

Is this Acceptable? Malaysians' Perceptions of Orthographic Variations of Personal Names

Adakah ini Boleh Diterima? Persepsi Rakyat Malaysia terhadap Variasi Ortografik Nama Peribadi

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ABSTRACT – In a multilingual and multicultural society like Malaysia, the spelling of names serves as a personal identifier and as a reflection of sociocultural and linguistic norms. While prior studies have examined spelling variation in educational and digital contexts, less is known about public perceptions of spelling variations of names. Against this backdrop, this study investigates how Malaysians perceive the acceptability of spelling variations. Using a mixed-methods design, 355 participants responded to a questionnaire comprising Likert-scale evaluations of ten real names, along with open-ended questions. Quantitative analysis revealed significant variability in participants' acceptability ratings, though names that retained phonological clarity (e.g., Adrianah) were generally more accepted than others (e.g., Frrdy). No significant differences were found across gender, age, ethnicity, or professional background. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses highlighted two key influences on naming decisions: individual sociocultural factors (e.g., religious beliefs, family tradition) and sociolinguistic-aesthetic factors (e.g., pronunciation, trends, media influence). These findings suggest a growing tolerance towards spelling variations, possibly indicative the value of distinguishing one's identity through names.

ABSTRAK – Dalam masyarakat berbilang bahasa dan pelbagai budaya seperti Malaysia, ejaan nama bukan sahaja berfungsi sebagai penanda identiti peribadi tetapi juga sebagai satu refleksi norma sosiobudaya dan linguistik. Walaupun kajian terdahulu telah mengkaji variasi ejaan dalam konteks pendidikan dan digital, kurang diketahui tentang persepsi terhadap variasi ejaan nama. Kajian ini menyiasat kebolehterimaan variasi ejaan dalam nama peribadi. Dengan menggunakan reka bentuk kaedah campuran, 355 peserta menjawab soal selidik yang terdiri daripada penilaian skala Likert bagi sepuluh nama sebenar, bersama dengan soalan terbuka. Analisis kuantitatif mendedahkan ketidaksamaan yang ketara dalam penilaian tahap kebolehterimaan di kalangan responden, walaupun nama yang mengekalkan kejelasan fonologi (cth., Adrianah) umumnya lebih diterima daripada yang lain (cth., Frrdy). Tiada perbezaan ketara ditemui merentas jantina, umur, etnik atau latar belakang profesional. Analisis tematik bagi respons kualitatif menunjukkan dua pengaruh utama pada keputusan penamaan: faktor sosiobudaya individu (cth., kepercayaan agama, tradisi keluarga) dan faktor sosiolinguistik-estetik (cth., sebutan, aliran, pengaruh media). Penemuan ini mencadangkan peningkatan toleransi terhadap variasi ejaan yang mungkin mencerminkan nilai identiti melalui nama.

INTRODUCTION

Names play a significant role as a marker for identity, sociocultural heritage, and even religion. The spelling of names may be influenced by the dominant language, or the language where the name is commonly found (see discussion by Sebba, 2009). In Malaysia, the spelling of names for people or even objects may be shaped by diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Zhu & Ang, 2025). This results in spelling that may not be stable and consistent. While this reflects language creativity, it may also indicate changes in acceptance towards spelling norms. Spelling has been examined in educational contexts to gauge the level of literacy among students (e.g., Kihob & Mahali, 2021; Mohd Rusli et al., 2022). Spelling has also been examined in emerging digital social spaces, where orthographies have been linked to the expression of semiotic meanings (e.g., Hashim et al., 2017). These discursive sites where spelling is examined are viewed as temporal and dynamic. As such, spelling divergences within these spaces may be accepted; in fact, unconventional spelling may be deemed a key linguistic feature. Nonetheless, not much has been discussed regarding unconventional spelling in more stable situations, such as in people's given (and legal) names. In this setting, names are more permanent and less permeable. With an interest in actual names, this study aims to examine the perceptions of spelling for names of Malaysians. Findings from this study would not only shed light on orthography, but they would also offer insights into issues relating to identity and language stability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Names as an Identity Marker

Names for people and object are important and timeless linguistic markers. A name reflects the personal identity, as well as the sociocultural and even religion of a person. In Jeshion's (2009) critical and comprehensive linguistic discussion of names, she concludes that names are important as they reflect the singularity of thought and reference to objects within the parameters of interlocutors. Names are also a transference of the description or attributes of people. With regards to this, Jeshion states that "there is something special about proper names that makes the transfer of a singular thought [...] more automatic or privileged" (2009. p. 399). Due to the importance of names as identity markers, to have them mispronounced and questioned may bring about a negative reaction or experience (Hagström, 2012). Names may also be associated with negative connotations. This may be exemplified in recent times through the name of 'Karen', which had taken on stereotypical attributes of a white middle-class woman being rude, entitled, and possibly racist towards people of color or from minority groups (Blitvich, 2022). What this indicates is how names are not just functional, but are emotional and cognitive bridges between individuals and the broader social world.

Factors Influencing Naming

There are various factors that shape the decision of naming a person. From a religious perspective, names can be seen as a channel of communication between the name-giver and their maker. The names selected may reflect religious beliefs and ideologies and serve as a memory marker not only of the religion but of any significant events that had led to the selection of the name (Aboh et al., 2022). Names may also depict ideologies of gender and even power relations. For instance, in the Bette society in Southeastern Nigeria, male names depict ideologies relating to being fearless, tough, and heroic while female names may depict themes of tension, value of a wife, beauty, and wealth (Aboh et al., 2022). In some cultures, names are also passed down to retain family history or honour, especially among male children (Brown et al., 2014). Names could also be given due to the aesthetic of sounds; nonetheless, this could be risky as it may lead to inappropriate meaning (Makoni et al., 2007). Names could also indicate an extent of language shift, such as that seen in the case of Zimbabwe, where there was a gradual increase in the use of English names from the 1960s to the 1980s (Makoni et al., 2007). This was also reported by Cheng in 2008 through the lens of globalization. Cheng gives the example of Malaysia, where there has been more global (or anglicized) approach in name-giving across three cultural groups. Cheng gave the examples of 'John Toh' (Chinese), 'Anthony Samy' (Indian), and 'Nadia Binti Mahmud' (Malay) as examples of a global identity.

Since names are unique identifiers for people, they may be viewed as occupying an "unregulated orthographic space" – a notion discussed by Sebba (2012, p. 5) to refer to discursive sites where spelling can diverge from normativity. However, it may be misguided to assume that the spelling of names is completely free for all. A more plausible view is that the spelling of names, while having the tendency to show orthographic variation in the representation of same sounds, may reflect a polycentric phenomenon (see Blommaert, 2010). This means that there is a sense of accountability towards a

particular norm centre, whether it be another language or cultural group, or even popular orthographic practices of the time (Stæhr, 2016).

Orthography of Names

Within a cultural context or even throughout the world, there are names that are shared. These names are typically spelled similarly, subscribing to a convention of spelling. This convention may imply correctness, while spelling that deviates may be deemed incorrect. Conventions may also illustrate the prescriptive force that shapes the form of a particular language. This may be advocated strongly by those who view language through a moral lens, in that the consistency and purity of language requires an adherence to norms and established rules (Sebba, 2009). Sebba continues, “[o]rthographies, with their distinctive sets of sound–letter correspondences, are easily distinguishable for their users and quickly become associated with particular groups.” (p. 82). This renders spelling as an iconic representation of a culture as they may function as a social image of the group in which they are found.

Spelling may represent the notion of clarity in terms of form for a particular language – that there is still a universal consensus on how sounds in that language should be represented orthographically (Pan et al., 2021). In English writing, spelling remains an important aspect of language development as it is an indicator of a language user’s level of proficiency in the language (Pan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, various views regarding spelling in the English language have emerged over the years, where there are arguments that spelling may not be entirely important, due primarily to the arbitrariness of the spelling of sounds (Pan et al., 2021). Furthermore, due to the proliferation of digital communication, spelling rules may be ignored, especially in informal and social communication; yet, there is still consensus that accurate spelling can show professionalism and the level of education of interlocutors (Kunch et al., 2022). In terms of the spelling system of Bahasa Malaysia (hereafter, Malay), it has been deemed rather straightforward due to its predictable sound-spelling correspondence, and thus deviances from conventional spelling or orthography may be considered redundant (see Sebba, 2009). Winskel and Lee (2014) support this notion and state that Malay “has a highly transparent writing system with almost one-to-one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes” (p. 179).

Research on the Malay language have also examined the acceptability of spelling. For instance, in the study of Kihob and Mahali (2021) on secondary school students’ spelling of Malay, it was found that spelling errors persisted as students lacked familiarity with some spelling conventions and rules, and students were also influenced by oral or spoken language practices. Based on these findings, it may be assumed that perceptions of the participants included the positive view towards speech-based writing and that the conventional spelling norms are arbitrary and may be modified. Similar findings were reported by Mohd Rusli et al. (2022), where the participants reported spelling based on what was heard, rather than on conventions. Nonetheless, perceptions in other types of discursive sites have been found to be more open. For instance, in examining university students’ online language and communication behaviors, Hashim et al. (2017) found that students were engaged in various code-mixing processes, as well as modifications to spelling and meaning. This was also reported by Ting and Yeo (2019), where students’ digital communication was found to feature improvisation to spelling to either forward a point or to represent indigenous or local languages that did not have standard orthography.

THE STUDY

This study aims to examine the perceptions of Malaysians of unconventional name spellings. A mixed-methods approach was utilized through a survey questionnaire with open-ended questions. This approach was deemed suitable to gather information that would provide general perceptions and individual views regarding unconventional spelling.

Context and Participants

Since the aim of this study was to glean the perceptions of the public, there was no specific context identified. Participants were recruited through convenience and a snow-ball approach. Since both researchers were working at a university, they invited their students to participate in the anonymous study. They also encouraged their students to share the survey with their friends and family. The researchers also shared the survey with their own personal contacts.

Data Collection

Data collection was done through a survey questionnaire that comprised two parts. The first part of the questionnaire collected demographic information of the participants while the second part gathered data regarding participants' perceptions towards the spelling of ten names. The items in the second part were presented in a 5-point Likert scale, where participants could evaluate the spelling of names and indicate the acceptability. Participants could choose "1" if they perceived the spelling as "very acceptable" and they could choose "5" if they perceived the spelling as "not acceptable at all". The names presented in the second part were real names that the researchers have encountered. These names are presented in the table below. Peculiar aspects of the spelling are indicated in bold. Remarks regarding how these names would be spelled according to conventions in Malaysia are also provided.

Table 1. List of names included in the survey questionnaire

Spelling	Remarks
1. ADRIANAH	The "H" letter at the end of the name is unnecessary.
2. ANYS	Typically, the [ɪ] sound will be spelled with an "i", instead of a "y".
3. MAXRYNER	Technically, one may argue that there are two names within this name. The two names would also be separated, instead of joined.
4. SITTI	This is a common name in Malaysia. The typical spelling for it is "Siti" with one "t", rather than two.
5. MAY LYN	In the first part of the name, a typical spelling would be "Mei", which is a more common transliteration for Chinese names. In the second part of the name, a typical spelling would be with an "i" letter, instead of a "y". The same issue as #2 may be observed here.
6. MARTEEN	The conventional spelling may be "Martin", where the [ɪ] sound is spelled with the letter "i" instead of the letters "ee".
7. HYELENA	The conventional spelling is "Helena". The "y" in the observed spelling does not affect the pronunciation of the name. The same for the double "l".
8. LUNDUS	This is considered a common name among the indigenous Dusun people of Sabah, and may not be familiar or common to those in the urban areas.
9. KELINTON	This spelling is for the English name "Clinton". What may be seen here is the expansion of the consonant cluster at the onset of this name into "ke".
10. FRRDY	This name is pronounced [fərdɪ]. However, as observed, there are not vowels in the first syllable; instead, there is a double 'r'.

The final part of the questionnaire collected qualitative data through two open-ended questions. The first question asked participants to mention names which they thought had peculiar spelling and the second question asked about factors that could influence how names were spelled.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive methods, namely mean and standard deviation scores. The quantitative data was also analyzed with a one-tail T-test to determine if there were any differences in perceptions between male and female participants; and studying and working participants. A single-factor ANOVA analysis was also done to determine if there were any significant differences when variables such as age group and ethnic background were taken into account. The qualitative data from the open-ended responses, on the other hand, were analyzed thematically. This was done according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for thematic analysis. The process began with the familiarization of data and proposing initial codes. Then, the codes were consolidated into themes. During this process, the researchers involved evaluated the themes in terms of how they captured the data. Finally, the themes were defined and were exemplified using responses from the participants.

RESULTS

A total of 355 responses were collected. Many of those who responded were female (n=198); students (n=316); and were between 18 to 24 years old (n=308). The participants were also mostly of a mixed background (n=172). The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' demographic information

Gender	
• Female	198 (55.77%)
• Male	157 (44.23%)
Profession	
• Studying	316 (89.01%)
• Working	39 (10.99%)
Age group	
• 18-24	308 (86.76%)
• 25-30	8 (2.25%)
• 31-34	4 (1.13%)
• 35-40	4 (1.13%)
• 41 and above	31 (8.73%)
Ethnic Background	
• Indigenous	63 (17.75%)
• Chinese	31 (8.73%)
• Indian	13 (3.66%)
• Malay	77 (21.69%)
• Others	172 (48.45%)

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation scores illustrating the participants' perceived acceptance of name spellings. From the mean and standard deviation scores, it appears that participants had diverse perceptions of acceptability.

Table 3. Participants' perceived acceptability of the spelling of names

Spelling Of Names	Mean	Standard Deviation
ADRIANAH	2.22	1.31
ANYS	3.31	1.24
MAXRYNER	2.86	1.33
SITTI	2.70	1.39
MAY LYN	2.50	1.29
MARTEEN	2.34	1.34
HYELLENA	2.66	1.34
LUNDUS	3.02	1.46
KELINTON	3.18	1.37
FRRDY	3.75	1.36

As shown in Table 3, the name perceived to be acceptable was ADRIANAH (2.22) while the name perceived to be not acceptable was FRDDY (3.75). The standard deviation scores were >1, indicating that there was a myriad of responses given by the participants. Considering this, it would be useful to consider the number (frequency) and percentage (ratio) of scores given for each name. This is presented in Table 4.

"Adrianah" and "Marteen" received the highest acceptability ratings, with 43.94% and 36.90% of respondents rating them as "Very Acceptable". On the other hand, "Frrdy" was the least accepted spelling, with 43.88% of respondents rating it as "Not Acceptable at All". Spellings for "Anys" and "Kelinton" had more balanced distributions, but they also received a significant percentage of lower acceptability ratings. Meanwhile, spellings like "Sitti", "May Lyn", and "Hyellena" were somewhat accepted, with a higher proportion of "Very Acceptable" and "Acceptable" responses.

A one-tailed T-test was performed to compare responses between gender (male and female) and the participants' profession. The results for gender yielded a t-value of 0.0475 and a p-value of 0.4813. In terms of the responses of students and those who were already working, the t-value was 0.1001, with a p-value of 0.4607. As both p-values was more than 0.05, these results indicated no statistically significant differences between groups, suggesting that gender and profession status did not impact the acceptability of name spellings. Additionally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine variations in responses based on age group and ethnicity. For age groups, the F-statistic was 1.18 with a p-value of 0.3323, which is greater than 0.05, meaning that age did not significantly influence participants' acceptability ratings. Similarly, when analyzing ethnicity, the F-value was 0.395 with a p-value of 0.811,

which is also above the significance level. This suggests that ethnic background did not play a significant role in shaping participants' perceptions of name spellings.

Table 4. Frequency and ratio of scores given by participants

SPELLING OF NAMES	Very acceptable	Acceptable	Somewhat acceptable	Not acceptable	Not acceptable at all
	1	2	3	4	5
ADRIANAH	156 (43.94%)	60 (16.90%)	69 (19.44%)	46 (12.96%)	24 (6.76%)
ANYS	35 (9.86%)	55 (15.49%)	107 (30.14%)	82 (23.10%)	76 (21.41%)
MAXRYNER	72 (20.28%)	75 (21.13%)	88 (24.79%)	70 (19.72%)	50 (14.08%)
SITTI	93 (26.20%)	78 (21.97%)	80 (22.54%)	51 (14.37%)	53 (14.93%)
MAY LYN	103 (29.01%)	89 (25.07%)	80 (22.54%)	50 (14.08%)	33 (9.30%)
MARTEEN	131 (36.90%)	84 (23.66%)	63 (17.75%)	41 (11.55%)	36 (10.14%)
HYELLENA	89 (25.07%)	86 (24.23%)	82 (23.10%)	53 (14.93%)	45 (12.68%)
LUNDUS	74 (20.85%)	72 (20.28%)	63 (17.75%)	65 (18.31%)	81 (22.82%)
KELINTON	53 (14.93%)	69 (19.44%)	73 (20.56%)	81 (22.82%)	79 (22.25%)
FRRDY	30 (8.45%)	49 (13.80%)	53 (14.93%)	69 (19.44%)	154 (43.88%)

The variation in acceptability observed through the quantitative findings hint the diverse experience participants had with name spellings. To form a better understanding of name spelling, qualitative data gleaned from the two open-ended questions was used to determine possible underlying patterns and influence. In the first open-ended question, participants were asked to give examples of names with unconventional spelling. A total of 505 names were given, with ten being shown below (Table 5).

Table 5. Unconventional spelling and combination

Unconventional Spelling	Unconventional Combination
1. Naylina	1. Jeevan Jayzett
2. Dorathea	2. Rafunzel Nathalie
3. Shentyla	3. Max Agustinus
4. Abigiel	
5. Kasmariana	
6. D'Alister	
7. Jeampah	

Names that were categorized as having unconventional spelling had clusters of vowels which were considered redundant (e.g., Dorathea); at least one name, "Abigiel" did not correspond with its conventional counterpart, "Abigail". Furthermore, there were two names that were not common in the research context (e.g., Shentyla, D'Alister, and Jeampah). The participants also revealed having encountered people unconventional combination of names that also had unconventional spelling, such as "Jeevan Jayzett" and "Rafunzel Nathalie". From the participants' qualitative responses, it may be observed that participants do encounter name spellings that are unconventional, which may indicate that such spellings may not be isolated occurrences.

To identify broader influences, the second open-ended questions asked the participants to discuss factors that may influence the spelling of names. The themes yielded after analysis were individual sociocultural factor, and sociolinguistic and aesthetic factor. The former refers to personal choices made by the name-giver, along with their beliefs such as family traditions or religious beliefs. The latter refers to broader factors such as regional and global practices, as well as social perceptions. These two themes shed some light on larger sociolinguistic trends that shape how the participants view name spelling.

Individual Sociocultural Factors

This factor refers to the personal decisions made in giving names. These decisions may be influenced by the name-giver's cultural or religious beliefs, and the family tradition of honoring names. In some of the responses provided by the participants, there were also personal decisions made based on astrological beliefs or cultural symbolism. The education level of the name-giver was also attributed as

a factor, as it may have a bearing on the use of conventional or unconventional names or spellings of names.

1. "Parents may name children based on favourite characters from movies or books."
2. "It is from family tradition – my cousins' names have the same middle word."
3. "Names from biblical or Quranic sources influence spelling and meaning."
4. "Names may be rooted in indigenous languages like Dusun."
5. "Transliteration from Arabic, Chinese, or other scripts causes spelling changes."
6. "Cultural myths or local stories influence name choices and spelling."

Responses #1 to #6 exemplify the dynamic nature of name-giving, where it shows how names are intricately linked with religious, cultural, familial, and even educational influences. For instance, response #1 and #2 illustrate familial factors that shape name spelling. Response #3 to 6, on the other hand, reflect religious and cultural factors that shape name spelling. These factors show how the identity of a person is bridged with their heritage, whether in terms of language, culture, or religion.

Sociolinguistic and Aesthetic factor

The next factor is related to broader sociolinguistic phenomena or perceptions towards sounds considered to be aesthetically valuable. This shows how linguistic practices are affecting local name spelling convention. This also shows how name spellings may be shaped by differences in languages, which may not be surprising in the context of Malaysia given its multilingual and multicultural environment (see Cheng, 2008). Name-givers may decide on a name that is uncommon to their own ethnic or religious background. Name-givers may also be influenced by names they hear on global media. The latter gives a peculiar edge to a name as it may be unique and unfamiliar to the immediate community of the name-giver. Nonetheless, this may not always be the case as spelling may be the result of an unfamiliar sound or errors in spelling during the registration process of a person, such as that indicated in response #7 and #8.

7. "Lack of literacy in rural areas affects name spelling."
8. "Spelling mistakes from old registration officers unfamiliar with local pronunciation."
9. "Influence from colonization, such as Anglicized versions of names."
10. "Generational differences influence spelling – older names are simpler, newer ones trendier."
11. "Some regions in Sabah have unique naming conventions."
12. "Some names are aesthetic... parents like the way it looks or sounds."
13. "Modern parents find unusual names creative or bombastic."

Responses #9 to #13 above show how the process of giving names were influenced by broader sociolinguistic and historical trends that may have left an impression upon the name giver (parents). This has led to choices being made that may be perceived as unique, unusual, creative, and even bombastic. Again, this may provide an extent of explanation as to why there was a high variability in acceptance towards name spellings, even those that may be considered unconventional.

DICUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore Malaysian university students' perceptions of the acceptability of unconventional name spellings. Furthermore, the study sought to determine sociocultural factors that may shape those perceptions. This research presents a novel angle in the study of spelling in the context of Malaysia, which had previously been centered upon school students' spelling abilities in the academic setting. In the current study, findings showed a shifting linguistic and social landscape where name spelling is increasingly negotiated rather than strictly adhered to. While seemingly conventional spellings such as "Adrianah" or "Marteen" were viewed as largely acceptable, names that were more opaque or phonetically inconsistent, such as "Frrdy," were still met with some resistance. This suggests that name spelling acceptability is filtered through intelligibility, phonological transparency, and perceived proximity to recognizable norms. As Jeshion (2009) notes, names are more than functional labels as they serve as cognitive and emotional bridges to social identity. In the Malaysian context, this symbolic function is even more pronounced due to the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity. Spelling variations are not simply aesthetic choices but are tied to broader perceptions of cultural legitimacy, modernity, and linguistic belonging. The emotional salience of names means that non-normative

spellings may be perceived as disruptive or even disorienting, especially when they obscure expected pronunciation or deviate from spelling conventions.

The findings also point to the influence of regional spelling conventions, particularly in East Malaysian states like Sabah, where naming practices may differ from those in Peninsular Malaysia. In Sabah, many indigenous communities employ naming conventions that reflect oral traditions, kinship systems, and local phonological systems. Names such as “Lundus”, which means beautiful in the Dusun language, may appear unfamiliar or non-standard to urban or West Malaysian audiences, but are rooted in local culture and language. This is comparable to the naming practices of the Bette society in Southeastern Nigeria, where they depict positive ideologies relating to one’s personal characteristic, life, and family (Aboh et al., 2022). Participants’ reactions to such names reveal how regional variance in naming intersects with national norms and how unfamiliarity can sometimes be mistaken for deviation. This reflects Sebba’s (2012) idea of polycentric normativity, where multiple centers of linguistic authority coexist, and local norms may be just as legitimate as national or global ones, even if they are not institutionally endorsed. The thematic findings further illuminate how naming is both a deeply personal and socially contingent act. On the one hand, names are rooted in family, tradition, religion, and belief systems, all of which are factors that support the findings of Aboh et al. (2022) and Brown et al. (2014). On the other hand, broader sociolinguistic forces such as colonial legacies, regional dialects, aesthetic appeal, and media influence contribute to naming variability, consistent with Makoni et al. (2007) and Cheng (2008).

A noteworthy observation from the quantitative findings is the lack of any significant variation across gender, profession, age group, or ethnicity. This reinforces the idea that tolerance or resistance to unconventional spellings may be less about demographic variables and more about shared ideological positions on what names should signal, which comprise intelligibility, cultural rootedness, or uniqueness. The notion that names are affected by global-local dynamics is further affirmed in participants’ qualitative responses, which indicated that orthographic variation may not always be intentional. The responses also illustrate that youth and newer generations may be more inclined to view name spelling as a space for creative expression, influenced by both modernity and digital culture. These findings challenge the idea of a fixed orthographic norm, especially in personal naming practices. They suggest a fluidity and hybridity that is reflective of Malaysia’s multicultural and multilingual society. Names become a site where identity, language, and society converge, which illustrates the tension between normativity and expression, tradition and innovation. In places like Sabah, where naming traditions have distinct phonological and cultural logic, national conversations around spelling conventions should be broadened to include such regional realities.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the perceptions of the spelling of names, revealing both the creativity and complexity embedded in orthographic representation. While spelling conventions carry symbolic and communicative weight, the findings suggest that younger Malaysians are increasingly open to deviations. This indicates a growing awareness that language use, including name spelling, is not solely governed by conventional norms but is also shaped by lived experiences, personal values, and sociocultural practices. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the broader understanding of names as discursive and sociolinguistic artifacts. In line with Sebba (2012) and Stæhr’s (2016) arguments, orthographic variation is not merely a deviation from standard norms but a reflection of identity positioning and language ideology. Names function as powerful symbols of social belonging, and the willingness to accept non-standard spellings suggests a shift towards a more inclusive and polycentric approach to linguistic legitimacy. The role of regional diversity, especially naming conventions in East Malaysia such as Sabah, must be recognized as part of this broader change.

For future research, more targeted investigations should examine naming practices across specific linguistic, regional, or ethnic communities, especially among indigenous groups whose naming conventions may diverge from dominant norms. Comparative research could also examine differences in orthographic acceptance across urban and rural populations, or between diaspora and local communities. Longitudinal studies would further enhance our understanding by tracing how perceptions of spelling shift over time, particularly with continued digital exposure and global naming trends. Ultimately, this study adds to the growing body of work that sees language as a living, negotiated practice. In focusing on names and their spellings, it offers an entry point into larger conversations about

representation and inclusivity in a multilingual and multicultural society. As Malaysia continues to navigate its linguistic diversity, it is crucial that language policies and societal norms make room for flexibility, variation, and recognition of the legitimacy of diverse linguistic practices, including the creative spelling of names.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Daron Benjamin Loo: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data collection and analysis, Writing of original and revised drafts.

Veronica P. Atin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data collection and analysis, Revising draft.

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

Data available on request from the authors.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors declare that no generative AI was used in the writing of the manuscript.

ETHIC STATEMENTS

Not applicable

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