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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING [INSERT PREFERRED NAME HERE]: ACADEMIC NAMING CONVENTIONS WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *In any cross-cultural communication getting someone's name wrong is a constant source of worry and potential embarrassment. More importantly the naming styles and conventions of many countries creates confusion, Malaysia being 'Truly Asia' suffers from this particularly due to it having three major different ethnic groups (Malay's, Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians) within the population. This paper is based on inductive research living in Malaysia over the past fifteen years. As University rankings drive an increased number of international academic appointments this creates a problem with referencing and citations. Failure to follow a standardised notation may result in publications being omitted from an Academic's profile – be it under Research Gate or Google Scholar. Consequently, an early decision on one's preferred academic name is required. Whichever name is chosen, it must be promulgated consistently on every piece of marketing collateral that the institution or individual publishes.*

Keywords: branding, culture, communication, name, reference.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on inductive research or grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), the author having lived in Malaysia for the past fifteen years, worked in the International Americas as well as Europe & Africa for various multinational organizations and been the subject of a German company acquisition, Dent (2014).

The importance of branding is understood by most marketers. However, the impact of an individual's brand name is surprisingly ignored by many Malaysian academics, to their peril! Whether you are an engineer, accountant or butterfly collector this applies to you (Vitberg, 2010). "Personal branding becomes more and more important for all professionals today. Because the new way of making business today connects peers above hierarchies, being well-known helps to achieve success in the networked business environment, called the network economy" (Powell, Staw, & Cummings, 2003).

The importance of branding and brand names is replete with disaster stories (Nova, Bum etc.) but targeting the right name in the right market is a sine qua non it is astonishing how many still get it wrong. Amongst practicing real marketers this can be forgiven; for Marketing academics this is can prove an arrow in the heel. The importance of self-branding and its impact on 'Academic Reputation' is rising due to this factor being included in various ranking algorithms (Duffy & Pooley, 2017).

Academic Titles

The convention in Malaysian universities for Malaysian Chinese academics to combine their title with their given (or Western adopted) name rather than their surname (as in the West). Hence Dr Derek or Associate Professor Derek as opposed to Dr Ong. I experienced the same naming convention when arriving in Malaysia when I was often called Mr Michael rather than Mr Dent. The addition of the title 'Mr' in Malaysia denotes respect, even though the conjugation of the formal 'Mr' with the informal 'Michael' sounds nonsensical in English. This odd combination actually shows respect together with some level of intimacy so may be of great value, particularly when communicating with students.

Malaysian Chinese names

Dr Soo¹ is a Malaysian Economist I have worked with who is employed by Lancaster University in the UK. The first time I met him I greeted him thus: 'Good morning Dr Kwok, how are you?' I had not realised that Kwok Tong had already followed one of my ideas and had changed the word order of his name to fit the British convention. His family name is Soo and his given name is Kwok Tong. Clever stuff – but it had fooled me.

This is also a problem encountered by western academics asking Malaysian Chinese their name. A Gwailoh will be expecting their inter-locutor to provide their given name as they are meeting in real time and in person. However, a Malaysian Chinese academic will frequently give their family name (Wong, Gan, Foo etc.). This creates some confusion and when compounded with formal titles this can soon get quite messy.

Doctor! Doctor!

I once worked for a Germany company in which many of the senior managers (including my line manager) had double doctorates. Woe betide anyone who greeted them as merely; Dr X! The correct appellation was of course 'Guten morgen Dr Dr X'. In those circles I was known as Herr Dent, (never Michael which would have been far too intimate for a formal business greeting in Germany). In Florida (where I worked from 2000 to 2001) the emphasis was always on a first name basis. On arrival I was told (in a friendly, conspiratorial fashion) that en Español my name would be Miguel. I replied, rather haughtily, that my name was Michael! This was a mistake in terms of cultural intelligence (Barnes, Smith, & Hernández-Pozas, 2017). I had been offered a local name and had declined it, a BIG mistake. In fact, many immigrants to the United States would rapidly change their names to something more Anglo-Saxon to ease assimilation for them and their family (Gerhards & Hans, 2009). Using cultural intelligence, it is clear that using local vernacular and adopting a local brand name is the correct adaptive approach (Dent, 2020).

This is also a potential pitfall for well qualified Malaysians in the United States where the term 'Professor' is used very loosely. An Associate Professor in the US may not even have a doctorate. So once again the title 'Associate Professor Ong, PhD' on a business card takes away any potential confusion. In Malaysia it is well-nigh impossible to be an Associate Professor (Professor Madya) without having a PhD so the mouthful Associate Professor Dr Derek Ong.....is best avoided – especially at Graduation ceremonies. In fact, the British convention in spoken English is to drop the Associate appellation, 'Professor' suffices, although not in when written.

¹ <https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=medCLSIAAAAJ>

I well remember working in the US with a job title of ‘Marketing Operations Manager, International Americas’ for a European MNC and being considered at too low a level to converse with Vice-Presidents never mind Senior Vice Presidents! I later discovered that the ‘so called’ SVPs had a lower level of revenue responsibility than most of my direct reports.

Mick, Mike, Michael, Miguel & Michel

When I was young and football players were real heroes Mick Prendergast was the centre forward for my favourite football team so I decided I would be known as Mick Dent henceforth. This is in accordance with social identity theory whereby “the core of an identity is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a rôle” (Stets & Burke, 2000). At the time I was also captain of my College 2nd XI. This phase lasted until my early twenties. When I was at London Business School, I became known as Mike Dent and published a case study under that name. Later I was told that a two-syllable name did not sound very academic and I decided to move onto the full name that my parents gave me ‘Michael’ as Alford (1987) might have suggested. Shortly after leaving LBS I joined Coopers & Lybrand and discovered that proper consultants had names based only on their initials. My boss (Professor Christopher D Foster) was known as CDF and the 5 a side football team that played under his name was known as the ‘Seedy F’s’!

When I worked on various European committees my French speaking Belgian and French colleagues referred to me as Michel, which is a well-established man’s name. I was now more culturally attuned and readily welcomed my new appellation. The phenomenon of changing one’s name to fit with a new culture is well established This was fine until at a larger European meeting occurred, where my British friends were astonished to hearing me referred to in the female gender and wondered what it was that they did not know about me!

Western Middle Names

I had once a had an excellent boss² named ‘The Honourable Peter M M Campbell’ (the son of a Lord). It was a source of continuous dissatisfaction for him to be restricted to only one middle initial when entering the United States as he had two. As he put it when confronted by an immigration officer ‘the problem is not with my name – it is with your form’.

I now have an English Provost at my University who has a middle name which under normal circumstances but few (other than his parents) would know. Now it is emblazoned upon his door, for all to see. In Malaysia with its obsession for full names according to your identity card (IC) this creates additional confusion. I have frequently been called out at queues asking for Dr Murray?? It usually takes me a while to realise that this is actually me! The answer to this dilemma for any visiting academics to Malaysia is to avoid divulging your full middle name to anyone in authority. My personal response when asked; is that my middle name is a Scottish Clan name and cannot be revealed to any person on pain of death. Given that my ex-wife’s maiden name was Campbell this has at least the Colgate ring of confidence (Haider, 2019) about it if not strictly, actually true...

² Funnily enough in the United States the word ‘boss’ can be rather insulting, whereas in Malaysia it denotes respect.

Dr [Surname] PhD (No!)

This is clearly redundancy in action (unless of course you actually have degrees in Medicine as well as Philosophy). In academic circles this seems overly pretentious and ‘first name surname PhD’ is to be preferred. It also avoids the possible confusion with a medical doctor (who confusingly may not have a doctorate at all – merely two undergraduate degrees – MB and ChB).

I am unclear as to whether if you have a higher doctorate (i.e. D.Litt. or DSc) this might still obtain, but I kind of doubt it. Anyway, if you already have a higher doctorate you are already way above such arcane disputes.

More importantly with the drive for global recognition, conferences, papers etc. it is essential to use the same brand name in all markets. Malaysia may prefer titles but internationally this may not translate so well. Tun Mahathir Mohamad being but one example as this will not be understood by most. Apparently when Nelson Mandela landed at Subang airport in October 1990 his first question to Mahathir was ‘How is Tengku?’³ A major faux pas on several levels.

Try not to change your brand name, ever! The usage of Maiden or Married names

“The brand name is arguably the most important element of the branding mix, because it is the one element you hope never to have to change. Packaging designs will be updated, advertising campaigns will change, even product formulations may alter. But the brand name will stay the same” (Hart, 1998).

Getting married is an occupational hazard for most female academics. The issue then is whether to adopt your husband’s name or not. My ex-wife (Fiona Elsa Dent) has written several books, had a column in the Financial Times and is well known in academic circles. After our (mutually agreed and friendly divorce) she had the option of wiping the slate clean and reverting to her maiden name. Unfortunately, with so much brand equity already built into her extant brand name a change back to Fiona Campbell did not make sense. A fortiori an athlete named Ffyona Campbell had just been exposed as having fabricated her experiences as published in her best-selling book, so a clear case of double jeopardy.

If you do have to change your name for any reason (for example converting to Islam in Malaysia, as two of my British colleagues have done, requires that you change your name) then using an Orcid ID is one way of circumnavigating the problem.

³ <https://aliran.com/web-specials/2013-web-specials/mahathir-is-no-mandela/>

Once upon a time I had a boss named Graham Gill and he married a young lady (in the same organization) called Gill (pronounced with soft rather than hard G). Gill proudly had her passport changed to her married name just in time for their honeymoon to Yugoslavia. They encountered severe problems at immigration whilst the officer battled with the same spelling but different pronunciations.

Rite of Passage

For some ethnic Chinese in some countries it has become a rite of passage to adopt a Western name at the age of eighteen or thereabouts. For others it may even be already on their birth certificate, given to them by their parents (Huang & Ke, 2016)

The adoption of a Western name is voluntary and not reflected on an identity card in Malaysia, although some parents do register their children with a western name too. In some countries changing one's name can be very straightforward, not so in Malaysia where there is strict conformance using the full name as per your identity card on all official forms. The scope for confusion is multiplied by the Chinese convention of placing the family name first. Ideally the name that you wish to go by at a conference should be the same as you use for your publications. The editor of any journal is not particularly interested in the name in your passport (which if you are German will also include your doctorate if applicable). They are quite happy with a nom de plume (or pen name). Indeed, many women in the 19th century would publish under a man's name as this increased their prospects of publication. Similarly, Joanne Rowling added an initial 'K' to her name to make it sound more like a man's name as she wished to appeal to a target market of young boys, hence: J. K. Rowling. Again, Under the pseudonym 'Robert Galbraith', Joanne Rowling also writes crime novels, featuring private detective Cormoran Strike.⁴

The key question for any Chinese academic is should I use this my adopted name or not? This is not a trivial question; whatever name is chosen will likely to persist for a long time. I often see documents with someone's name rendered thus Tan (family name), Lei Ong (given names), Andrew (adopted name). Apart from the length this is destined to confuse students and visiting academics.

The referencing recommendation from the Universiti Malaya Library is that Vincent Foo Hiap Khian should be cited as Foo, V. H. K. (1983) such that the family name followed by the initial of the English name and then the author initials.

The US American country manager of Brasil of the company that I worked for at that time confided in me that he gave both of his children names that were 'global', i.e. would work in any culture. Given that this was in 2000 he was obviously way ahead of the pack in terms cultural intelligence.

⁴ <https://www.jkrowling.com/about/>

Professor Mohammed Nazari bin Ismail

Malay names are even more complicated than Malaysian Chinese names. To quote but one example my PhD supervisor at Universiti Malaya. There is no family name, Ismail is the first name of Nazari's Father. The 'bin' means 'son of' (or binti in the female case). Mohammed is always a prefix to a first name (as is Abdul – which translates as 'slave of' and hence a major faux pas of Western academics is to refer to someone as Abdul as it requires a second name to go with this). The word Mohammed can be abbreviated as Mohd, which can be pronounced as 'Mod'.

This is so complicated that the Universiti Malaya has issued a referencing guide for Malay names – to little avail. Most publications have enormous difficulty coping with these conventions and as a result Professor Nazari has been cited under a number of names including: MNB Ismail, MN Bin Ismail, MN Ismail, etc. He himself eschews both the bin and the Mohammed and refers to himself as Nazari Ismail.⁵

On one occasion he was flying to Japan for a conference on a Chinese airline and he bought a ticket using a European online travel site. The online form, only asked for first and last names, so he wrote 'Mohd' as his first name and 'Ismail' as his last name. On the ticket, the name became Mohd Ismail. When he went to the airport to check-in, the staff took his passport and compared his full name as it appeared in the passport and on the ticket. As the names were different to Nazari's horror and disappointment, he was not allowed to board the flight! If he had written his name as Mohd Nazari Ismail, then it apparently would not have been a problem. Protests that the online booking form did not ask for his middle name fell on deaf ears.

One Professor at a Public university in Malaysia was invited as a key-note speaker to a high-profile conference in the United States, he was amused to see all of the PR collateral advertising him as Professor Bin! My advice would be to avoid the use of bin or binti when asked for the author's name, this is also the official advice from the Universiti Malaya Library.⁶ I would also suggest that the name you use is entirely consistent on your business card, name on office door, University website etc.

As any Marketeer will tell you creating a strong brand name requires continuity. Changing the name of Marathon in the UK to match its European one (Snickers) required much angst and a large advertising budget to achieve the conversion (Pauwels-Delassus & Mogos Descotes, 2013).

⁵ <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=JeM9AIUAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra>

⁶ <https://umlib.um.edu.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/APA-Guide.pdf>

Indian Names

Indian names tend to be long and multi-syllabic which creates some communication problems. The addition of a/l or a/p is merely the equivalent of bin or binti, meaning son of or daughter of. Again, best left out in academic writing. The length and pronunciation can be problematical.

I once drove my Marketing Director of the time, about 50 miles from Broxbourne in Hertfordshire to our Advertising Agency in Soho, London (Gold, Greenless Trott, one of the top agencies at the time). His name was Prodip Guha (with some royal linkages) and when we unexpectedly had to give our names to the receptionist (we had expected red carpet treatment) the phone call to Dave Trott's secretary went as follows: "Hello, can you please tell Mr Trott that there is an Indian gentleman by the name of Project Gupta waiting to see him in reception". My boss turned red in the face with fury and told me that we were leaving immediately. I protested that I had just driven for an hour to get there but he was irreconcilable. In those days cell phones were almost unheard of but my boss had a car phone – the phone rang frantically as the Agency tried to atone for their mistake. Prodip ignored all calls for the rest of the day. I was, confidentially, later informed that the receptionist had been ceremonially fired.

Other Nationalities

Indonesian names create problems for airlines in particular as many people have just the one name so when booking a flight ticket, the only option for them is to fill in the mandatory surname field with their given name again. I had this problem when trying to book a ticket home for our Indonesian maid 'Sue'. Iranians and other nationals who have very long and difficult to pronounce names may resort to using a nickname, unless this is incorporated into all of the University bureaucracy, this can be a problem. I remember at one University we thought we had lost the exam paper of one Iranian student but it transpired he had written the name we all knew him by on his exam paper – which of course bore no resemblance to the official 'passport' name that Malaysian regulations required.

Sonic and Colour branding

Partly because I am Scottish, I have a wee bit of a colour affiliation with the colour Purple (as with the ancient Phoenicians – possibly the true founders of the Marketing discipline.) Problematically this is well liked by women but seen as slightly 'dodgy' by men (Al-Rasheed & S., 2015). Having empirically tested all of my legitimate Scottish tartans I regret to inform my readers that the colour Purple does not obtain in my case. Cadbury's had the same problem (Hoek & Gendall, 2010).

To date I have not established any kind sonic branding (of course one of the major characteristics of an owl is silent flight!), although I am a major proponent if this tactic.

2. Conclusion

For any aspiring Global academic, it seems clear that an unambiguous brand name is essential, Business cards, students' memories, international conferences and published papers are all important elements of your personal brand image and hence need maximum impact. Using different 'noms de plume' or 'noms de guerre' increase customer confusion and are hence best avoided. Social media are an ever more important part of the mix, be it Facebook, Instagram or Linked-In (Karaduman, 2013).

My key advice to any Malaysian is to ignore what is on your IC and use the name that you wish to be known by in all circumstances. And for other nationalities, be very hesitant of offering your full name to any Malaysian institution.

Mon nom de guerre, "C'est mmd!"

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