



Public Perception of English Environmental Taglines in Indonesian Retail Campaigns: Between Global Messaging and Local Meaning

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Abstract

Taglines are widely used in environmental media campaigns and appear in various formats such as posters, flyers, and tote bags. Despite their prevalence in Indonesia, public awareness of environmental protection remains limited. This study investigates the use of English in environmental campaign taglines, focusing on how these taglines are perceived by the public and their effectiveness in influencing environmentally conscious behavior. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 15 participants across three public locations. Thematic analysis revealed that participants' perceptions of English-language environmental taglines are shaped by emotional connection, cultural relevance, and language accessibility. English is often appreciated for its clarity, simplicity, and global resonance, but local languages are perceived to offer stronger emotional and cultural connections. Most participants found that English taglines increased awareness, and in some cases motivated behavioral changes, such as reducing plastic use. However, linguistic barriers and cultural disconnect were also noted, particularly among individuals less familiar with English. These findings suggest that while English taglines can effectively promote environmental awareness, their success depends on balancing global appeal with cultural and linguistic sensitivity to local audiences.

Keywords: *environmental campaign; English taglines; public perception; language accessibility; behavioral change*

Introduction

Environmental degradation is a global concern, including in Indonesia, where issues such as plastic waste pollution and declining ecological awareness persist (UNEP, 2020). Despite various governmental regulations and community-based initiatives, environmental awareness remains limited among the public (Gifford, 2013). Recent studies have emphasized that although environmental campaigns are essential in raising awareness, their success heavily depends on the clarity and emotional resonance of the messages conveyed (Demeria, 2013).

In Indonesia, these campaigns often rely on verbal messages—particularly short, impactful taglines that are displayed in public spaces such as posters, banners, advertisements, and eco-friendly tote bags. Taglines, by their very nature, are designed to capture attention and prompt immediate responses, making them ideal for promoting pro-environmental behavior (Perovic & Folic, 2012). In many instances, these taglines are written in English, which is often chosen to project modernity, global values, and universality (Panggabean et al., 2020).

Previous studies have explored the role of language in environmental messaging. For example, Avila (2018) and Li et al. (2022) underscored the importance of community participation and strategic communication in fostering environmental behavior change. The linguistic and semiotic dimensions of taglines have also been widely discussed. Perovic and Folic (2012) highlighted the polyfunctional nature of taglines, emphasizing their dynamic ability to engage audiences through both persuasive and informative elements. Additionally, Demeria (2013) noted that taglines, especially in public spaces, hold a communicative power that extends beyond mere information dissemination—they evoke emotional engagement and create a shared sense of responsibility.

In the context of Indonesia, studies by Panggabean et al. (2020) and Agarwal & Krishan (2014) have observed that English is commonly used in public communication due to its perceived prestige and simplicity, as well as its global resonance. In particular, English is frequently employed in urban areas and tourist-driven regions such as Bali and Makassar, where it is seen as a marker of modernity and international relevance. However, while English taglines are widely used, their effectiveness in influencing public perception and action remains inadequately understood. There is a need for more research exploring how these messages are received and interpreted by diverse communities in Indonesia, particularly in areas where the population may not be proficient in English (Deuze, 2019).

Although several studies have addressed the linguistic construction and strategic use of taglines, few have focused on audience perception, especially in multilingual societies like Indonesia. The psychological and cultural reception of English-language taglines is an underexplored area, particularly regarding how different linguistic communities perceive, understand, and respond to these messages (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Furthermore, empirical evidence on

whether exposure to English taglines leads to actual behavioral changes in environmental practices remains insufficient. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining not only how taglines are delivered but also how emotional connection, language familiarity, and cultural relevance influence their effectiveness. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How are English environmental taglines perceived by consumers in Indonesian retail settings?
2. How do these perceptions influence awareness and daily environmental behavior?

The objective of this study is to explore the public's emotional and cognitive responses to English-language environmental campaign taglines and assess their potential in promoting eco-conscious actions. The novelty of this research lies in its empirical focus on real-life taglines printed on tote bags in retail campaigns, analyzed from the perspectives of consumers in three different locations in Indonesia. By integrating linguistic, cultural, and behavioral frameworks, this study provides new insights into the effectiveness of English environmental messaging in multilingual and multicultural contexts.

Method

This study applied a qualitative research approach to explore how individuals interpret and respond to English-language environmental campaign taglines. As noted by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2006), qualitative research emphasizes understanding human experiences through the collection and interpretation of non-numerical data. This approach was deemed suitable for examining nuanced perceptions, emotional responses, and socio-cultural interpretations associated with environmental messaging. Creswell (2013) also highlights that qualitative methods are ideal when the goal is to explore participants' meanings and lived experiences within a specific context.

The research was conducted in three different public settings in Indonesia: Moena Fresh (Denpasar), Alfa Midi Poros Maros 2 (Maros), and Roti 'O Mall Ratu Indah (Makassar). These sites were selected purposively, not only because of their visible use of eco-friendly tote bags featuring English environmental taglines, but also to reflect a diverse range of consumer demographics and regional contexts. As suggested by Patton (2002), purposive sampling enables researchers to focus on information-rich cases that can offer deep insight into the phenomenon under study. The locations chosen represent a mix of urban and semi-urban environments with varying levels of exposure to globalized branding and environmental discourse.

Data collection took place between February and November 2024. A total of 15 participants (5 from each location) were selected using criterion-based sampling, focusing on customers who had seen or used tote bags with

environmental taglines. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. This method allowed for in-depth exploration while maintaining consistency across interviews (Kvale, 1996). Open-ended questions enabled participants to share their perceptions regarding the clarity, emotional resonance, and motivational impact of English-language taglines in their everyday environmental practices.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that systematically identifies, organizes, and interprets patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set. Following the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the analysis included: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This approach is widely recognized for its flexibility and applicability across a range of qualitative research designs (Nowell et al., 2017).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies such as member checking and reflexive journaling were employed during data interpretation, in line with recommendations by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Ethical considerations were also prioritized throughout the research process. Referring to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001), this study adhered to three core ethical principles, namely: (1) Autonomy - by securing informed consent and voluntary participation; (2) Beneficence - by protecting participants' identities through pseudonyms and data anonymization; (3) Justice - by ensuring transparency, fairness, and respect for all participants regardless of linguistic or educational background.

Results

The analysis yielded several recurring themes that illustrate how participants interpret and respond to English-language environmental taglines. These themes are presented below, supported by selected quotes to highlight the diversity of perspectives across research locations. Thus, this study explores public perceptions of English-language environmental campaign taglines used in retail settings in Indonesia, specifically through tote bags distributed by Moena Fresh (Denpasar), Alfa Midi Poros Maros 2 (Maros), and Roti 'O Mall Ratu Indah (Makassar). The findings are organized into several key themes based on the interview data collected from 15 participants across the three locations.



Figure 1. The environmental tagline campaign printed on tote bags

Visibility and Familiarity with English Taglines

Most participants stated that they frequently encountered English environmental taglines in public spaces, including supermarkets, cafes, malls, and digital platforms. This indicates a general familiarity and exposure to English in environmental campaigns, especially in urban or tourist-centric areas such as Denpasar and Makassar. This finding aligns with Panggabean et al. (2020), who observed that English is increasingly present in Indonesian public communication, particularly in commercial and lifestyle domains.

"I see English taglines quite often, especially in stores and malls. They're everywhere." – P1

Interpretation and Initial Reactions

Participants generally responded positively to English taglines, associating them with urgency, global values, and environmental responsibility. Some focused on the emotional effect, while others considered the universality of English.

"They provoke a sense of awareness... the Earth is everyone's responsibility."
– P2

"It makes me think globally, that this isn't just our issue—it's a shared one."
P5

However, several informants noted difficulty in fully understanding taglines with complex or idiomatic English. This reflects Li et al.'s (2022) suggestion that strategic messaging must account for varying levels of language comprehension in diverse populations.

"Sometimes I get it only if the tagline is simple." – P12

"I prefer if there's an Indonesian version too." – P15

Language Preference and Cultural Relevance

The participants were split in their preference for English versus local languages. While some found English more impactful and efficient, others felt a stronger emotional connection with messages in Indonesian or local languages such as Makassarese or Buginese. This resonates with Demeria (2013), who argued that language choice affects emotional resonance in public messaging.

“English feels more modern and to the point.” – P1

“Taglines in Makassarese are easier to relate to emotionally.” – P11

This reflects the importance of cultural proximity and language accessibility in campaign effectiveness.

Barriers to Comprehension

Several respondents mentioned linguistic and cultural barriers, particularly when idiomatic expressions or foreign cultural contexts were used in taglines. Some pointed out that English is still not a second language in most Indonesian communities. These insights are consistent with Agarwal and Krishan (2014), who emphasized that foreign-language campaigns may lead to partial or miscommunication when local literacy is low.

“English is not our second language like in Singapore or Malaysia, so the barrier is real.” – P6

“If we translate idioms word-for-word, they often lose meaning.” – P10

Behavioral Impact of English Taglines

Many participants reported that English taglines had prompted them to reflect on their habits and adopt more eco-friendly behaviors, such as bringing reusable bags, reducing plastic use, or properly disposing of waste. This finding supports Avila (2018), who noted that campaign messages, when emotionally charged, can trigger pro-environmental action even across language barriers.

“I bring my tote bag and tumbler now. The tagline helped me think about that.” – P2

“Simple taglines like ‘Go Green’ do push me to act differently.” – P3

Nevertheless, a few respondents admitted that such taglines had little to no effect on their behavior.

“To be honest, I haven’t changed anything because of it.” – P8

Language and Engagement

Most participants agreed that environmental taglines in native languages are more engaging and easier to understand, particularly for audiences with limited English proficiency. This affirms the idea that communicative accessibility enhances message engagement (Perovic & Folic, 2012).

“If the tagline is in Indonesian, I immediately get the point.” – P10

“Makassarese or Bahasa makes the message feel closer to me.” – P11

However, some argued that English could still be effective if the message is clear and concise.

“Sometimes English is even simpler than Bahasa—depends on how it’s written.” – P8

Memorability of English Taglines

All participants agreed that English taglines were generally memorable, particularly those that used rhythm, simplicity, and impactful words. These responses confirm Demeria’s (2013) observation that short, rhythmic phrases enhance memorability in public campaigns.

“They stick in my head because they’re short and catchy.” – P9

“I remember them because they rhyme or have good rhythm.” – P1

Effectiveness of Translation

Almost all respondents believed that translating English taglines into local languages would make them more effective, especially for audiences unfamiliar with English. Translation could increase clarity, relatability, and emotional connection.

“In my native language, the message feels more personal and powerful.” – P2

“The message becomes clearer and motivates me more if it’s in Bahasa.” – P10

Importance of Language Consideration in Campaign Design

There was strong consensus that environmental campaigns should consider the language proficiency and preferences of target audiences when designing taglines. This supports Avila (2018), who emphasized the need for inclusive and community-based messaging to drive behavioral change.

“If people don’t understand the tagline, the message won’t work.” – P6

“Creativity and clear language together make a great message.” – P10

Final Reflections

When asked for additional input, several respondents shared that tagline influenced them not just because of the language used, but also due to their clarity, emotional resonance, and the campaign's relevance to their daily lives.

“Short and catchy slogans in English are very effective.” – P9

“The message made me reflect and change some of my habits.” – P3

Discussion

Internal and External Perceptions of English Taglines

The findings from this study reveal that the effectiveness of English environmental campaign taglines is shaped by both internal and external perceptions, which influence how the messages are received and acted upon.

Internal Perceptions:

These perceptions relate refer to individual emotions, comprehension, and behavioral responses. For instance, participants such as P2 and P7 reported feeling emotionally engaged by English taglines, which motivated them to adopt more environmentally friendly practices—such as bringing reusable bags or sorting waste. These results align with Avila (2018) and Li et al. (2022), who emphasize emotional resonance as a key driver of environmental behavior. However, limited English proficiency hindered understanding for some, reducing the personal relevance of the message. Participants like P12 and P15 expressed a preference for simpler language or translations into their native tongues. This supports Agarwal & Krishan’s (2014) argument that linguistic accessibility significantly influences message reception in multilingual societies.

External Perceptions:

On the other hand, related to sociocultural and global associations. English was often seen as a marker of modernity and global connectedness (P5), echoing Demeria’s (2013) claim that English in public campaigns symbolizes universalism. Yet, others (e.g., P6 and P10) highlighted the limitations of English in Indonesia, where it is not widely understood outside urban centers. These insights resonate with Straubhaar’s (1991) concept of “cultural proximity,” in which audiences gravitate toward messages embedded in their own linguistic and cultural frameworks. Participants such as P11 and P12 found local languages—such as Makassarese or Bahasa Indonesia—more emotionally compelling, suggesting that environmental campaigns must carefully consider language familiarity and cultural attachment when crafting messages.

Positive Perceptions of English Environmental Taglines

The study also revealed several positive perceptions regarding English taglines, which contribute to their effectiveness in environmental campaigns:

Emotional Impact:

Messages in English were often described as emotionally compelling and thought-provoking. P2, for example, said the tagline inspired behavioral changes, which supports Demeria's (2013) assertion that brief, well-crafted slogans can evoke strong emotional reactions.

Global Resonance:

Participants such as P5 associated English with a sense of shared global responsibility. This finding reinforces Perovic & Folic's (2012) observation that English taglines carry a transnational symbolic value, linking local environmental concerns to broader global narratives.

Simplicity and Memorability:

Participants like P9 highlighted the simplicity and clarity of English taglines, which made them easy to remember. Taglines such as "Go Green" and "Say No to Plastic" were often cited for their brevity, rhythmic quality, and clarity. Culley et al. (2011) similarly argue that slogans with simple structures and phonetic appeal enhance retention and long-term awareness. These qualities are essential for creating memorable messages that have the potential for widespread impact.

These positive perceptions underscore the role of language as not only a medium for information but also as a trigger for emotion and behavior. The simplicity and global appeal of English taglines contribute to their effectiveness in raising awareness and encouraging action.

Negative Perceptions and Barriers

Despite the positive aspects of English taglines, several participants identified barriers that could reduce their effectiveness:

Language Barriers:

Complex or idiomatic English reduced message clarity for some respondents (e.g., P12). This supports Panggabean et al. (2020), who found that unfamiliar vocabulary can weaken the communicative impact of public messaging in non-English-speaking regions.

Cultural Disconnect:

Participants such as P11 favored messages in Bahasa Indonesia or Makassarese, stating that local language made the content feel more intimate and relatable. Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding theory helps explain this—messages

are more effectively received when aligned with the audience's cultural codes.

Perceived Elitism and Inaccessibility:

A few respondents, such as P6 and P10, perceived English as elitist or academic, which could alienate individuals who felt excluded from the conversation due to their limited language skills. This highlights a potential downside of using English in environmental campaigns, especially in rural or less-urbanized regions.

Lack of Behavioral Change:

While awareness was often increased, actual behavioral changes were not always reported. P8 admitted to not modifying any habits, indicating that awareness alone is not a sufficient catalyst. Li et al. (2022) highlighted this issue, emphasizing the need for multifaceted strategies beyond mere exposure to slogans.

These negative perceptions and barriers highlight the importance of addressing linguistic, cultural, and social factors in designing effective environmental campaigns.

Implications for Environmental Messaging

The findings of this study underscore the need for a more inclusive and contextually sensitive approach to environmental communication. While English taglines can be effective due to their global appeal and simplicity, their success depends on addressing the emotional, cultural, and linguistic factors that influence public engagement and behavior change.

Language Translation and Cultural Sensitivity:

Translating English taglines into local languages, as suggested by most respondents, could increase their clarity, relatability, and emotional impact. This is especially important for reaching audiences in rural or less-urbanized areas where English proficiency may be limited. A bilingual approach that combines both English and local languages, as practiced by Moena Fresh, may offer a balanced solution that retains the global resonance of English while ensuring accessibility.

Audience-Centered Campaigns:

Effective environmental messaging should be audience-centered, taking into account the language preferences, cultural values, and socio-economic backgrounds of the target audience. By adapting messages to the local context and incorporating both global and local elements, campaigns can foster a deeper emotional connection and drive more sustainable behavior changes.

Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach to environmental communication, one that balances the global reach of English with the cultural and linguistic needs of local populations. This approach will help ensure that environmental campaigns are both effective and inclusive, capable of inspiring meaningful change across diverse communities.

Conclusion

This study examined the public perception and effectiveness of English-language environmental taglines used on tote bags in Indonesian retail settings. The findings indicate that English taglines can influence both awareness and behavior, particularly when the messages evoke emotional responses or emphasize global relevance. English was often perceived as modern, universal, and aligned with global environmental movements, which contributed to increased awareness and reflection on pro-environmental behavior.

However, the effectiveness of these taglines was found to be highly variable, influenced by factors such as language comprehension and cultural relevance. While some participants appreciated the simplicity and international appeal of English taglines, others expressed a stronger connection to messages delivered in local languages such as Bahasa, Makassarese, or Buginese. These participants noted that local languages not only facilitated better understanding but also fostered a deeper emotional connection, suggesting that language accessibility and cultural proximity are essential for effective communication in a multilingual society like Indonesia.

The study's limitations include a small sample size of 15 participants and the exclusive focus on tote bags as the medium for environmental messaging, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, examining a broader range of media formats, and exploring comparative analyses of English and local-language taglines. Such studies would provide valuable insights into how language and cultural factors influence the success of environmental campaigns across different audiences.

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