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Intellectual Discourse

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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِ، اِي	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِي، اِي	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Gestalt and Semiotic Analyses of Brand Communication on Disability Inclusion: The Case of Malaysia and the US

Aida Mokhtar*

Faiswal Kasirye**

Abstract: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the United Nations' effort in advocating disability inclusion in education and the infrastructure of member countries. Brands can also play their role by promoting disability inclusion through their brand messages. Brand messages are powerful as they advocate causes and ideals that include disability inclusion through repetitive and omnipresent messages whose ultimate goal is to influence the target audience's behaviour. This multiple case study compared brand communication from ten brands each originating from Malaysia and the United States using Saussure's model of semiotics. It was found that *Common Fate* is the fundamental gestalt principle in most brands' communication on disability inclusion of both countries and that positive nomenclature was used as the signifier that underlined the organisations' positive perception of disability inclusion.

Keywords: Disability inclusion, Malaysia, USA, brands, semiotics.

Abstrak: Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan (SDGs) Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu menggariskan usaha badan tersebut dalam menyokong penglibatan orang kurang upaya (OKU) dalam pendidikan dan infrastruktur

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negara anggotanya. Jenama juga mampu memainkan peranan mempromosikan penglibatan OKU melalui mesej jenama mereka. Mesej jenama berupaya menyokong usaha dan ideal penglibatan OKU melalui penggunaan mesej berulang dan tersedia ada di mana matlamat utamanya adalah untuk mempengaruhi tingkah laku dan sikap golongan sasaran. Kajian kes pelbagai ini membandingkan komunikasi jenama daripada sepuluh jenama dari Malaysia dan Amerika Syarikat dengan menggunakan model semiotik Saussure. Kajian mendapati bahawa *Common Fate* (“Takdir Sepunya”) merupakan prinsip asas *gestalt* dalam kebanyakan komunikasi jenama mengenai penglibatan OKU di kedua-dua negara dan tatanama positif telah digunakan sebagai penanda yang menggariskan persepsi positif sesuatu organisasi terhadap penglibatan OKU.

Kata kunci: penglibatan orang kurang upaya, Malaysia, USA, jenama, semiotic.

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) reported that persons with disabilities (PwDs) represent over 15% (approximately over one billion people) of the global population. This number is increasing due to the aging community and the presence of noncommunicable diseases (“Disability”, 2021). In Malaysia, approximately 453,258 PwDs were registered with the country’s Social Welfare Department (“Social Statistics Bulletin Malaysia 2018”, 2020). While in the United States (US), 61 million adults have a disability, making up 26 percent of the adult population (“Disability Impacts all of Us”, 2020). Regarding global employment rates for PwDs in developing countries, 80% to 90% of working-age PwDs are unemployed, whereas, in industrialised countries, the figure is between 50% and 70% (“Disability and Employment”, 2021).

“The Malaysian public sector employees encompass 1.2 million in total as of August 2018, excluding the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) and Malaysian Armed Forces (ATM), and 3,782 PwDs were employed in the public sector in 2017 while in the private sector, 14,252 PwDs were employed from 1990 to 2018 out of the 13.74 million people in the workforce (Ministry of Human Resources, 2019). In the US, it was reported that in 2020, 17.9 percent of PwDs were employed, a decrease from 19.3 percent in 2019 (Bureau of Labour Statistics: US Department of Labor, 2021). The statistics show that more needs to be done to employ PwDs in Malaysia and in the US, and employment practices

should be communicated supporting disability inclusion. Malaysia's Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 (PwD Act 2008) mentions in Section 29 (1) that persons with disabilities shall have the right to access to employment on equal basis with persons without disabilities. While the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against PwDs in employment and other areas.

When it comes to the private sector and disability inclusion in the US, there have been several efforts, such as the Disability Equality Index (DEI), that measures workplace practices of disability inclusion and Valuable 500. The DEI is a "comprehensive benchmarking tool that helps companies build a roadmap of measurable, tangible actions to achieve disability inclusion and equality," with companies that score 80 and above acknowledged as the best places for PwDs to work in (Disability:IN nd). The Disability:IN website also mentions DEI as a joint initiative of the nonprofit organisations, Disability:IN and the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD). Six criteria are considered in the assessment to attain a score in the DEI: Culture & Leadership, Enterprise-Wide Access, Employment Practices, Community Engagement, Supplier Diversity, and Non-US Operations. Valuable 500 is a global business collective of 500 Chief Executive Officers and their companies that make efforts to practice disability inclusion by developing a Transformation Programme that will spur system change and encourage businesses to be inclusive of PwDs (Valuable 500, 2021).

In the US, there appears to be a sense of belonging felt by organisations that disclose their disability inclusion practices through their DEI scores and also by being part of the Valuable 500 group, that also creates a positive brand reputation. Employing PwDs would help develop goodwill, the good image of an organisation, and its brand reputation. This is akin to the notion of cause marketing that links marketing efforts to a good cause and corporate social responsibility (CSR) that puts the organisation in a positive light as it serves society through activities (Moriarty et al., 2019).

It is important to note that there are some issues in the employment of PwDs in Malaysia and in the US. PwDs in Malaysia encounter two significant challenges; the problem of the lack of equal employment opportunities and the uncondusive workplace environment, which

include mobility and accessibility problems, inaccessible technological facilities, unsupportive employers and colleagues, and security risks (Tyng et al., 2020). The lack of disability inclusion practices in organisations may endanger the relationship between customers and the organisation. A study proved that the image of a company that hires PwDs affects customer satisfaction positively (Akbar et al., 2020). It would also be good to include PwDs in a company's vision and scope, that helps build and boost its reputation in the long run.

Other than disability inclusion in employment, some brands have been generating products for PwDs and promoting them through advertisements (Mokhtar & Hussain, 2019). The latest devices include novel features in software for cognitive, speech, and vision accessibility (Apple, 16 May 2023). In the US, however, Nielsen reported that PwDs only appear in one percent of the advertisements despite having 26 percent of the population with disabilities (Neff, 2021). Including PwDs in brand communication may also help shape people's perceptions of a brand and the continuous attraction of customers to it (Houston, 2016). It is apparent that positive depictions of PwDs in a company's advertising campaign and branding could improve a brand's image and promote its disability inclusion as a subset of diversity inclusion (Moriarty et al., 2019).

The study's research questions are:

1. Which gestalt principles are found on the websites of brands in Malaysia and in US when communicating on disability inclusion in employment?
2. What are the signifiers for disability inclusion on websites of brands in Malaysia and in the US?
3. What are the signified elements for disability inclusion on websites of brands in Malaysia and in the US?
4. How are disability inclusion depictions comparable on websites by brands in Malaysia and in the US?
5. How are disability inclusion depictions different on websites by brands in Malaysia and in the US?

Literature Review

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), disability “results from the interaction between individuals with a health condition, such as cerebral palsy, down syndrome, and depression, with personal and environmental factors including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support” (World Health Organisation, 2021). Disability inclusion, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), refers to:

Including people with disabilities in everyday activities and encouraging them to have roles similar to their peers who do not have a disability is disability inclusion. This involves more than simply encouraging people; it requires making sure that adequate policies and practices are in effect in a community or organisation.

Benefits of Communication on Disability Inclusion Practices to Organisations

There are several benefits of practicing disability inclusion in the workplace and communicating these practices. The benefits of being inclusive of PwDs in any organisation are that the brand gets a positive perception from its consumers and PwDs who become brand ambassadors create a positive image of the organisation (Akbar et al., 2020). The inclusion of PwDs in the workplace can attract publicity and increase customer traffic with social enterprises (like hospitality businesses) to actively promote themselves on social media (Kalargyrou et al., 2018). González & Luis Fernández (2016) proved that customers are loyal to brands that convey clear corporate information about disability inclusion practices. The feeling of goodwill toward the organisation due to its disability inclusion efforts motivates customers to purchase products churned by these organisations.

Disability Inclusion and Websites as a Medium for Marketing Communication

The website is the platform where advertising, public relations, and direct marketing are blurred and integrated (Moriarty et al., 2019). Websites predominantly advertise organisations and their products, build rapport with stakeholders underscoring the public relations function and sometimes allows for purchases and interaction with

emails, chatbots, phone numbers, and other contact details, marking its direct marketing function. The present study focused on websites as a platform for advertising the organisation with regards to its disability inclusion practices.

A study examined the inclusivity and accessibility of recreation programmes in colleges for students with disabilities on programme websites of 24 US universities regarding inclusive terminology, inclusive images, and inclusivity statements (Bruning et al., 2020). The findings were that two universities used 39.48% of the total inclusivity terms, the majority used only one disability-related term on their website, half used eight or fewer terms, and one used outdated terminology. In addition, more than half of the universities examined (58.33%) did not have pictures of PwDs or adaptive equipment on their websites, and only a quarter (25%) had a collegiate campus recreation programme statement. Finally, a qualitative study examined how a small business owner in an urban US city prioritised digital inclusion in his daily operations, and it generated six themes: perceptions of disability influence digital inclusion, powerful branding suggests digital access, unawareness of accessibility guidelines, UX (user experience) testing overlooks input from PwDs, inclusion is tough to enforce on digital platforms, and workarounds hinder digital improvements (Cipriani, 2019).

The websites of 75 major companies in five different countries (France, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the US) were also examined, and it was found that the discourse of inclusion is being steadily depicted on websites and that branding inclusion can be beneficial in the mission to be an employer of choice. In another study, using a critical discourse theoretical framework and adopting strategies from Astroff (2001) and Pauwels (2012), disability information on the California State University (CSU) website appeared to have surface visibility, meaning that 66% of the sites had minimal information on their home pages, the lack of information of disability inclusion as part of diversity, the lack of reasonable navigation structures, obscured content and the mentioning of disability as the deficits of students (Gabel et al., 2016). Another study investigated obvious evidence of inclusive practices in library instruction programmes through a content analysis of library instruction websites and instruction request forms, and examined instruction-related pages for accessibility language, and the findings showed little evidence of programmatic disability inclusion on library websites

(Graves & German, 2018). Another study examined five prominent US art museums in terms of the marketing methods they used to promote access to audiences with disabilities, and the findings indicate that word of mouth and the use of technology, such as websites and social media, were the most common forms of marketing methods used to reach PwDs (McMillen, 2017). More studies need to be conducted to examine how brands communicate on disability inclusion at the workplace on their websites judging from the studies that have been carried out.

Semiotics, Disability Inclusion, and Websites

No studies have combined the concepts of semiotics, disability inclusion, and the websites of Malaysian and US brands, marking the research gap. There are, however, some studies that have investigated the evolutionary discourse of toy campaigns through their visual and verbal attributes using Kress & van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach in the examination of images to provide a broader view on the issues of diversity, representation, and inclusion (Almeida, 2017). The findings depict a transition to contemporary notions of different family structures, embracing physical imperfections and naturalising our perceptions of disabilities. Another study examined five museums regarding how visually impaired people are represented by art museums that provide accessible activities for them (Fernandez, 2020). The analysed discourse found on the webpages of these museums found an ambiguous representation of people with visual impairments.

Websites need to balance the expectations of mainstream society and PwDs. The representations of visually impaired people found on these online sources are the result of balancing traditional discourses around people with visual impairments and demystifying representations that focus on negative stereotypes that label them as unproductive people. Another study examined the websites of disability support offices (DSOs) belonging to twelve US higher education institutions (HEIs) using multimodal discourse analysis and genre analysis (Kim, 2021). It was found that DSO websites were within four clicks of HEI homepages but had inconsistent navigation paths, making it challenging to reach DSO websites. In addition, DSO websites were promoting and branding the institutions more than presenting information about the services offered.

A case study investigated the best practices in accessibility among selected hotel restaurants in New Zealand (Shetty, 2020). The categorical analysis findings depict best practices in terms of the accessible display of content and visual design elements on their websites. This included the use of high colour contrast for displaying information on websites, the use of the two-step click process to access information, and a standard central tab present at the top of the page consisting of links to subsequent webpages. The strategies that were used to convey accessibility identified through content analysis included (i) accreditations with social change organisations, (ii) inclusion of PwDs in the workforce, (iii) use of persuasive language, and (iv) effective use of imagery. Examples of common tactics found across websites include Braille menus and the availability of trained staff to support PwDs in the restaurant. The rhetorical analysis findings depicted how the three cases used quotes and statements indicating themes around: (i) Accessibility is for all, (ii) Persuasion for the Inclusion of PWDs, (iii) Validity, and (iv) Persuasion for social change.

Another study uncovered Thai fourth-year English-major students' adoption of lexical choices with connotations that conveyed the identities of the Home for Children with Disabilities for their website project and further explored how and why discursive strategies were used to interpret identities of the home and disabilities through the participants' lexical selection (Sudajit-apa, 2017). The findings revealed the participants' use of different lexical choices with connotations to presuppose the home's identity as a warm, practical, and charitable organisation by providing various special care services to their children, and the children with disabilities were identified as socially independent and capable of being self-supporting. Nevertheless, social exclusion and the lack of social collaboration were entrenched in the discourse's discursive reproduction.

Another content analysis study on the websites of top 20 organisations in Romania searched for statements and definitions related to diversity, equality, or inclusion (Hopson, 2021). The findings uncovered notable differences between top Romanian organisations, how they address different diversity dimensions and how best to elaborate the diversity discourse. From the study, 19 diversity dimensions were identified. Most analysed organisations have at least one diversity statement on their official website and address at least three diversity dimensions.

However, in the case of seven organisations, no statements conveyed diversity, equality, or inclusion. From this review, there were no previous studies, to our knowledge, on the amalgamation of Gestalt principles, semiotics, websites, and disability inclusion of Malaysian and US brands.

Theoretical Framework

This study presents design principles from Gestalt theory as part of its framework. The principles of Gestalt help us to understand how people make sense of advertising, marketing, and visual campaigns. Gestalt comes from the German noun meaning form or shape, and Wertheimer's initial work was refined by Gestalt psychologists who said that visual perception is the consequence of organising sensory elements into different groups (Lester, 2020) and a holistic perception of individual parts (Zufelt, 2019). The principles refer to how humans perceive objects in a holistic manner.

Wertheimer's (1938) Gestalt factors are Proximity, Similarity, Closure, Good Curve, Past Experience or Habit, Objective Set, Director, and Common Fate. He categorises the Factors of Similarity as parts that are alike coming together in a person's perception; the Factor of Proximity as the association of objects close together that form a pattern; and the Factor of Closure that symbolises two enclosed units evident in a pattern in the form of two shapes that may be perceived as evident.

Furthermore, other Gestalt factors relate to the Good Curve and encompasses the shape of three-enclosed distinct shapes that are dominated by a curved line; Past Experience or Habit, which focuses on the use of the experience that is habitually felt due to constant drilling to form a pattern; Common Fate relating to the natural grouping of elements that create a pattern based on standard spacing such as 2 mm between pairs of dots that would move pro-structurally in groups they were placed in when shifted together; and, Objective Set that concerns dominant groupings perceived by a person despite the disturbance in a pattern. Finally, the last gestalt factor assesses Direction, which means that if an adjacent line B to the main line of AC, B would be perceived as an appendage. All the Gestalt Factors are used to examine the websites of 10 brands each in Malaysia and the US in the study.

Semiotic Analysis

The study of signs or semiology embraces meaning-making through signs or text that can be anything from literature, art, and media (Chandler, 2017). This study used Gestalt principles that represent patterns formed through different signs intertwined with semiotic analysis to interpret the signs' meaning.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, states that language is a system of signs within a system, a sign has two aspects: *le signifiant* (a "signifier") and *le signifié* (a "signified") with the relationship between both parts as that which is conceptual, arbitrary, and defined by social convention (Danesi, 2018). The linguistics feature has been made to include the physical elements of signs that could be seen, touched, smelled, or tasted (signifiers) and the visual mental image (signified) described as a post-Saussurean phenomenon (Chandler, 2017). When applied to the study, the website represents a sign divided into two: the signifier element comprises the visual and verbal elements, and the signified as the mental image the audience interprets. The study applied Saussure's semiological perspective and examined the sign, signifier, and signified website content concerning disability inclusion messages conveyed by selected brands in Malaysia and the US.

Method

This study is a multiple case research design that compared selected brands in Malaysia and the US regarding brand communication on disability inclusion by using Gestalt principles and semiotic analysis. A case study goes in-depth as it attempts to answer the research questions of "how" and "why" (Yin, 2018). The principles of Gestalt and semiotics are put together in a framework for the study and included in the codebook. The units of analysis are websites selected from ten US brands that are familiar to the researchers: L'Oréal USA, Microsoft, Boeing, Corning, Nestle, Johnson, and Johnson, Dell, Ford, P&G, and Walmart that scored 100 percent in the DEI of 2021 (American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and Disability: IN, 2021). Furthermore, the ten most valuable Malaysian brands in 2021 selected for the study are YTL, PETRONAS, Maybank, Celcom, CIMB, Telekom Malaysia, Air Asia, Maxis, Sime Darby, and Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB), selected from a list of top ten brands ranked according to brand value by Brand Finance ("Malaysia 100 2021 Ranking," 2021). After the brands were

selected, the keywords: “DEI” and the brand name were used to search for US brands’ reports on the brands’ practices of disability inclusion at the workplace. In the case of Malaysia, the term: “disability inclusion” and the names of top brands were used to search for reports of disability inclusion by the brands. The research process involved the following stages (see Figure 1):

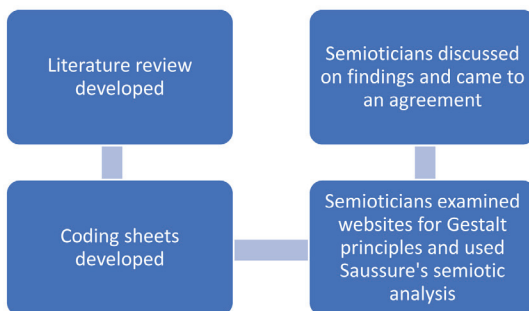


Figure 1: Flowchart of research methods process

A coding sheet was divided into Gestalt principles, semiotic signifiers, and signified elements that integrated Gestalt principles and Saussure’s semiotic analysis approaches in the research study. Both images and copy (or text) in the brand communication through websites were examined.

The semiotician as the interpreter of the websites must also know the culture in which a representation or the text (on websites) was formed in order to interpret them better (Danesi, 2018). The influence of a persons’ background on the interpretation of advertisements is apparent. In a study, analysts who held different positions such as the advertising creative director, minister and consumer consultant, were used to understand the meaning of advertisements which according to semiotic or sign analysis, is dependent upon the person’s interpretation after seeing or hearing the advertisement, and hence, the findings represented the variations of interpretations influenced by various backgrounds (Langrehr & Caywood, 1995).

However, the polysemic nature of semiotics puts forth a sense of arbitrariness where the signs could have multiple meanings interpreted by different individuals (Bryman, 2018). This is supported by the development of later post-structuralist semiotics that differed from early

semiotics, which took a structuralist approach, perceiving the meaning of signs as remarkably fixed and interpreted according to a system. In contrast, later post-structuralist semiotics theory saw signs as interpreted by audiences that would differ from the creator of the message and between audiences themselves marking the difficulty in determining the notion of sameness in meanings akin to the intercoder reliability of content analysis (Macnamara, 2005). Nevertheless, in keeping with the importance of establishing the credibility of qualitative data, the semioticians confided in one another to agree on common findings. This confirms with the practice of investigator triangulation that requires multiple observers as opposed to single observers in the observation to eliminate biases (Denzin, 1978).

Findings

The brands whose websites were examined in terms of their practices of disability inclusion were selected (See Table 1). There were ten brands in Malaysia that were selected as they ranked highly in the Brand Directory (“Malaysia 100 2021 Ranking,” 2021), and in the US the researchers were interested in examining the websites of brands that earned 100 percent for their DEI (American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) and Disability: IN, 2021). Not all US brands selected originated from the US, such as L’Oréal USA (originally from France) and Nestlé (originally from Switzerland). However, they were chosen due to the researchers’ familiarity with them.

Table 1: Brands Selected for the Study

Brands in Malaysia	Brands in the US
Maybank	L’Oréal USA
Maxis	Microsoft
Celcom	Boeing
Telekom Malaysia	Corning
Sime Darby	Nestle
YTL	Johnson and Johnson
PETRONAS	Walmart
TNB	Dell
CIMB	Ford
Air Asia	P&G

Brands in Malaysia, Gestalt and Semiotics

Table 2: Gestalt Principles on Webpages and Reports of Top Brands in Malaysia

Brands in Malaysia	Gesltalt Principles
Maybank	Common Fate
Maxis	Common Fate
Celcom	Common Fate
Telekom Malaysia	Common Fate and Similarity
Sime Darby	Common Fate
YTL	Common Fate
PETRONAS	Common Fate and Similarity
Tenaga Nasional Berhad	Common Fate
CIMB	Common Fate
Air Asia	Common Fate and Similarity

All of the Malaysian brands selected for the study originate from Malaysia and these encompassed banks such as Commerce International Merchant Bankers Berhad (CIMB) and Malayan Banking Berhad (Maybank); telecommunication companies such as Telekom Malaysia, Maxis, and Celcom; Sime Darby (a global trading and logistics player with core businesses in industrial, motors and logistics sectors, healthcare, insurance, and retail segments); YTL Corporation Berhad (an integrated infrastructure developer with extensive operations in several countries including Malaysia); PETRONAS (Petroleum Nasional Berhad or government-owned oil and gas corporation); TNB (an electric utility company); and, Air Asia (an international low-cost airline) (see Table 1).

The websites of the Malaysian brands were examined in terms of their depiction of disability inclusion by focusing on crucial Gestalt principles and interpreted through the semiotics analysis of image and text. There were different combinations of Gestalt principles found on the websites. The brands using Common Fate and Similarity principles

when conveying disability inclusion are PETRONAS, Air Asia, and Telekom Malaysia. Maybank focuses on providing entrepreneurial training to PwDs, PETRONAS ensures their suppliers are inclusive, and Air Asia practices equal opportunities at the workplace. Sime Darby, YTL, CIMB, Maxis, Celcom, Tenaga Nasional Berhad, and Maybank websites mainly use Common Fate as they provide the Direction of the organisation through the idea of everyone moving forward in the same way in terms of disability inclusion.

The Maybank website identifies with the Gestalt principle of Common Fate in its copy and image, marking the idea of moving PwDs forward when training them to be financially independent and self-sustaining through its entrepreneurship programme. The signifier is the image of a group of happy children waving to the camera together, marking Common Fate's one-direction principle. The children reflect the marginalised community but are not PwDs. The text focuses on Maybank Foundation's collaboration with the social enterprise People Systems Consultancy in their Reach Independence & Sustainable Entrepreneurship (RISE) programme that trains PwDs to become successful entrepreneurs. This is mentioned as part of Maybank's efforts to contribute to communities sustainably, bringing about tangible results. The signified is Maybank's practice of disability inclusion within the community by empowering PwDs to be self-sustaining and financially independent through entrepreneurship.

For PETRONAS, disability inclusion is mentioned in its *Human Rights Report 2020*. The Report appears to be guided by the Gestalt principles of Common Fate and Similarity. The visual signifier is the image of a smiling worker in an orange suit and a hard hat (possibly an engineer) who appears to be a person without disabilities or typical. The text focuses on PETRONAS's practice of disability inclusion as part of its non-discrimination practice in hiring and employment practices, which is also one of its nine human rights principles that its Suppliers and Contractors must adhere to. This way of reporting upholds the common Direction taken by PETRONAS by putting disability inclusion under the umbrella of human rights, thus, adhering to the Common Fate principle. As a signifier, the text mentions that unlawful discrimination should not happen for people of different ages, gender, religion, skin colour, and disability, underscoring the Similarity principle because they belong

to the standard category of a diverse community. The signified entails PETRONAS' support for disability inclusion through its Suppliers and Contractors in terms of their hiring and employment practices that are quantifiably evaluated and framed using global expectations of human rights and the law.

Air Asia also uses the Gestalt principles of Common Fate and Similarity in its Sustainability Report as it mentions that it is against discriminatory and unequal practices and harassment and provides equal opportunities to all staff despite their marital status, family, religious belief, disability, age, racial grounds, sexual orientation, or memberships. Disability inclusion practices have been placed under human rights by the airline. Air Asia deems these efforts as the brand's role in being ethical and responsible through its intolerance of discriminatory and unequal practices. The text's tone reflects the brand's firm stance on this as it mentions its Code of Conduct and Sexual Harassment Policy, whistleblowing mechanism, the People & Culture Department that will investigate the matter, and any form of misconduct by employees that would get them to face disciplinary action, including dismissal. The signified is Air Asia's support for disability inclusion in employment as part of human rights.

Telekom Malaysia also uses Similarity and Common Fate gestalt principles in its *Sustainability Report* that focuses on creating value by including a diverse collective workforce (that includes PwDs). The diverse workforce is mentioned positively as they contribute to innovative and well-balanced ideas for the organisation. This common Direction to the diverse workforce represents the Common Fate principle embraced. The collective label given to the diverse workforce upholds Similarity. In addition, Telekom illustrates disability inclusion practices through designated parking spaces and ramps for PwDs. The signified projects that disability inclusion is practiced and perceived through a positive lens by associating it with the formation of value and by providing access to PwDs in order to include them at the workplace.

Sime Darby, YTL, CIMB, TNB, Celcom, and Maxis are brands that focus on the principle of Common Fate through their website signifiers. It could be seen that with the Common Fate principle, some brands focus on disability inclusion in employment (Sime Darby, CIMB,

Tenaga Nasional), YTL focuses on investing in special needs education, and Maxis in providing customer-oriented services for PwDs.

Sime Darby uses a signifier in the form of text on the organisation's fair employment practices and equal opportunities for PwDs without including an image. The signified is that disability inclusion is based on fairness and equal opportunities for PwDs upholding the organisation's Direction, thus conveying the Common Fate principle.

YTL focuses on Common Fate through the text signifier of YTL Foundation, transforming classrooms for children with disabilities coupled with the image of happy children in well-equipped classrooms that are student-focused and driven by technology is its way of providing a sustainable mode of support. This was indicated on the website through the Smart Frog classroom concept in the school, Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Cina) Sin Min in Perak, Malaysia. The signified conveys YTL's practice of disability inclusion by providing education that embraces technology advancement to build a sustainable society. Education is one of the ways to equip children with disabilities with knowledge and skills for better empowerment, reflecting YTL's common Direction.

CIMB, in its Sustainability Report, embraces Common Fate reflected by the organisation's common Direction through its diversity and inclusion practices as part of its work culture that it claims leads to healthy perspectives for better decision-making, attracts quality talents, and results in a high-performing and sustainable organisation. The number of PwDs employed by CIMB in Malaysia and abroad is also mentioned. The signified reflects CIMB's association of disability inclusion with positives regarding sustainability and high-performance perspectives. Unfortunately, there is no image to support the text here.

TNB also used Common Fate, as highlighted in its *Integrated Annual Report 2020*. The signifier text under the heading "Diversity and Inclusiveness" touches on the common Direction for the organisation that was conveyed through the revision of core values by including the collaborative value of embracing diversity and inclusivity, thus dispelling any form of harassment, and increasing the employment of PwDs that saw an increase of 14% hired in 2020 by the organisation.

TNB mentions that it provides employees equal opportunities regardless of age, gender, religious affiliation, and disability. The revision of TNB's core values underlining Common Fate reflects the seriousness of embracing diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

When the keywords "disability inclusion" were used by the researchers to search for the signifier of Celcom's practices of disability inclusion, an article appeared in the search that only had text with the headline of empowering the differently abled (rather than PwDs) by providing them exclusive priority services through home visits. The Gestalt principle of Common Fate is apparent here as it provides customer-oriented products for people with different abilities reflecting the company's common Direction in customer orientation. The signified is that disability inclusion is provided through PwD-oriented services by prioritising those euphemistically referred to as the differently abled. Using a different label for PwDs in the Malay language by shifting from *Orang Kurang Upaya (OKU)* to *Orang Kelainan Upaya* is often contested, with *Orang Kurang Upaya* prevailing in keeping with the PwD Act 2008. The signified is evident through the organisation's support for customers with disabilities, mentioned euphemistically through products made for them. The signifier words "exclusive" and "priority" are used concerning the services provided by Celcom to PwDs, signifying their practice of disability inclusion.

Maxis is another organisation whose website, when mentioning disability inclusion, embraces the Common Fate principle by helping PwDs to move forward through exceptional services provided to ease their burden when communicating. When we searched on disability inclusion practices by Maxis, an article appeared with the signifier headline "Maxis committed to more affordable connectivity for OKU customers," and the rest of the article focuses on the sales promotion given to PwDs who sign up for the *Hotlink Post-paid Flex plan with More Data* at RM40 per month that will earn them an RM10 monthly rebate for life. The message of assisting and easing PwD customers' burden is further emphasised with the promise of more prioritised services for PwDs. It is comforting to note that the sales promotion effort comes with the idea by Maxis of easing the burden of PwDs. The signified conveys that Maxis practices disability inclusion through its services for PwDs underscoring its PwD-oriented approach.

Brands in US, Gestalt and Semiotics

Table 3: Gestalt Principles on Websites of Brands with high DEI scores in US

Brands in the US	Gestalt Principles
L'Oréal USA	Common Fate and Similarity
Microsoft	Common Fate and Similarity
Boeing	Common Fate and Similarity
Corning	Common Fate and Similarity
Nestle	Common Fate and Similarity
Johnson and Johnson	Common Fate and Proximity
Walmart	Common Fate and Similarity
Dell	Common Fate and Similarity
Ford USA	Common Fate and Similarity
P&G	Common Fate and Similarity

The signifier and signified were identified in the brand communication on websites by US brands that focused on their reports of them having the 100 percent Disability Equality Index (DEI) score. Most brands embraced the design principles of Common Fate and Similarity: Ford USA, L'Oréal USA, Corning, Nestle, Walmart, P&G, Dell, Boeing, and Microsoft. Nevertheless, Johnson and Johnson focuses on Common Fate and Proximity (see Table 3).

The L'Oréal USA webpage on disability inclusion has the headline "Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." The image of two people of different races happily engaged is depicted at the top of the webpage. The webpage's text mentions that an organisation's strength is found when the brand associates itself with diversity and inclusion through acceptance and value. Disability inclusion practices are mentioned in terms of welcoming and valuing diverse staff, including those with disabilities. There is also a three-minute video posted by the brand

with a narration that conveys the specific names of the members of the team (presumably the staff) and their disabilities alongside other staff with unique characteristics using the theme “We are all different,” highlighting the diversity of its staff. The video uses copy without images. The signified is found through the depiction of the brand’s strategy of highlighting diverse communities in the same vein, thus emphasising the Common Fate principle and the embrace of unique people focusing on the Similarity principle and the positives associated with these differences. The brand mentions that staff differences lead to a more substantial and sustainable organisation.

Microsoft’s primary signifier is a purple banner with graphics of diverse people, including a person in a wheelchair, with the heading “Diversity and Inclusion.” Underneath, it conveys the message that there is transformative power by including many different perspectives through a diverse workforce inclusion, marking the common Direction of the brand regarding disability inclusion, hence upholding the Common Fate principle. The body copy underneath the banner mentions empowering everyone to achieve more and encouraging people to bring their whole self to work and do their best at the workplace. Again, the idea of the authentic self is impressed here, like for Nestle and Dell. An icon on the banner has the copy “How we work inside Microsoft,” which leads to another webpage. The second webpage contains information on nine resource groups representing diverse people (including PwDs) that are formed to engage with stakeholders inside and outside the organisation, thus upholding the Similarity principle.

Boeing uses on its website the Gestalt principles of Common Fate and Similarity, to relay disability inclusion. The brand’s website contains an image representing diversity inclusion in the form of four people with different racial backgrounds. In addition, the webpage carries Boeing’s *Global Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Report 2021*, and the text conveys equity, diversity, and inclusion as values at Boeing through its commitment to creating a welcoming environment for all teammates for shared, long-term success, marking Common Fate or common Direction for PwDs. The report also focuses on the real stories of employees with disabilities as part of the diverse community representing Similarity. The signified puts forth the earnestness of Boeing in practicing disability inclusion rooted in its core values.

Corning's webpage contains the headline "Diversity, Equity & Inclusion." It also encompasses the image of typical people of different ages and a PwD on a wheelchair, all wearing the same blue-coloured shirts heading to the same direction, thus representing their practice of disability inclusion. The text focuses on the brand's 100 percent DEI score while claiming it as the "Best Place to Work." The brand also mentions the inclusive environment at the workplace for staff with disabilities, evidenced by a staff testimonial. It also mentions an employee resource group known as the Abled and DisAbled Partnering Together (ADAPT) that supports Corning employees in discovering resources to accommodate their different disabilities. The image signifies the integration between diverse people representing the common Direction of the organisation upholding a Common Fate. The similar colour of shirt and the proximity of the typical and the nontypical person's featured highlight Similarity. There is pride sensed through the 100 percent DEI score and a structured way of addressing the inclusion of staff with disabilities through ADAPT.

With Nestlé, the gestalt principles of Common Fate and Similarity appear to have been used on its webpage on disability inclusion. A webpage has the headline "Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion at Nestlé," indicating the organisation's direction by putting the three concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the same level, thus promoting the Common Fate principle. The image of people from diverse racial backgrounds is at the webpage's top. The copy proceeding the image includes the subheading "Bring Your Whole Self to Work," subsequently mentioning the brand's commitment to fostering a diverse workforce that is inclusive of all that is the focus of the brand's culture, plus the idea of empowering staff to bring their whole self, unique perspectives, and talents to every challenge, and that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential practices of the company as it attempts to win consumers. Another depiction of Common Fate and Similarity principles is evident with testimonials by female employees commenting on their positive experiences of the brand's diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. One of the ladies with disabilities depicts her comfort of bringing her whole self to work, supported by Nestlé. The signified indicates that diversity, equity, and inclusion have become ingrained in the brand's culture, and letting employees be themselves is essential for the brand's business in serving customers.

Walmart's webpage on disability inclusion has the headline "Culture, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion." At the top of the page is the image of people from different racial backgrounds, but it does not seem to include PwDs. The text conveys, "Walmart is stronger as a company when people are heard, included and empowered." The brand highlights its seriousness in addressing the matter of culture, diversity, equity, and inclusion through multiple reports that focus on disability inclusion efforts. Walmart also mentions its launch of the Accessibility Centre of Excellence to advance the progress of disability inclusion and focuses on the Walmart score of 100 in the 2021 Disability Equality Index (DEI) for the sixth successive year. The signifier suggests that the brand's strength is by including diverse people, including those with disabilities, to make them heard, included, and empowered. Great pride is felt in its disability inclusion practices by the brand as evidenced by its reports on its activities and 100 percent DEI. Common Fate is brought about through its common Direction of diversity, inclusion, and equality set by the organisation. The similarity is found through the common ground established by people with diverse backgrounds placed on the platform of inclusion and equality. The signified is that Walmart's disability inclusion efforts strengthen it.

With Dell, the Gestalt principles are Common Fate and Similarity. Dell's website presents the *2021 Diversity & Inclusion Report* with a video encompassing diverse people who have different backgrounds, whether they are immigrants, Latino, gay, Asian, or with disabilities putting forth the principle of Similarity by putting the diverse people under one category. The theme of the Report is: "Driving Culture, Equity, and Belonging." It starts with the message "Be who you are" and the idea of taking yourselves with diverse backgrounds to the workplace in a welcoming environment. This message provides the Direction of the organisation, thus upholding Common Fate. The video ends with the message "Together we are unstoppable," reinforcing Similarity. The signifier is the image in the video of an employee with a disability exercising in a gym. The copy mentions the COVID-19 pandemic and the support given, that disability inclusion is part of the bigger picture of diversity inclusion, and that diversity is power by bringing people with unique perspectives. The signified is that Dell perceives the positives of diversity and disability inclusion, supports PwDs, and makes them feel welcomed as their authentic selves.

Ford's webpage appears with the headline, "The Mission," and mentions the inclusive supply chain developed by it to drive economic prosperity for people, communities, and businesses known as its Supplier Diversity and Inclusion (SD&I) programme. There is a timeline of the SD&I programme that includes milestones commencing from 1968 as an inner-city supplier programme that later developed into the SD&I programme in 1978 and included Disability-Owned Business Enterprise (DOBE) certified companies in 2018. The text signifier indicates that SD&I is aligned with Ford's Diversity & Inclusion programme, which it says is essential to uphold a solid and sustainable business. There is an image and the corresponding text of one of their suppliers certified as a DOBE. DOBEs are at least 51 percent for-profit organisations owned, operated, controlled, and managed by a PwD. The signified amount of structured attention given to Ford's embrace of disability inclusion in the form of including DOBEs appears to convey the seriousness of Ford's embrace of disability inclusion as part of the more significant inclusion of diverse companies belonging to several categories of people encompassing Women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Native Alaskans, Canadian Aboriginal, LGBT People, Veterans, Disabled Veterans, People with Disabilities and Small Businesses. There is similarity in the communities banded together through the SD&I programme, then moving them in the same direction as suppliers, thus representing Common Fate. The signified upholds Ford's embrace of disability inclusion through a structured programme for including PwDs through DOBEs in its business activities.

With P&G, the Gestalt principles of Common Fate and Similarity appear on its website. The webpage entitled "We Are Unique, and We are United" presents information on DEI. The remaining text mentions the organisation's aspiration to create a company and world that practices equality and inclusion for all and the idea of respect and inclusion as part of a culture where equal access and opportunity to learn, grow, succeed, and thrive are found. Diversity for P&G entails people of various genders, disabilities, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and others (LGBTQ+), and of different races and ethnicities. There is similarity through the common category of diverse communities reflected by the "We" in the headline. When the icon PwDs is selected, the image of 3 people of different racial backgrounds, including a PwD on a wheelchair in the middle, is found

at the top of the second webpage showing them walking in the same direction, thus upholding Common Fate. The image of the employees with differences walking together represents Similarity. The webpage's text focuses on P&G's commitment in creating a more inclusive world for all PwDs inside and outside the organisation. Disability inclusion at P&G touches on including employees with disabilities and consumers with disabilities through brand offerings such as tactile markings on brand bottles, developing partnerships, and helping communities thrive through inclusion and accessibility practices. The signified is P&G as a strong supporter of disability inclusion through their earnest efforts.

Johnson and Johnson uses the Gestalt principles of Common Fate and Proximity. The signifier is in the headline "Diversity, Equity & Inclusion," indicating the Direction the organisation is taking, thus underscoring Common Fate. This proceeds with the image of an Asian lady looking at the camera smiling, and below this is the copy "Diversity at Johnson and Johnson is about your unique perspective." There is also the image of a meeting between PwDs and typical employees with the subheading "Advancing our Culture of Inclusion and Innovation" with the body copy mentioning that the uniqueness of people brings the best solutions, thus associating diversity inclusion with something positive. The webpage also depicts another image of a meeting, including PwDs, evidenced by their wheelchairs and that the brand is part of Valuable 500. The signified depicts the organisation's sense of belonging to the Valuable 500 global movement and that disability inclusion is culturally embedded, as indicated through the text and image signifiers. The images of PwDs being included in meetings bring forth the principle of Proximity between the typical and PwDs.

Discussion and Implications

Several similarities were found between brands in Malaysia and the US in terms of the most frequently used Gestalt principles. First, all brands mainly focused on at least the Common Fate principle found from the common Direction undertaken by organisations or the Direction the organisation encourages PwDs to take. The factor of Common Fate is the perception of naturally grouping objects because they move in the same direction, like five hands pointing to the sky (Lester, 2020), thus, conveying that they are part of a group. After the organisations' websites were examined, they were moving in the same direction regarding their

practice of disability inclusion. For example, some Malaysian brands used human rights to support their Direction concerning disability inclusion (PETRONAS and Air Asia), others embraced the notion of producing customer-oriented products as part of their common Direction (Celcom and Maxis), some brands focused on disability inclusion at the workplace such as Sime Darby, CIMB, Telekom Malaysia and TNB. On the other hand, YTL focuses on providing a technological school setting for children with disabilities and Maybank trains PwDs to be entrepreneurs.

Most brands in the US that scored highly in the DEI also predominantly embraced the Common Fate principle, and the Direction taken by most brands is similar in that it provides support to staff with disabilities, except for Ford, which focuses on disability inclusion of the supply chain. However, this differs from the Malaysian brands that have adopted various directions under the Common Fate principle.

All brands in both countries use positive signifiers such as commitment, empowerment, power, priority, exclusivity, sustainability, and unique perspectives. Using appropriate nomenclature is essential as it could contribute to how a person perceives the world, as espoused by the Sapir Whorf's hypothesis (Mokhtar, 2019). Hence, the positive words chosen by the brands to convey on PwDs and disability inclusion reflect the organisations' perception of these concepts, leading to a positive brand reputation and purchases.

Another difference is that most US brands focus on Common Fate and Similarity Gestalt principles. For Wertheimer (1938), the Similarity factor reflects that elements that are alike come together in a person's perception, and in this case, PwDs in the US are placed together with other minorities as part of the diverse community. Some Malaysian brands also use the Similarity principle with Common Fate, such as PETRONAS, Air Asia, and Telekom Malaysia, that have put PwD employees under the banner of the diverse community. The remaining brands focus on PwDs alone. The notion of assimilating the diversity approach by putting PwDs under a bigger umbrella of the diverse community is an anti-discrimination effort through a systematic and planned policy to recruit PwDs for improved assimilation and equality practices in organisations (Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2008); a practice also found by Montenegro (2020) through the recruitment of women with

disabilities. Some brands in Malaysia and in the US also focus on profit-making, customer satisfaction, increased productivity, and inclusion of PwDs upholding Mazzei and Ravazzani's diversity management model (2008), and others focus on the scholars' leveraging differences approach by using differences to engage with stakeholders.

The DEI has given brands in the US more standardised ways of reporting by focusing on diversity and inclusion at the workplace according to the criteria required for scoring the index. In contrast, Malaysian brands embrace diverse ways of reporting disability inclusion through websites, articles, Sustainability Reports, and Annual Reports. Perhaps a similar form of standards should be established in Malaysia for its brands, albeit adapting to our culture. The brands in the US appear to wear their diversity and inclusion programmes, 100 percent DEI scores, and affiliations with Valuable 500-like badges proudly on their sleeves, which should also be the practice of Malaysian brands. It is not just reporting on disability inclusion practices that need to be carried out but also practicing it sincerely that needs to happen.

Limitations and Future Research

Future research could be carried out quantitatively to generalise the findings better. The study focused on a qualitative research design by combining Gestalt principles and semiotic analysis, that examined the websites of selected brands in depth; however, the findings could not be generalised to brands in Malaysia and the US. A quantitative research study would be more representative in reporting how brands in Malaysia and the US practice and report on disability inclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found that disability inclusion is practised in different ways by all brands in Malaysia and in the US. Brands in the US have a more standardised way of gauging the degree of disability inclusion practised at the workplace through DEI making it easier to search for this information on their websites. Brands in Malaysia communicate their practice of disability inclusion through different ways; by claiming the disability inclusion practice as part of human rights, PwDs as part of the diverse workforce, YTL's adaption of classrooms for children with disabilities, Maybank's entrepreneurship training for PwDs and Celcom's products-offering for PwDs. The

information on disability inclusion were sometimes found in reports or webpages that are separate from the main websites of the brands. Other than the practices of disability inclusion by both countries' brands, the Gestalt principle Common Fate conveying disability inclusion practices was found on all websites and reports by the brands in both countries. There are monumental benefits for brands to practice disability inclusion at the workplace which should make this a sustainable practice.

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