengencangkan kulit kendur.
Translation : [The body is already slim, but the skin is still flabby. Do these 20 effective exercises to tighten your flabby skin.]

The examples in Figure 2 show three syllabic shortenings, as in *jer* (*sahaja*), *dah* (*sudah*) and *tapi* (*tetapi*). These syllabic shortenings are commonly used in daily conversations by interlocutors regardless of whether the communicative setting is formal or informal. However, this kind of syllabic shortening is not acceptable in written texts, such as advertisements. Based on the suggestion in the Theory of Relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), the use of common syllabic shortening like this could be an effective approach by advertisers to make their target consumers feel more comfortable and acceptable.

3.4 Semantic Innovation and New Words Influenced by Other Languages

Semantic innovation and new words were found in the data. This kind of linguistic variation is normally presented using the ‘inverted comma’.

Figure 3. Semantic innovation and new words influenced form other languages in local advertisements



Figure 3 contains examples of semantic innovation and new words that have appeared in local advertisements. Among others, the advertisers used the word ‘pancing’ (literally: to fish) to explain the correct way to style any particular outfit to ‘to hook someone’. Furthermore, the word ‘fashionista’ was also used, which is traditionally related to a devoted follower of fashion. It seems that nowadays, the word ‘fashionista’ does not only refer to a devoted follower of fashion but generally includes ordinary teenagers and young adults. Other expressions such as ‘comfort woman’, ‘girl power’, ‘urban fantasy’ and ‘paha dah macam drumstick’ [literally: the thigh looks like a drumstick], are examples of semantic innovations found in the data.

3.5 Slang / Non-standard Words

To attract the interest of target consumers, the advertiser uses all kinds of strategies, including the use of slang and non-standard words.

Figure 4. The use of slang / non-standard words in local advertisements



Data show that the term ‘youth language’ implies that it is a complete language with its “own” lexicon and grammar. Figure 4 socio-linguistically shows a new urban advertisement identity with particular characteristic patterns of slang or non-standard words in local advertisements. For example, words like ‘korang’ [literally: you guys], ‘eww’, ‘tercacak’ [literally: straight and messy] and ‘tak keruan’ [literally: chaos]. These words are slang words and commonly used in daily conversation.

The main purpose of using a youth language in advertising is to attract and engage the attention of potential target consumers in the Gen Z age group. Young people, mainly teenagers and young adults, tend to use a common language when communicating with their peers. Linguistically, language patterns used by this group are called ‘slang’ and are characterized by the use of distinct vocabularies that eventually become fashionable and serve as markers that indicate in-group belonging (Chambers, 2003; Mahdad, 2012).

3.6. The Perception of Malaysian Consumers Regarding Youth Language in Advertisements

This section discusses the perception of Malaysian consumers, especially young-adults and adults, regarding youth language in Malay advertisements and explains the reasons for their respective perceptions. By taking into consideration the participants’ demographic profile, including age, gender, educational background, their first language; hence, the following findings were obtained:

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percent (%)
20 - 30 years old	51	68.0
30 - 40 years old	19	25.0
40 and above	5	7.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 2. Gender of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	18	24.0
Female	57	76.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 3. Educational background of respondents

Educational background	Frequency	Percent (%)
Degree	61	81.0
Master	12	16.0
PhD	2	3.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 4. Respondents' First language

First language	Frequency	Percent (%)
Malay	55	73.0
English	11	15.0
Other (Mandarin, Tamil, Iban, etc.)	9	12.0
Total	75	100.0

Table 1 shows the respondents' variation in age. The demographic details reveal that respondents are aged between 20 - 40 years old, in which 51 are aged 20 - 30 years old, 19 are aged 30 - 40 and 5 are aged 40 years old and above. In Table 2, information concerning gender shows that female respondents are dominant (57), whereas there are only 18 male respondents. Table 3 shows the respondents' educational background, which involves three educational levels with 61 holding Bachelor's degrees, 12 holding Masters' degrees and 2 holding PhDs. Finally, Table 4 shows the respondents' first language with 55 respondents able to speak Malay, 11 respondents English and 9 respondents able to speak languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Iban, etc.

Furthermore, the researcher posed three questions in the questionnaire to scrutinize the perception of Malaysian consumers regarding youth language in local commercial discourse. The questions involved the frequent occurrence of youth language in the local commercial discourse, the type of language used in advertisements to attract greater interest among local consumers as well as their positivity and preference regarding the use of youth language in advertisements. The results of the study are shown in the following tables:

Table 5. Item 1: "I always come across youth language like code-switching, funky English and syllabic shortening in local commercial discourse"

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	2	2.7
Average	7	9.4
Agree	20	26.7
Strongly Agree	46	61.2
Total	75	100.0

Table 5 shows that most respondents (61.2%) 'strongly agree' that they always come across youth language, like code-switching, funky English and syllabic shortening, in local advertisements. Meanwhile, another 26.7% answered 'agree', 9.4% answered 'average' and the rest 2.7% answered 'disagree'. The results indicate that the existence of linguistic variety in local commercial discourse is acceptable and inevitable in a multilingual society because it is more in line with contemporary

trends, compared to conventional advertisements that normally depend on standard language.

Table 6. Item 2: “I think that this kind of advertisement is more attractive and influential than only using one language”

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Average	10	13.4
Agree	10	13.4
Strongly Agree	55	73.2
Total	75	100.0

Moving on to Table 6. As stated, Item 2 is about the attractiveness of using youth language in local advertisements. It shows that the majority of respondents (73.2%) answered ‘strongly agree’, while 13.4 % answered ‘agree’ and another 13.4% answered ‘average’. The findings depict a positive response to the use of youth language in local commercial discourse. This is consistent with Luna and Peracchio (2005), who also received positive responses regarding the use of code-switching in advertisements. Hence, it can be suggested that advertisements with linguistic variety had attracted and influenced the majority of respondents.

Table 7. Item 3: “I positively perceive the use of youth language in local advertisements”

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	2	2.7
Average	12	16.1
Agree	53	70.7
Strongly Agree	8	10.5
Total	75	100.0

Item 3 intended to scrutinize Malaysians’ level of acceptance of youth language used in local advertisements. The results in Table 7 show that 70.7% of respondents answered ‘agree’ to the statement and had a positive perception regarding it. Besides, 16.1% answered ‘average’, 10.5% ‘strongly agree’ and 2.7% ‘disagree’. Based on the total findings, most respondents positively accepted the use of youth language in local commercial discourse. According to the results in Table 6 and 7, it can be suggested that the existence of youth language in local advertisements not only fulfils commercial purposes but also reflects the linguistic realities of its target consumers, in a society where English performs a communicative function and the majority in the society, especially in urban areas, understand this language.

3.7. The Reason for Malaysian Consumers' Perception Regarding the Use of Youth Language in Local Advertisements

Also, this study relied on another four questions to obtain answers related to reasons for the consumers' respective perceptions. The questions were about the attractiveness of the advertisement, whether the youth language used in the advertisement was confusing, was the message described in the advertisement easily understandable and could the use of youth language in advertisements cause the Malay language to become obsolete. The results are shown in the following tables.

Table 8. Item 4: "This kind of advertisement attracts my interest"

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	1	1.3
Disagree	8	10.7
Average	21	28.0
Agree	34	45.3
Strongly Agree	11	14.7
Total	75	100.0

Table 8 shows that the majority of respondents (45.3%) answered 'agree', while 28.0% of participants answered 'average', followed by 14.7% who answered, 'strongly agree'. However, the results for item 4 were slightly different as 10.7% of respondents answered 'disagree' and another 1.3% remarked 'strongly disagree'. The results help form an early conclusion that respondents have doubts about the influence of attractiveness in this kind of advertisement.

Table 9. Item 5: "The use of youth language in local advertisements confuses me and does not attract my interest"

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	8	10.7
Disagree	42	56.0
Average	21	28.0
Agree	3	4.0
Strongly Agree	1	1.3
Total	75	100.0

Item 5 in the questionnaire scrutinizes whether the use of youth language in local advertisements causes disconcertment and decreases the ability to exert influence on respondents. Table 9 shows that a fair number of respondents (56%) resorted to disagree with the statement and those with an average answer were second-ranked with 28.0%, while 10.7% had strongly disagreed. From a total of 75 respondents, 4.0% decided to 'agree' and 1.3% 'strongly agree' with the statement. This implies

that several respondents were not prepared to accept the unconventional method used to deliver messages in local commercial discourse.

Table 10. Item 6: “There is no problem at all in understanding this commercial discourse”

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	0	0.0
Average	4	5.3
Agree	42	56.0
Strongly Agree	29	38.7
Total	75	100.0

Table 10 shows the responses regarding whether there was a problem in understanding commercial discourse that uses youth language. 42 respondents (56.0%) answered ‘agree’, 29 respondents (38.7%) answered ‘strongly agree’ and the rest 4 respondents (5.3%) answered ‘average’ when they were asked if they had a problem understanding that type of commercial discourse. The results in Table 9 and 10 suggests that the majority of respondents understood well the messages delivered in the commercial discourse that used youth language. This method, undoubtedly, increased the interest in that particular advertisement and captivated the respondents more than the traditional advertisement, which only used one language.

Table 11. Item 7: “The use of youth language in local advertisement obliterates the Malay language”

Scale	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Disagree	0	0.0
Disagree	4	5.3
Average	45	60.0
Agree	26	34.7
Strongly Agree	0	0
Total	75	100

In the last item in the questionnaire, respondents were enquired about their opinion whether the use of youth language in local advertisements would gradually make the Malay language obsolete. Table 11 shows that 60.0% of respondents had a ‘neutral’ stand about the statement, while 34.7% answered ‘agree’. The remainder 5.3% of respondents answered ‘disagree’ with the statement in Item 7. The number of respondents who answered ‘agree’ was more than those who disagreed. This suggests that the excessive use of youth language in commercial discourse might indirectly affect the national language of Malaysia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study had discussed new marketing strategies for Malaysian advertisers. As seen in the examples provided, the use of youth language in local commercial discourse is one of the communicative strategies that speakers (in this case advertisers) develop to demonstrate their link as well as create an intimate relationship with the target group of consumers. There were four patterns of youth language found in selected data, namely an abundant use of English words or expressions, syllabic shortening or 'clipping', semantic innovation and non-standard language. All these varieties of language patterns are incorporated in local commercial discourse using the code-mixing style. As mentioned earlier, English expressions were inserted in the beginning and middle of the text, and in certain cases, it appeared at the end of the sentences.

On the other hand, the analysis of the questionnaire revealed that most respondents positively perceived this kind of youth language in local commercial discourse. They agreed that this can be a good marketing strategy to attract and engage the interest of target consumers. The youth language incorporated in local commercial discourse was more influential, easily understood and effective. However, this situation sparked some concern among respondents as they feared this step would eventually render the Malay language obsolete over time. As stated in the findings, there were quite a number of participants who agreed with the statement and believed that this strategy does not play a big role in persuading target customers.

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