



Visual rhetoric in Muslim-friendly tourism: A semiotic analysis of Malaysia's promotional imagery

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to systematically examine how advertisers and marketers semiotically construct the meaning and messages of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) through promotional visuals. Despite a growing interest in MFT, which mostly focuses on service provision and textual communication, there exists a gap pertaining to the exploration of visual communication strategies that shape travellers' perceptions and interpretations. For a more precise interpretation across categories, this study performed a visual semiotic analysis using a detailed codebook based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework. Findings indicate that facts and imagery are significant elements of effective visual communication, which describe halal certifications, facilities, or service features. This, in turn, reassures tourists regarding their compliance to religious practices. Thus, this study proposes a new approach that employs visual semiotics in visual decoding and narratives for promoting tourism materials.

Keywords: *Promotional visual, Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT), semiotic analysis, visual grammar*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been a big part of economic growth, cultural interaction, and social development around the world for many years. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2024), halal and Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) now constitutes one of the fastest-growing travel segments, with an estimated market size of USD 225 billion projected by 2030. Halal tourism, defined as travel that fulfils the religious and lifestyle needs of Muslim tourists, has grown rapidly around the world in recent years.

The Mastercard-CrescentRating on Global Muslim Travel Index (Crescent Rating, 2024) consistently ranks Malaysia among the top destinations for Muslim travellers, primarily due to its comprehensive halal infrastructure, encompassing cuisine, worship facilities, modest leisure activities, and certified accommodations. Their preference is due to the country's ability to provide support mechanisms for halal-friendly services, including cuisine, prayer spaces, modest leisure activities, and Muslim-friendly accommodations. The Muslim travel market has expanded rapidly, driving demand for tourism services and destinations that adhere to Islamic principles and giving rise to the niche of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT).

At the 12th International Conference on Tourism and Marketing (ICTM12), held in May 2024, Roslan Abdul Rahman of the Ministry of Tourism, mentioned the importance of a comprehensive plan for boosting Islamic tourism to tackle global challenges. With around two billion Muslims globally, this market is becoming a vital component of the tourism sector and presents a strategic potential to address the growing need for products and services that appeal to Muslims.

For Muslim-friendly tourism to succeed, it needs more than just stunning locations and infrastructure. Promotional messages must reach potential travellers. However, scholarly literature indicates that the success of MFT does not merely depend on physical infrastructure, but also on persuasive communication that aligns with religious and cultural values (Putra, 2024; Rahman & Omar, 2021). Their study revealed that strategic promotional communication is just as important as infrastructure and the appeal of the location when it comes to attracting Muslim visitors. The authors stressed that messages aligned with Islamic principles, including the availability of halal food, facilities for prayers, and services that comply with Sharia law, will improve the country's reputation as a Muslim-friendly destination.

In today's tech-savvy world, images are a part of the communication medium. They are used to persuade, build trust, encourage travel, and create pleasant impressions. Visual communication, including the resources that govern how meaning is created and communicated through images, plays a significant role in determining the narratives around the visual rhetoric of Muslim-friendly destinations. For instance, Mulyadi et al. (2023) examined the role of halal logos as a form of visual semiotics in shaping Muslim-friendly tourism branding. For Muslim travellers, the presence of halal visual markers provides a sense of security and belonging. Halal visual identifiers are part of the larger branding narrative of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) when it comes to destinations. The colours, compositions, symbols, and depictions of people in advertisements can have an enormous impact on how Muslim travellers view authenticity, accessibility, and inclusivity.

Therefore, while other studies focused on consumer behaviour (Jalil & Akbar, 2024), service quality (Ligery et al., 2022; Noor, 2025), and policy frameworks (Syed

Hamzah et al., 2024), limited attention has been given to the link between MFT and the visual rhetoric employed to promote Muslim-friendly destinations.

The use of images to portray the halal tourism sector in Malaysia continues to raise concerns about consistency, authenticity, and cultural sensitivity. A recent 2025 debate criticised a short tourism teaser for the “Visit Malaysia 2026” campaign for excluding mosques, even though it showcased a wide range of other cultural and religious landmarks. Critics pointed out that although churches and temples were featured, mosques, which are essential to the Muslim identity and architecture, were left out. Their exclusion caused a polemic about national representation. Such an exclusion shows how visual narratives can unintentionally undermine the representation of Malaysia’s Muslim-majority identity and convey inconsistent or tokenistic perceptions.

Sukmayadi and Effendi (2020) explored visual communication strategies in halal tourism promotion in Japan, focusing on how hijab-wearing women and Islamic architecture influence perceptions of inclusivity, including images of Muslim women in hijab, representations of Malaysian halal cuisine, and national architectural symbols in brochures and other promotional materials. In a separate study, Sukmayadi and Effendi (2020) examined Malaysian halal brochures, emphasising the semiotic role of halal logos and cultural markers in conveying authenticity. This study distinguishes between these two references to clarify their distinct geographical and analytical focuses. It is important to recognise that symbols, logos, graphics, pictures, and images serve as visual representations of concepts that significantly influence cultural societies, particularly in shaping individuals’ lifestyle choices, consumption trends, and their specific interest in halal preferences.

Investigating the strategic use of visual communication to provide information about Muslim-friendly locations while simultaneously serving as cultural signifiers would yield insights towards enhancing MFT’s competitiveness in the global tourism sector. To address these challenges, an empirical analysis is needed to investigate how travellers interpret visual imagery so that standard visual guidelines that take cultural authenticity, religious sensitivity, and global marketability into account can be created. This endeavor would help bridge the gap that currently exists between policy frameworks and visual communication approaches in Malaysia’s halal tourism sector. Consequently, this study sought to examine and conceptualise the semiotic resources of visual imagery in Malaysian MFT promotion through the application of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar framework. It is guided by the main research question, which aims to assess the representational, interactive, and compositional features of Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT) imagery in Malaysia to enhance promotional strategies that align with cultural appropriateness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslim-friendly tourism through visual rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is commonly understood as the use of graphical information or visual elements to communicate meaning and to influence the audience’s attitudes, opinions, and beliefs, as well as to persuade them (Hill & Helmers, 2012), similar to how words are used in traditional rhetoric. Balcı (2016) described it as a creative process that involves

arranging written and visual materials on digital media and two to three-dimensional surfaces. The aim is to send a message to a specific audience, in accordance with specific marketing strategy and objectives.

Apparently, using aesthetics in advertising and promotional materials is a team effort; thus, it is important to understand the visual content and its significance. Mat Alim and Abd Rahim (2021) examined the application of semiotic theory and visual rhetoric principles in public service announcements (PSAs). They explored how images, symbols, layout, and other visual design elements contribute to meaning and persuasion. Their findings indicate that PSA campaigns depend not only on text, but also on carefully constructed visual elements, which collectively guide interpretation and influence audience behaviour.

PSA advertisements often use images deliberately to trigger the audience's emotional responses, arrange layouts to direct their attention, include culturally relevant symbols, and match strong visuals with concise text to make the message stronger (Mat Alim & Abd Rahim, 2021). With regard to Muslim-friendly tourism, the use of visual rhetoric is vital in how the audience responds to advertising materials. Carefully chosen images can embed perceptions of credibility, inclusiveness, and accessibility. However, the failure to use these visual strategies can make materials appear superficial or misleading, potentially undermining trust among Muslim tourists (Mat Alim & Abd Rahim, 2021).

According to Pritchard and Morgan (2001), imaginative imagery in both printed and electronic advertisements is informative and effective for promoting and marketing objectives. A study by Chen et al. (2025) established the combination of visual imagery and textual creativity, which significantly influences the effectiveness of tourism advertising. Their findings reveal that pairing human figure imagery with textual wordplay (such as puns) can enhance attention, improve recall, and foster more positive attitudes toward tourism advertisements.

Sukiman et al. (2023) asserted that visual rhetoric and media representation in Muslim-friendly tourism have garnered significant attention among Muslim travellers, particularly from Middle Eastern nations and reverts globally, as they perceive Malaysia as a convenient destination that emphasises halal principles.

Advertisements featuring Muslim tourists, families, or cultural traditions can enhance relatability to Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT), thereby increasing trust in it (Rahman et al., 2022; Samori et al., 2016). Campaigns become more engaging and memorable when images are paired with culturally relevant wordplay, such as slogans that blend Islamic values with leisure (Battour & Ismail, 2016; El-Gohary, 2016). Accordingly, the integration of visual and textual strategies in MFT promotion serves as a pivotal mechanism for influencing travellers' perceptions, redirecting their focus, and enhancing recall, all of which are critical factors affecting destination decision-making among Muslim tourists (Chen et al., 2025; Henderson, 2016).

The roles of visual communication in Muslim-friendly tourism

The premise of being Muslim-friendly, commonly known as the halal label, has an immense effect on what customers prefer. The subject matter should pertain to faith and trust, highlighting that all activities and consumer behaviours must be pleasurable, yet in accordance with the constraints established by 'Allah' (Alserhan, 2010). Religion plays a major role in shaping people's ideas and attitudes (Rehman & Shabbir, 2010). Therefore,

it is important to carefully analyse and commit to the implications of establishing a brand for Muslims. Temporal (2011) suggested that from a commercial viewpoint, it is advantageous to cater to the desires of clients. He stressed the importance of understanding and studying the Muslim market segment, which is still underexplored.

Islam (2021) contended that visual and linguistic signifiers, such as halal certification markings and Islamic iconography, are essential to the positioning strategies in Muslim consumer markets, rather than being mere supplementary elements. This notion, when applied to Muslim-friendly tourism (MFT), stresses that businesses at tourist destinations need to be able to successfully segment and target consumers, while also making visual narratives that link services with religious values and expectations to reinforce trust and credibility through visual communication.

Halal tourism through the visual grammar lens of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006)

Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (2006) offers a systematic approach for analysing meaning in images via semiotic resources, encompassing representation, interaction, and composition. The framework is based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics analyses of multimodal communication (Jewitt & Oyama, 2021). This methodology is especially relevant for examining how visual elements communicate cultural, religious, and lifestyle concepts in halal tourism marketing. Halal tourism has emerged as a crucial factor in drawing Muslim visitors worldwide, as highlighted by Al-Ansi et al. (2021). The increasing interest in the halal dimension across various sectors is associated with its visual depiction in the promotion of tourist destinations. These images narrate the essence of halal tourism in Malaysia and the experiences travellers may anticipate (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Images are important for shaping opinions among individuals and affecting the choices of tourists (Battour et al., 2017). The use of visual representations to promote halal tourism has been well-recognised in Malaysia (Sukmayadi & Effendi, 2020). Nonetheless, challenges persist regarding the reliability and efficacy of these representations in accurately reflecting cultural values and fulfilling travellers' expectations. For instance, Khan et al. (2024) found that when promotional images do not align with reality, travellers frequently encounter disappointment and scepticism, negatively impacting the destination's reputation and perhaps resulting in unfavourable word-of-mouth.

According to Sukmayadi and Effendi (2020), while promotional materials frequently highlight Muslim women in hijab, halal-friendly cuisines, and iconic Malaysian landmarks, debates persist over whether such portrayals accurately capture the essence of halal tourism. According to Balakrishnan et al. (2025), unethical advertising in product promotion undermines goods and services if materials or visuals contain misleading information. This concern is particularly relevant in today's media landscape, which relies heavily on both conventional and newer platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Telegram, and DOOH (Digital Out-of-Home) advertising.

From a semiotic standpoint, Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (2006) elucidates how images convey meaning via representational, interactive, and compositional frameworks. This framework shows that the visual elements in halal tourism advertisements are not necessarily an aesthetic approach; they are also semiotic

tools that affect how Muslim travellers understand, trust, and identify with the culture (Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework aims to decipher the visual language employed in the portrayal of halal tourism while also acknowledging its impact on tourists' perceptions and decision-making processes. The cultural importance of visual representations is undeniable. Malaysia's cultural diversity and Islamic traditions necessitate a nuanced and refined strategy for visual representation in the promotion of halal tourism (Salleh & Hashim, 2021). This is in line with the requirement for culturally sensitive representations that strongly connect with the beliefs and ambitions of Muslim tourists (Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Efforts to enhance visual representations of halal tourism in Malaysia are evident (Rahman et al., 2022). Researchers endorse the adoption of adaptive visual approaches that proficiently portray the key aspects of halal tourism while accommodating various travellers' preferences and cultural sensitivity (Al-Ansi et al., 2021; Ekka, 2024). These strategies aim to connect visual depictions with the genuine experiences desired by Muslim tourists in Malaysia (Sukmayadi & Effendi, 2020). In summary, the literature points out the role of visual representations in advancing halal tourism in Malaysia. Nonetheless, there remains a significant necessity for research and development to devise visual methodologies that are effective, culturally attuned, and consistent in highlighting the essential aspects of halal tourism.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the study's objectives, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework was employed for a visual semiotic analysis. The framework is necessary to systematically examine digital promotional materials associated with MFT to determine the frequency and distribution of key visual elements.

Sampling

A purposive sampling of digital promotional items (N = 69) associated with MFT was collected from January 2024 until July 2024 based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) must be digital promotional materials; (2) must contain visual content (images or stills from video); and (3) must be explicitly associated with MFT. Items not meeting these criteria were excluded.

Coding procedure

A codebook based on Kress and Van Leeuwen was used to code each item. The codebook contains five meta-functions: representational meaning, interactional meaning, compositional meaning, contextual meaning, and geographical area. To systematically analyse the meta-functions, various focus themes and subthemes were developed to illustrate the narrative structures. These subthemes offered a systematic framework for analysing various facets of MFT visual elements, ensuring that the analysis encompassed both representational and communicative dimensions of the promotional materials. Figure 1 shows the four stages of the coding process.

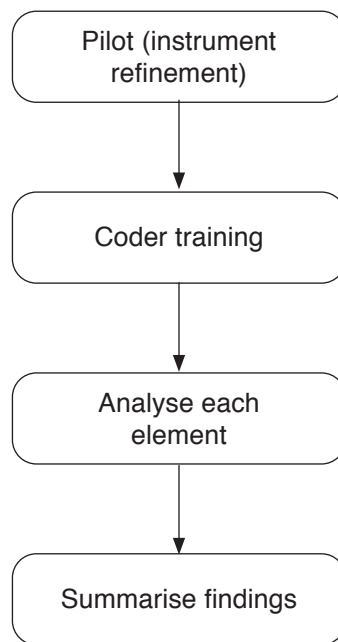


Figure 1. Four stages of coding process

Two skilled coders with expertise in visual communication studies performed the coding. Before the primary analysis, the coders acquired a detailed codebook based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework; this codebook had operational definitions and visual examples for each category. A pilot test involving 28% of the sample was executed to enhance the definitions and decision-making criteria, thereby ensuring a thorough comprehension. Intercoder reliability was then assessed on 20% of the data using Cohen's kappa for nominal variables and weighted kappa for ordinal variables, producing values above 0.75, which indicates substantial agreement. The remaining data were divided between coders, with regular discussions to resolve any ambiguities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Representation meaning

Gender

As shown in Table 1, the Representational Meaning highlights that the majority of images depict both males and females (65.63%), whereas images featuring only females account for 21.88%, and those featuring only males comprise 12.50%. This distribution indicates a calculated communication strategy that prioritises inclusivity and social equity. The gender composition patterns observed in the dataset reveal a strategic balance between cultural authenticity and global marketability. Mixed-gender depictions promote Malaysia as a welcoming environment for families, couples, and group travellers. These techniques target a dual audience: the Muslim market, which adheres to modesty and gender norms, and the non-Muslim market, which is drawn to the cultural richness and inclusivity represented in the graphics.

Table 1. Representational meaning

Theoretical Coding	Focused Coding	Initial Coding	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Representational Meaning	Gender	Males	4	12.50
		Females	7	21.88
		Mixed Genders	21	65.63
		No participant	0	0.00
		N	32	
Role of Participants		Locals	41	33.88
		Service Providers	38	31.40
		Tourists	39	32.23
		Religious Figures	3	2.48
		N	121	
Action		Eating Halal Food	21	24.42
		Festivals and Celebrations	15	17.44
		Social Gatherings	7	8.14
		Shopping	12	13.95
		Religious Practices	11	12.79
		Sightseeing	12	13.95
		Outdoor Activities	8	9.30
		N	86	
Narrative Structure		Collage	15	21.74
		Interactive	40	57.97
		Sequential	3	4.35
		Conceptual	6	8.70
		Testimonial	2	2.90
		Comparative	3	4.35
		N	69	



Figure 2. Mixed gender promotional visual

This strategy corresponds with the findings of Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2020), who contended that successful Muslim-friendly destinations attain a visual balance between universal appeal and religious-cultural uniqueness. It aligns with El-Gohary's (2023) assertion that modest yet inclusive imagery fosters trust and engagement among Muslim travellers without alienating non-Muslim tourists.

Role of participants

The MFT promotional items indicate a balanced representation of locals (33.88%), tourists (32.23%), and service providers (31.40%). Nonetheless, religious figures are relatively uncommon, comprising only 2.48%. This balance indicates that MFT's visual promotions frequently depicted individuals engaging in activities such as exploring attractions, sampling halal cuisine, or participating in cultural performances. The advertisements portray MFT as an engaging cultural space by depicting tourists in active roles rather than merely as passive spectators.



Figure 3. Local Malaysian image of representation role



Figure 4. Tourists' image of representation role

Action

The findings indicate that the MFT promotional items encompass a diverse array of activities. The predominant activity was enjoying halal food (24.42%), succeeded by festivals and celebrations (17.44%), shopping and sightseeing (both 13.95%), religious practices (12.79%), outdoor activities (9.30%), and social gatherings (8.14%). This indicates that festivals and celebrations typically exhibit large crowds, traditional apparel, and stage performances, which serve as analytical frameworks that demonstrate the cultural whole by highlighting its respective components. These events function as important semiotic resources that combine visual spectacle with inherent cultural significance (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).



Figure 5. Enjoying halal food



Figure 6. Festivals and celebrations

The findings further substantiate the perspective that shopping scenes often emphasise traditional handicrafts or local products, reinforcing cultural authenticity and aligning with the economic narrative surrounding tourism development (Henderson, 2016). Similarly, religious rituals like prayers in mosques are portrayed in a visually respectful and emotionally impactful manner, augmenting the perceived spiritual significance of travel.

Narrative structure

The narrative structure code shows that interactive sequences comprised the majority (57.97%), followed by collage formats (21.74%), with lesser proportions of conceptual (8.70%), sequential and comparative (each 4.35%), and testimonial (2.90%) formats. The visual analysis data revealed that interactive sequences typically illustrate individuals interacting with each other or their environment, creating “vectors of action” that attract the viewer’s attention and stimulate imaginative engagement. In halal tourism, these patterns are robust, as they align with the travel habits of Muslims, who frequently journey with family or groups of friends (Eid & El-Gohary, 2020).

Interactional meaning

Camera shot

Table 2, which shows the interactional meaning through camera shots and angles of MFT promotional items, revealed that medium shots constituted the majority at 39.13%, followed by long shots at 34.78%, close-ups at 20.29%, ground-level shots at 4.35%, and aerial shots at 1.45%. In visual grammar, the shot distance parallels the spatial proximity between individuals regarding interpersonal meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Medium shots establish a socially acceptable distance, simulating the experience of conversing with or observing someone from a familiar proximity. This distance in tourism marketing allows individuals to feel they can engage while maintaining their personal space (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013). Modesty regulations significantly influence interpersonal proximity in halal tourism, particularly between individuals of differing genders (Eid & El-Gohary, 2020).



Figure 7. Medium shots

Table 2. Interactional meaning

Meta-function	Focused Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Interactional Meaning	Camera Shot	Ground-level Shots	3	4.35
		Medium Shots	27	39.13
		Long Shots	24	34.78
		Close-ups	14	20.29
		Aerial Shots	1	1.45
		N	69	
Camera Angle	Camera Angle	Eye Levels	59	85.51
		Low Angles	3	4.35
		High Angles	7	10.14
		N	69	
Realism	Realism	Very Abstract	0	0.00
		Less Abstract	3	4.35
		Neutral	12	17.39
		Less Realistic	1	1.45
		Very Realistic	53	76.81
N	69			

Close-ups, while infrequent, are crucial for highlighting emotional expressions, cultural subtleties, and product characteristics (e.g., halal cuisine). Kress and van Leeuwen defined close-ups as an expression of intimate proximity, fostering emotional engagement and personal investment. Their selective application in these advertisements suggests that the advertisers aimed to achieve a balance between intimacy and a broader contextual setting, appealing to both relational and exploratory motivations (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

Camera angle

The present study revealed that eye-level shots (85.51%) were predominantly used, indicating an egalitarian visual aesthetic. Subsequently, high-angle shots constituted 10.14%, while low-angle shots accounted for 4.35%. The low-angle shot in MFT promotional items conveys a sense of surveillance or scrutiny. This perspective is frequently employed to depict market scenes, festivals, or community events from an aerial viewpoint. Halal tourism primarily serves to depict a comprehensive view of densely populated public venues (markets, festivals, prayer assemblies), emphasise collective experiences rather than individual ones, and illustrate the spatial arrangements of religious or cultural events. Conversely, high-angle shots depict a night market featuring rows of food stalls and visitors traversing illuminated pathways. Henderson (2016) asserted that elevated perspectives in tourism photography encourage a sense of belonging by providing a comprehensive view of the social and cultural context. This method effectively demonstrates the harmonious coexistence of individuals from diverse backgrounds in public spaces, adhering to cultural norms within halal tourism.



Figure 8. Eye-level shots

Realism

The findings further indicate that highly realistic imagery predominates (76.81%), followed by neutral realism (17.39%), less abstract (4.35%), and less realistic (1.45%), with no instances of very abstract imagery. Visual grammar posits that modality (realism) affects perceived authenticity. High realism suggests to the viewers that the imagery authentically represents actual experiences (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In halal tourism, this concept is critical; Muslim travellers frequently depend on visual indicators to evaluate the cultural and religious appropriateness of their chosen destinations (Mohd Isa et al., 2022). Authentic representations of halal cuisine, prayer amenities, familial engagements, and cultural festivities mitigate perceived travel risks while reinforcing brand trust (Eid & El-Gohary, 2020).



Figure 9. Very realistic image

The absence of abstract imagery reflects a commitment to clarity over artistic interpretation. Abstract visuals may be effective in creative advertising; however, halal tourism promotion relies on clear, recognisable cultural and religious symbols to eliminate ambiguity and ensure accurate audience interpretations (Stepchenkova & Li, 2022).

Compositional meaning

Types of information

Table 3 presents compositional elements such as layout and textual integration whereby product benefits and information (69.6%) was the most prominent, followed by expert opinion (15.9%), narratives (7.2%), testimonials (2.9%), and statistics (1.4%). Furthermore, the result shows that 2.9% of promotional materials only used images or symbols, with no headline or body copy.

Table 3. Compositional meaning

Meta-function	Focused Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Compositional Meaning	Types of Information	Expert Opinions	11	15.94
		Product Benefits or Product Information	48	69.57
		No Headline or Body Copy	2	2.90
		Narratives	5	7.25
		Statistics	1	1.45
		Testimonials	2	2.90
		N		69
Salient Elements		Graphic elements	2	2.90
		Logos	4	5.80
		Colour	1	1.45
		Images	48	69.57
		Texts	14	20.29
		N		69

In visual grammar, the positioning of information is crucial for conveying meaning. The dataset does not explicitly indicate positional placement (left/right/top/bottom), yet the prevalence of product benefits and information implies a significant emphasis on central or upper positioning, typically linked to “ideal” or “default” content. In halal tourism advertisements, such an arrangement generally entails the prominent display of explicit and factual descriptions, including halal certification, facilities, or service features, to promptly assure viewers of religious compliance (Mohd Isa et al., 2022).



Figure 10. Compositional meaning

Expert opinion functions as an authoritative endorsement mechanism. The present study indicates that MFT promotional materials intermittently feature quotations or visuals of religious leaders, culinary experts, or government tourism representatives. This framing enhances perceived credibility, particularly for Muslim travellers who prioritise religious assurance in their decision-making (Eid & El-Gohary, 2020). Testimonials and statistics, although frequently disregarded, are essential for establishing social proof and empirical validation.

The sparse use of promotional materials devoid of headlines or body copy indicates a preference for integrating visuals with explanatory text, which corresponds with the information-seeking behaviour of the halal tourism audience. Travellers frequently require explicit clarification on religious and cultural appropriateness prior to making travel decisions (Battour & Ismail, 2016).

Salient elements

The salient elements analysis reveals that images comprised the majority at 69.6%, while text represented 20.3%. The analysis of selected MFT promotional materials underscores salient elements through high-resolution images of halal cuisine, mosques, family gatherings, and cultural festivals, which serve as immediate engagement stimuli, immersing the viewer in a familiar and culturally relevant context. In contrast, the text illustrates the synergy between visual and verbal persuasion. This suggests that MFT promotional materials should prioritise images to initially capture attention, while employing text to provide clarity, especially for information that cannot be effectively conveyed through images, such as details concerning halal certification.

Logos (5.8%) frequently function as trust anchors in halal tourism promotion. These logos are usually positioned at the bottom or corner of the promotional items, where, as per Kress and van Leeuwen's compositional framework, they inhabit the "real" space linked to factual and credible information. Nonetheless, graphic elements (2.9%) and colour as the predominant characteristic (1.4%) are rarely observed, indicating a limited application of solely ornamental features.

Contextual meaning

Cultural elements

The analysis of Table 4 reveals that architectural elements (30.77%) dominated the contextual dimension, reflecting the strong semiotic association between Islamic architecture and Muslim identity. These include domes, minarets, Arabic calligraphy, and geometric motifs that signal religious adherence and authenticity. Overall, this study unequivocally demonstrates that mosques are significant, as they fulfil two functions: indicating that the location is accommodating to Muslims and providing prayer facilities. Marketers frequently use prominent locations, such as Masjid Putra or Masjid Kristal, to promote Malaysia as a destination for Muslim tourists.

Table 4. Contextual meaning

Meta-function	Focused Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Contextual Meaning	Cultural Elements	Architectural Elements	32	30.77
		Religious Symbols	27	25.96
		Traditional Clothing	10	9.62
		Cultural Practices and Rituals	10	9.62
		None of the above	25	24.04
		N	104	

Religious symbols (25.96%) such as crescent moons, prayer rugs, and Qur'anic inscriptions further reinforce Malaysia's Islamic branding. Traditional clothing and rituals (9.62%), like baju kurung, batik, and communal iftar, serve as semiotic bridges linking local heritage with broader Muslim cultures. These encompass Qur'anic calligraphy, crescent moons, prayer rugs, halal certification symbols, and motifs of Islamic art. In visual grammar, these function as symbolic elements that enhance the viewer's understanding of the depicted participants and environment.

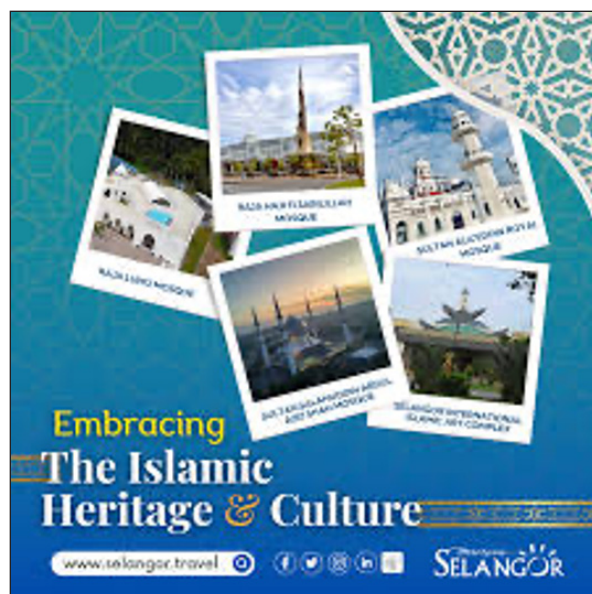


Figure 11. Contextual meaning

Furthermore, 9.62% of the images depicted traditional attire and cultural practices and rituals, whereas nearly a quarter (24.04%) of images exhibited no identifiable cultural elements. This risks diluting Malaysia's Islamic visual identity, echoing Stephenson et al. (2020) who warned of "branding hybridity" in halal tourism marketing. Such images frequently depict natural landscapes, standard hospitality settings, or close-ups of food devoid of cultural identifiers. While this approach can enhance the brand's global appeal, it may undermine the halal-specific branding if not accompanied by explicit textual or logo-based assurances (Mohd Isa et al., 2022). This strategy aligns with Henderson's (2016) assertion that destinations occasionally reconcile niche religious branding with universal tourism appeal to avoid alienating non-Muslim markets.

This study extends prior analyses by systematically categorising visual cues to reveal cultural hierarchies; where modern urbanism and minimalistic design often overshadow traditional religious imagery. Such findings underscore a need for balanced representation that integrates both Islamic and multicultural symbols to strengthen Malaysia's visual rhetoric globally.

Geographical area

Location

Table 5 indicates that urban environments constituted the predominant geographical category, comprising 56.52%, frequently showcasing city skylines, contemporary infrastructure, iconic buildings, and commercial districts. In MFT imagery, urban backdrops often feature landmarks, like the Petronas Twin Towers, contemporary mosques in Putrajaya, and upscale shopping centres. They convey modernity, conforming to travellers' expectations for premier amenities and contemporary comfort. The results align with El-Gohary's (2023) recent study, which observed that halal tourism marketing increasingly employs urban imagery to attract younger Muslim travellers in search of destinations that integrate religious amenities with shopping, business, and lifestyle offerings.

Table 5. Geographical area

Meta-function	Focused Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Geographical Area	Location	Urban Settings	39	56.52
		Natural Settings	6	8.70
		Rural Areas	4	5.80
		Does not represent any geographical location	20	28.99
N			69	



Figure 12. Geographical area

Nonetheless, natural environments comprised merely 8.7%, while rural areas constituted 5.8%. Approximately one-third of the images (28.99%) did not possess discernible geographical indicators. The infrequent representation of rural-area imagery indicates that, although rural heritage constitutes a significant aspect of Malaysia's cultural identity, it is not prominently featured in contemporary MFT marketing.

CONCLUSION

The present study systematically investigated the influence of visual rhetoric on MFT perceptions and narratives in Malaysia, employing Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar to analyse five meta-functions: representational meaning, interactional meaning, compositional meaning, contextual meaning, and the geographical area of promotional materials. The findings present new evidence that visual resources serve as a strategic approach for authenticity and effectively convey a marketer's message in the promotion of Muslim-friendly destinations.

Hence, this study contributes to refining Malaysia's tourism visual policy, ensuring cultural sensitivity without compromising global appeal. Unlike Sukmayadi and Effendi (2020) as well as Mulyadi et al. (2023), who focused on selected visual elements, this study employed a comprehensive visual grammar approach encompassing five meta-functions—representational, interactional, compositional, contextual, and geographical. The prevalence of mixed-gender representation, the significant focus on urban settings, and product-related information indicate an intention to convey both a contemporary concept and religious inclusivity. Nevertheless, the inclination to under-represent rural heritage and specific Islamic markers, such as historic Islamic sites, reveals deficiencies that may inadvertently diminish Malaysia's status as a Muslim-majority country with an Islamic identity.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study presents a novel methodology for employing visual semiotics in the visual decoding and narrative construction of tourism promotional materials. The study examined how the Kress and Van Leeuwen framework

can be applied to uncover micro and macro meanings that affect travellers' interpretations and decision-making processes. This contribution is noteworthy, as prior research has given scant attention to visual rhetoric; consequently, this study bridges the gap by evaluating promotional materials through visual semiotic analysis.

Generally, this study enhances discussions regarding the intersection of culture, religion, and branding within tourism research, illustrating the importance of culturally sensitive visual representation in shaping destination competitiveness. As such, future research could enhance standard semiotic guidelines by acting as a strategic instrument for analysing inclusive and effective visual promotions. The study also identifies both strengths (authentic cultural cues, gender balance) and setbacks (under-representation of rural heritage, inconsistent religious symbolism) in Malaysia's current visual strategy, offering practical recommendations for future campaigns.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the significance of visual rhetoric in influencing Muslim-friendly tourism promotion. By highlighting both strengths and setbacks in Malaysia's current visual strategies, it underlines the significance of integrating authenticity, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity in tourism branding. The presented findings and recommendations aim not only to enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in the global halal tourism market but also to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how visual communication can link cultural identity with global appeal.

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