Constructing Multicultural Harmony: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Ethnic Representation in George Town Heritage Promotional Materials

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how multicultural harmony is depicted through visuals and discourse in marketing materials for the George Town Heritage Celebrations. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, George Town is renowned for its diverse cultures from Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian communities. The research combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and visual semiotic analysis to explore how ethnic groups are portrayed in the design, images, and text of the event brochure. Findings reveal that visual stories focus on famous heritage sites and cultural icons, symbolizing national unity. While visible elements highlight historical architecture and multicultural performances, subtle messages promote an idealized view of ethnic harmony. Using color, layout, and culturally significant images, the brochure functions not only as marketing material but also as a visual ideology supporting discussions of Malaysia's national identity. The study suggests these visual and textual strategies influence public perceptions of unity, diversity, and cultural coexistence. The analysis emphasizes the importance of heritage communication in shaping collective memory and fostering social cohesion within Malaysia's diverse society.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Cultural Identity; Ethnic; Multiculturalism; Tourism; Visual

INTRODUCTION

George Town, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Penang, Malaysia, serves as an intriguing example for exploring the complexities of multicultural representation in heritage marketing materials (Ismail & Mohd Ali, 2011; Suhaimi & Bustami, 2020). The city's historical importance as a trading port has fostered a diverse community, leading to a vibrant mix of cultures, traditions, and architectural styles. As George Town uses its heritage to attract visitors and boost its economy, the portrayal of different ethnic groups in promotional content becomes an essential issue. Heritage tourism can lead to significant capital growth, rising rent prices, and changes in business operations (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2018). Therefore, understanding the nuances of ethnic representation in marketing materials is vital for ensuring that tourism development is fair, inclusive, and respectful of the city's diverse communities (Huibin & Marzuki, 2012).

The concept of "creative cities" has become more popular in the 21st century, with urban areas worldwide competing based on their branding, image, identity, and cultural assets (Leng & Badarulzaman, 2014). Cities are promoted through their activities and attractions that define them. However, aiming to be a creative city poses challenges, especially for culturally diverse places like George Town, as it may compromise authenticity and the integrity of local features (Khoo, 2020). Official recognition of cultural heritage can symbolize national identity amid a global mosaic. George Town's multicultural heritage is deeply rooted in its history as a key Southeast Asian trading hub, attracting traders, immigrants, and settlers from around the world (Noh & Imron, 2025). This mix of cultures has shaped its architecture, cuisine, religious practices, and social customs, adding to its unique charm. Heritage tourism benefits from this diversity, drawing visitors eager to experience the city's rich offerings. However, tourism-driven commercialization can sometimes oversimplify or exclude certain cultural elements

(Salim et al., 2020). Economic development pressures threaten the preservation of its cultural identity, especially with high-rise buildings and new developments in the historic center, risking the integrity of the George Town World Heritage Site (Shamsuddin et al., 2012). Tourism marketing via brochures, websites, and social media plays a crucial role in shaping visitors' expectations of George Town. These strategies often highlight the city's multicultural heritage through imagery and narratives showcasing diverse communities, sites, and customs. The rise in tourism has led to adaptive reuse of heritage buildings into hotels and commercial spaces. While this boosts the economy, it also raises concerns about gentrification, displacement, and the loss of local identity. Some argue that street art, rather than traditional heritage, has become a more prominent attraction and a source of income for some residents.

Consequently, it is essential to analyse how different ethnic groups are portrayed in these promotional materials, considering concerns surrounding authenticity, power relations, and the risk of cultural appropriation. The multicultural identity of George Town is often praised, but the portrayal of its various ethnic groups in heritage marketing materials may not always be accurate, fair, or inclusive. Marketing efforts frequently target tourists, leading to the commercialization of heritage. This selective portrayal can result in certain communities being marginalized or erased, reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating existing power dynamics. Additionally, an excessive focus on cultural elements can lead to the simplification of traditions, undermining the richness and intricacy of George Town's diverse heritage. Such a trend can adversely affect social harmony, the preservation of culture, and the sustainable growth of tourism in the long run. It is crucial to weigh short-term benefits against their long-term implications.

This study is driven by the central question: How is multicultural harmony shaped through the depiction of various ethnic communities in the heritage promotional materials of George Town? To tackle this question, the research sets out the following specific aims: to identify the prevailing discourses that represent different ethnic groups in the heritage materials of George Town, to analyse the visual and textual techniques used in these materials to depict multicultural harmony, to investigate the degree to which these representations mirror the real experiences and viewpoints of the diverse ethnic communities in George Town, and to evaluate the possible effects of these representations on social unity, cultural conservation, and equitable tourism growth. An exploration of affordable housing and public administration in World Heritage Sites is still crucial (Omar et al., 2013).

A thorough comprehension of the urban landscape elements that affect the historical character of the site, as well as both the tangible and intangible aspects, is essential. This research undertakes a critical discourse analysis of George Town's heritage promotional materials to investigate the construction of multicultural harmony within these texts and images. It investigates the extent to which these representations accurately reflect the lived experiences and contributions of all ethnic groups residing in George Town, while also considering the potential for homogenization, stereotyping, and the erasure of marginalized voices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on heritage tourism highlights the complex relationship between culture, identity, and economic development. Numerous studies have examined the role of tourism in promoting cultural understanding and intercultural dialogue (Li & Sheng, 2025). However, the commodification of heritage for tourism purposes has also been critiqued for its potential to distort cultural meanings, reinforce stereotypes, and disempower local communities. Moreover, the focus on authenticity in heritage tourism can lead to the creation of artificial or staged cultural experiences that fail to capture the true essence of a place (Presenza et al., 2018). Some findings suggest that the interaction of political will and affective connections maintained to communities in remote places has stymied cultural tourism activity in the state. The socio-cultural impacts of tourism also affect the value of cultural heritage, especially in developing economies. Other studies have explored the impact of tourism on social cohesion and community development, with some research suggesting that tourism can foster a sense of pride and belonging, while others highlight the potential for conflict and resentment when the benefits of tourism are not equitably distributed (Anuar et al., 2021). Preserving historic urban landscapes necessitates a detailed examination of the intricate interplay of tangible and intangible elements that contribute to their distinctive character.

The development implications of heritage tourism are well established. Heritage tourism can bring a positive response to regional competitiveness by exerting a positive influence on regional employment and income. Heritage tourism could deliver significant earnings for environmental protection, as well as giving economic value to cultural heritage. Heritage tourism can result in high tourist arrivals, receipts, multiplier effects, and job creation opportunities for local communities (Chong & Balasingam, 2018). The lack of tourist endorsement on the development of intangible cultural heritage can lead to limited value and waste of resources. Cultural and heritage tourism, which has gained considerable traction in recent decades, fundamentally revolves around travel experiences rooted in the arts, heritage, and activities that authentically depict the stories and people of both the past and present. Cultural routes intertwine seamlessly with cultural tourism, effectively uniting various tourist attractions within a region under a cohesive theme, thereby enhancing marketing efforts and bolstering the management and conservation of heritage assets (Lin et al., 2024).

A substantial body of research has examined how tourism intersects with culture and identity, especially within the realm of heritage tourism. While tourism is frequently credited with fostering intercultural understanding and dialogue, it also runs the risk of commodifying culture transforming intricate traditions into simplified, marketable images. This process of commercialization can detach cultural practices from their authentic contexts, particularly when content is curated to meet tourist expectations rather than reflect the lived experiences of local communities.

The socio-cultural effects of tourism are especially pronounced in multi-ethnic societies. Studies indicate that when the economic benefits of tourism are unevenly distributed, it can lead to discontent and exacerbate the marginalization of certain groups. Nonetheless, when managed responsibly, heritage tourism holds potential for preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of belonging and pride among local populations. Researchers highlight the importance of safeguarding both physical landmarks and intangible heritage to sustain the unique character of historic urban environments. Despite this, there remains a lack of empirical inquiry into how ethnic representation in tourism marketing shapes community identities and interethnic dynamics particularly within Southeast Asian contexts such as George Town. This study seeks to address this gap by critically analysing how promotional content visually and textually constructs narratives of ethnic diversity and social harmony.

Identity, Multiculturalism, and Harmony

The formation of identity is a multifaceted process influenced by historical, social, and cultural factors. Multiculturalism, both as an ideology and a social phenomenon, acknowledges and appreciates the variety of cultures within a community. Nonetheless, multiculturalism can also be a contentious idea, as there are differing views on how to reconcile the rights and needs of various cultural groups. The concept of harmony is frequently referenced in discussions about multiculturalism, implying a condition of peaceful coexistence and mutual comprehension among diverse cultures. However, achieving genuine harmony can be difficult, as it necessitates confronting issues of power dynamics, inequality, and historical wrongs. Cultural identity arises from an individual's engagement with cultural elements, which include cultural concepts, symbols, and practices (Zhang et al., 2020). The phrase "cultural identity" refers to a set of cultural traits that an individual considers representative of their belonging to a particular culture. Cultural heritage influences identity by maintaining distinct characteristics that define a location through various dimensions. Identity is shaped through a continuous interplay of cultural, social, and historical factors. In diverse societies, identity emerges from collective cultural expressions, interactions within shared spaces, and the preservation of communal memory. Multiculturalism, understood both as a policy framework and a lived reality recognizes the coexistence of various cultural groups within a single society. Nonetheless, it brings with it significant challenges concerning fairness, visibility, and equal representation. While the notion of "harmony" is frequently employed in official and promotional rhetoric to signal unity, genuine multicultural harmony demands addressing deeper issues such as systemic inequality, historical injustices, and unequal power relations (Zhang et al., 2020).

In urban environments rich in cultural heritage, the way multicultural harmony is portrayed can either promote inclusivity or reinforce marginalization. Marketing narratives that highlight surface-level diversity without engaging with underlying social and economic disparities risk presenting an idealized, and often misleading, version of multicultural coexistence.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a theoretical and methodological framework that investigates how language interacts with power and ideology. CDA posits that language is inherently biased and always involved in social and political conflicts. Its primary aim is to reveal the underlying assumptions, biases, and power dynamics present in discourse. The objective of CDA is to foster social justice and equality by questioning prevailing ideologies and empowering those who are marginalized. The interplay of discourse and power creates a framework of meaning that affects social equity and justice. CDA provides a crucial perspective for analyzing how language shapes and facilitates identity construction, promotes specific ideologies, and sustains power dynamics within society. Critical discourse analysis investigates the link between power and ideology embedded in language through discourse studies (Fairclough, 2003). It moves past simple description and interpretation to explain the societal roles of language, uncovering hidden links and causes that illuminate the workings of ideology. CDA is a powerful instrument for examining how reality is socially constructed, how power is exerted, and how inequality is legitimized. Engaging in CDA entails maintaining a critical distance from the data, situating the data within social contexts, making one's political views clear, and focusing on self-reflection as researchers. CDA highlights the connection between language and social transformation and intervention, aiming to clarify who holds the authority to speak within a specific ideological framework.

CDA offers a method for methodically examining the frequently ambiguous connections between discourse and society that exist between discursive practices, events, and texts and larger social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. CDA involves analysing discourse samples from actual language use in real-life situations and relating them to the social and political contexts by a certain set of objectives. Critical Discourse Analysis is not a distinct academic field with a defined set of research approaches, unlike certain branches of linguistics. Instead, it functions as a shared viewpoint on the study of discourse among scholars from diverse fields, encompassing linguistics, sociology, psychology, and communication studies. CDA maintains its interdisciplinary nature through the examination of how power, dominance, and inequality manifest, persist, and are resisted through language use in social and political contexts. Critical discourse analysis can complement and extend existing critical and radical writing pedagogies. The Frankfurt School and Jürgen Habermas's influence are especially apparent in studies utilizing CDA.

Ethnic Representation in Promotional Materials

Promotional materials play a significant role in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards different ethnic groups. The way ethnic groups are represented in these materials can have a profound impact on their social standing and integration into society. Fair and accurate representation can promote understanding and respect, while biased or stereotypical portrayals can reinforce prejudice and discrimination. By analysing the language and images used in promotional materials, we can gain insights into the underlying power dynamics and ideologies that shape ethnic relations in a particular context. CDA has a strong focus on ethical critique and argumentation, subjecting arguments to systematic critical questioning in an open debate. CDA can be applied in the study of various discursive phenomena in institutional contexts.

CDA's capacity to uncover implicit sociopolitical concerns in language as a social practice has the potential to empower individuals and social groups, as well as its multidisciplinary approach to studying mass media discourse (Abdullah, 2014). To deconstruct ideological underpinnings, critical discourse analysis examines linguistic components in pertinent socio-cognitive and political situations. CDA offers a comprehensive framework for examining how language is utilized to create and negotiate identities, advance specific ideologies, and uphold power dynamics in society. It provides theoretical and methodological tools for understanding how language is utilized to construct and negotiate identities, advance ideologies, and uphold power dynamics in society.

Heritage Tourism in George Town, Penang

George Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Malaysia, serves as a cultural crossroads populated by various ethnic groups. Its extensive history and varied demographics contribute to its popularity as a tourist location. Heritage tourism has developed into a substantial phenomenon in Southeast Asia, closely intertwining

culture, nature, tourism, development, and political efforts. The safeguarding and enhancement of George Town's cultural heritage are vital for its socio-economic advancement and community unity. Tourism plays a crucial role in driving economic progress, creating job opportunities, and generating income for local enterprises. The rise of digital technologies has transformed heritage tourism, providing travellers with remarkable access to information and influencing how they view a destination. Nonetheless, the promotion of heritage can also result in the commodification and exploitation of cultural practices.

Heritage encompasses more than its direct implication of inheritance, incorporating wider aspects of ethnicity, nationalism, and even global identity. The growth of heritage tourism in Malaysia presents various opportunities and challenges (Marsin et al., 2014). While it may foster economic expansion and cultural conservation, it can also lead to the commercialization of cultural practices and the displacement of local populations. The advantageous location of Malacca has historically made it a central hub for trade, culture, and political affairs. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is based on a theoretical model that regards language as a practice ingrained in and influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts. George Town has evolved into a lively center for contemporary art and creativity, reflecting its capacity to embrace change while respecting its historical and cultural heritage.

The idea of resilience is closely connected to heritage tourism, showcasing a city's capability to endure external challenges through community involvement and efforts toward preservation (Rahmawati et al., 2014). It is important to evaluate how promotional materials affect the depiction of ethnic groups in George Town. The commercialization of cultural heritage poses significant risks, potentially resulting in cultural uniformity and a decline in authenticity. It is vital to analyse the narratives communicated through these materials and their possible effects on social dynamics. The promotional content should emphasize the richness and intricacy of George Town's cultural heritage, steering clear of stereotypes and fostering intercultural appreciation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the principal analytical framework, providing a robust lens through which the ideological construction of multicultural harmony and ethnic representation in George Town's heritage promotional materials can be examined. Grounded in Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and Teun A. van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive approach, CDA allows for a layered and contextually sensitive investigation into how texts are constructed, interpreted, and situated within broader social and political dynamics. Fairclough's model enables an analysis of three interrelated levels: (1) the linguistic features of texts (textual analysis), (2) the processes involved in producing and interpreting texts (discursive practice), and (3) the socio-cultural and institutional context in which discourse is embedded (social practice). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective further emphasizes the significance of shared social representations, ideologies, and mental models in understanding how discourse both reflects and reinforces dominant power structures. Applying both frameworks offers a critical and nuanced view of the power-laden messages communicated through visual and linguistic signs in heritage tourism materials.

This research adopts a qualitative design that prioritizes interpretive depth over generalizability. It investigates how cultural heritage, identity, and ethnic diversity are symbolically framed and disseminated in public-facing promotional content. Drawing upon CDA's emphasis on language as social practice, the study interrogates how promotional discourse is ideologically shaped and how it may, in turn, shape public consciousness about multiculturalism and heritage in Malaysia

Critical Discourse Analysis functions as the analytical framework for this research, offering a comprehensive method for unraveling the complex interplay between language, power, and ideology about ethnic representation in the heritage tourism materials of George Town. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective highlights the essential importance of context in comprehending discourse, encouraging researchers to take into account the social, cultural, and historical elements that impact both the creation and understanding of texts.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides a structured method for analyzing discourse, incorporating textual analysis, discourse practice analysis, and social practice analysis. This model allows researchers to examine the linguistic characteristics of texts, assess the mechanisms through which texts are created and

engaged with, and explore the wider social environment in which discourse functions. The investigation of the discursive strategies used by state and international organizations in framing and leveraging heritage has been a central concern of critical heritage studies (Kolesnik & Rusanov, 2020).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) suggests that language is not merely a neutral communication tool, but rather a dynamic medium that both shapes and is shaped by social relationships. This study examines how tourism, governance, and cultural studies view cultural heritage as both an opportunity and a challenge (Santa & Tiatco, 2019). By carefully analyzing the linguistic constructs, rhetorical techniques, and visual elements found in George Town's heritage tourism materials, this research aims to reveal the foundational ideologies and power relations that impact the portrayal of ethnic communities. Utilizing CDA as a framework, the study seeks to unveil the subtle yet widespread ways discourse contributes to the formation of social identities, the reinforcement of stereotypes, and the continuation of inequalities within the realm of heritage tourism. CDA emphasizes that language can mirror prevailing cultural, political, and gender perspectives and practices, whether they are deliberate or not.

Research Design

A qualitative research framework, grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis, will be utilized to examine ethnic representation in the promotional materials for heritage in George Town. The objective is to interpret how tourists perceive heritage about their cultural backgrounds. This study employs a qualitative methodology, allowing for a detailed exploration of the meanings and interpretations embedded within the various texts. Such an approach promotes a deeper understanding of the intricate interactions between language, power, and ideology within the realm of heritage tourism.

A qualitative methodological framework is employed to capture the layered meanings, values, and ideologies embedded in George Town's heritage promotional materials. These materials include brochures, posters, websites, and social media content produced between 2022 and 2025. This time frame encompasses four consecutive George Town Heritage Celebration campaigns, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, shifts in narrative framing, and consistencies in visual strategies.

Purposive sampling was used to select materials that explicitly depicted ethnic and cultural representations. Selection criteria included visibility, the diversity of ethnic portrayals, linguistic framing, and symbolic content. However, this approach is not without limitations. First, due to practical constraints, including limited public access to certain internal government documents and non-disclosure of proprietary materials, the data set is limited to publicly available, state-sanctioned promotional content. Second, convenience sampling was implemented during field visits, where post-visit interviews with tourists were conducted. This may introduce sampling bias, as these participants were not selected randomly and may not fully represent the broader tourist demographic.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges potential researcher bias, especially in the interpretation of imagery and language. Given the positionality of the researcher as both an analyst and a member of the academic community, reflexivity is critical. Throughout the study, critical self-awareness has been maintained regarding personal assumptions, cultural proximity, and the interpretive choices made during the coding and analysis stages. Methodological triangulation through multiple analytical tools helps to mitigate these biases and enhance interpretive rigor.

Data Collection

Data collection will encompass a thorough selection of promotional materials, of brochures and websites involved in the promotion of George Town as a heritage site between 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Analysis of the data will be conducted using a blend of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis methods, concentrating on the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and rhetorical techniques related to ethnic representation. This methodology is especially valuable for revealing the systems of signs and the underlying meanings in tourism marketing discourse. The application of semiotics in tourism studies is essential for comprehending how signs and symbols influence the construction of meaning and the formation of tourist

experiences. The gathered data will be examined using qualitative analysis methods, including thematic analysis and narrative analysis, to uncover patterns, themes, and discussions related to ethnic representation and multicultural harmony.

Sampling

Purposive sampling will be employed to choose promotional materials that represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds in George Town, ensuring that materials depicting diverse ethnic groups and cultural practices are included in the selection. The criteria for selection will take into account elements such as the material's visibility, intended audience, and its overall message concerning ethnic diversity and cultural heritage. This approach is aimed at selecting participants who can provide rich, comprehensive insights into the subject matter. The size of the sample will be based on the concept of data saturation, where data collection will persist until no new significant themes or insights arise from the analysis. Due to limitations, convenience sampling was implemented, where visitors were invited to participate right after finishing their visit to a heritage site.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were analysed using a blend of CDA and qualitative content analysis. This involved multi-step coding, beginning with open coding to identify recurrent themes, followed by axial coding to draw connections between visual and textual signifiers. Key themes examined include ethnic visibility, spatial hierarchy, lexical choices, and visual tropes. These were interpreted within the context of Malaysia's multicultural policies, national identity discourses, and the commercial objectives of the tourism industry.

Visual analysis paid special attention to the spatial arrangement of ethnic figures, their costuming, positioning within images, and gaze direction all of which contribute to implicit narratives of dominance, harmony, or exclusion. Textual analysis focused on the recurring rhetoric of unity, inclusion, and celebration, questioning whose voices are represented and whose are omitted.

The study also considers the semiotic landscape of George Town, analysing signs, murals, and architectural markers that are integral to the promotional aesthetic. Inspired by Barthes' (1972) theory of mythologies, this research examines how promotional content naturalizes dominant ideologies through familiar visual and textual codes, thus turning cultural diversity into a sanitized, depoliticized myth for tourist consumption.

The gathered promotional materials will undergo a thorough process of critical discourse analysis, following the theoretical framework described previously. This will entail a detailed investigation of the language, visuals, and other semiotic elements utilized in the materials, concentrating on uncovering the implicit ideologies and power dynamics that influence the depiction of ethnic groups. The analysis will also take into account the historical and socio-political backdrop in which these promotional materials are created and consumed, acknowledging that meanings are fluid and are continually negotiated and interpreted by various audiences. Several stages will be involved in the analysis, including familiarizing oneself with the data, coding, developing themes, and interpreting the results, ensuring a methodical and transparent analysis process. Additionally, the analysis will assess how the promotional materials shape ideas of authenticity, heritage, and identity, and how these representations contribute to the overall portrayal of George Town as a multicultural hub.

Investigating the visual aspects of promotional materials is vital, as images can communicate significant messages that either support or challenge prevailing narratives. Studying the relationship between canon, archive, and performance is critical for understanding how digital heritage resources contribute to the formation and representation of cultural memory. Moreover, the analysis extends to a study of the semiotic landscape of George Town, including the signs, symbols, and visual indicators that aid in constructing meaning in the urban setting. By examining the language, images, and symbols found in heritage tourism materials, this research aims to illuminate how power dynamics are negotiated and challenged within cultural representation. The articulation of these methods highlights the significance of myth analysis from a Barthesian viewpoint, particularly to the context of advertising signs.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations will be paramount throughout the research process, ensuring that the study is conducted

responsibly and respectfully. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants involved in the study, and their anonymity and confidentiality will always be protected. The research design will be reviewed and approved by the relevant ethics review board to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and principles. The findings of the study will be disseminated in a transparent and accessible manner to promote dialogue and understanding about ethnic representation and multicultural harmony in George Town's heritage tourism sector. The researchers will be mindful of their own biases and assumptions and will strive to present a balanced and nuanced account of the issues under investigation.

Ethical rigor has been upheld throughout the research process. All interview participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity has been preserved. The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee, and all sources used were appropriately cited. Ethical reflexivity was practiced in interpreting cultural symbols and community representations, especially when discussing sensitive issues such as gentrification, cultural appropriation, and ethnic marginalization.

FINDINGS

Multicultural harmony of various ethnic communities in the heritage promotional materials of George Town

The representation of multicultural unity in George Town's heritage initiatives often requires a careful equilibrium. On one side, these efforts aim to honour the distinctive cultural inputs of every ethnic group, highlighting their customs, celebrations, and architectural designs. This strategy accentuates the richness and variety of George Town's heritage, cultivating a sense of pride and belonging among its inhabitants. The urban environment of George Town is shaped by both tangible and intangible elements. However, ongoing developments and construction projects pose a threat to the essence of this world heritage site. The swift pace of development and commercialization may result in the displacement of local communities, endangering the very foundation of multicultural harmony that these promotional materials aim to celebrate.

The promotional materials for the George Town Heritage Celebrations exhibit a symbolic portrayal of multicultural inclusivity, largely focused on the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. This tri-ethnic representation is highly strategic, with visual and textual elements showcasing each group through cultural signifiers such as traditional dress, food, dance, and music. In many brochures and posters, Malays are depicted in *Baju Melayu* or performing *Silat*, Chinese individuals are shown with lanterns or engaging in lion dances, while Indian characters are portrayed wearing *sarees* or performing classical dances such as *Bharatanatyam*. These representations aim to establish a sense of balance, equality, and harmony among the ethnic groups. This selectivity excludes other ethnocultural minorities, such as the Peranakan Chinese, Eurasian communities, Thai Malaysians, or indigenous groups like the Orang Asli. These omissions reflect a simplified and official version of multiculturalism, one that aligns with state narratives and dominant racial classifications. The idea of inclusivity is thus shaped by what is shown and what is excluded, reinforcing a curated form of ethnic representation that supports the national ideology rather than local realities. This can be seen in the example of the visual theme brochure from 2022 to 2025 below:

The Theme of The George Town Heritage Celebrations	Year
	2022

	2023
	2024
	2025

A prominent finding is the static and performative nature of ethnicity within the materials. Culture is portrayed as something unchanging, aesthetic, and rooted in the past primarily through traditional costumes, ritual performances, and festive symbols. These elements are designed to be visually digestible and celebratory, catering to both local and international tourists. However, this performative approach risks essentializing ethnic identities locking them into fixed visual categories. For instance, Indians are frequently associated with colors,

festivals, and religious imagery, while Chinese characters are linked to commerce or festivity. Malays are generally framed as custodians of national tradition and values. This selective framing reinforces cultural stereotypes and denies the fluid, evolving nature of ethnic identities, especially among younger generations or intercultural communities. There is little representation of everyday life, intercultural dialogue, or shared spaces where multiculturalism happens organically. Instead, the materials focus on formal, staged cultural moments that commodify culture for public spectacle. This approach prioritizes appearance over depth, ritual over reality, and aesthetic over authenticity.

A deeper analysis of visual composition reveals subtle spatial hierarchies in ethnic representation. In group photographs, Malays are often positioned centrally or in leadership roles, while other ethnic groups appear at the sides or in background positions. The repetition of such spatial choices suggests an unspoken hierarchy, where Malay identity is privileged as the cultural and moral anchor of the nation, subtly reinforcing the dominant Bumiputera narrative in Malaysian politics and society. Even when equality is claimed through multi-ethnic representation, the positioning, gaze, body language, and proximity of figures suggest that unity is not always portrayed horizontally. Such spatial grammar supports the notion of harmony but underlines asymmetrical cultural power dynamics beneath the surface.

The materials consistently promote a celebratory narrative of multicultural harmony. Textual elements frequently repeat terms such as "unity," "togetherness," "shared heritage," and "pride in diversity." These lexical patterns mirror the national discourse on *"Unity in Diversity"* (e.g., *"Rakyat Bersatu," "Malaysia Truly Asia"*) that is central to Malaysia's postcolonial identity construction. Yet, these representations are idealized and depoliticized. They fail to reflect social complexities, historical tensions, or current cultural negotiations that influence interethnic relations in George Town. There is no mention of gentrification, tourism-driven displacement, cultural appropriation, or the marginalization of certain communities. By focusing exclusively on celebratory moments, the materials offer a sanitized portrayal of multiculturalism, one that masks inequality and downplays conflict.

The George Town Heritage Celebration brochures from 2022 to 2025 project an image of multicultural harmony by showcasing Malaysia's major ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese, and Indian in curated and visually celebratory ways. Through repeated imagery of cultural costumes, festive activities, and traditional practices, these brochures construct a symbolic portrayal of unity and inclusivity. However, this portrayal tends to be highly selective and static, relying on staged cultural performances that emphasize ethnic distinction rather than cultural interaction or hybridity. Ethnic identities are presented as unchanging and performative, defined by visual markers like dress, music, and food, which risks reducing rich, evolving cultural identities to mere tourism-friendly spectacles.

The visual framing within the brochures subtly reinforces spatial hierarchies, where Malay figures often occupy central or dominant positions, suggesting an underlying privileging of Malay culture as the normative center of national identity. While the language used such as "shared heritage," "unity," and "cultural celebration" promotes idealized togetherness, it often glosses over the historical tensions and social inequalities that have shaped interethnic relations in George Town. Moreover, marginalized or hybrid communities, including the Peranakan, Eurasian, Siamese, and migrant populations, are largely absent, revealing an exclusionary narrative that upholds official state discourses of multiculturalism while neglecting grassroots diversity.

The brochures function not only as cultural promotions but also as ideological instruments serving tourism goals and reinforcing Malaysia's national image as a harmonious, plural society. Yet, this harmony is constructed through a top-down, aestheticized discourse that lacks engagement with real lived experiences, intercultural dialogue, or power dynamics. The tension becomes particularly visible in public reactions, such as the 2024 controversy surrounding the exclusion of Malays and Peranakans in a promotional video, which exposed underlying discontent with the superficiality of the inclusion. The George Town Heritage Celebration brochures outwardly promote multicultural harmony; they ultimately reflect a symbolic and state-aligned vision of diversity that simplifies ethnicity, overlooks marginalized voices, and prioritizes performative unity over genuine cultural negotiation and inclusion. For multicultural harmony to be more than a visual construct, future materials must move beyond celebration and representation to include critical engagement with community voices, evolving identities, and socio-cultural complexities.

The visuals and language used are tailored to meet these goals, making multiculturalism marketable and manageable. However, this also raises concerns about the commodification of culture, where traditions are reshaped to suit tourist expectations and government branding rather than preserved as authentic expressions of identity and history.

As a result, heritage is repackaged, and ethnic cultures are simplified and sanitized to maintain a palatable image of harmony. The risk is that this may eventually erode the deeper cultural meaning and exclude grassroots voices, particularly those critical of state narratives or uninterested in commercialization.

Additionally, placing focus on specific elements of multiculturalism rather than others may result in the marginalization or exclusion of less prevalent communities. The rise in tourism has placed a strain on these traditional trades, highlighting the necessity for capacity building and assistance. Promotional materials for heritage can sometimes emphasize visual attractiveness and marketability at the expense of historical precision and cultural awareness. As a result, this can lead to the production of superficial or clichéd depictions of diverse ethnic communities, further entrenching current biases and stereotypes. Furthermore, promotional content may focus on economic benefits, potentially eclipsing the inherent value and significance of cultural heritage.

The Visual and Textual Techniques to Depict Multicultural Harmony, in George Town Promotional Materials

Between 2022 and 2025, the George Town Heritage Celebration brochures have strategically utilized both visual imagery and language to promote an idealized vision of multicultural harmony. This portrayal appears carefully orchestrated to resonate with national unity rhetoric and the broader goals of cultural tourism within George Town's UNESCO World Heritage framework. Visually, the materials prominently display colourful images and illustrations featuring Malays, Chinese, and Indians engaged in communal festivities be it parades, artistic showcases, or shared culinary events. These visuals are far from incidental; they are deliberately curated to signal ethnic presence through identifiable cultural signifiers such as the *Baju Melayu*, *cheongsam*, and *sari*, as well as through musical and symbolic objects like the *kompang*, *dhol*, *erhu*, lanterns, and oil lamps. While these elements collectively affirm the visibility of major ethnic groups, they also reduce diverse and dynamic cultural identities into easily consumable and commodified symbols of "heritage."

The recurrence of these visual motifs, especially within thematic iterations like *"Voices from the People"* (2022), *"Future Heritage"* (2023), and *"Doors and Doorways"* (2025), reinforces a highly structured narrative of ethnic harmony. Each community is portrayed performing its culture in a harmonious, festival-like atmosphere. However, this inclusion is largely aesthetic and superficial, celebrating culture as a spectacle rather than engaging with its lived complexity. Significantly, the brochures lack representation of hybrid and underrepresented groups such as the Peranakan, Eurasians, Siamese-Malays, and foreign migrant populations like Indonesians or Burmese workers, thereby reinforcing a narrow, tri-ethnic framework aligned with the official multicultural ideology of the state rather than the actual sociocultural diversity of George Town.

Textually, the brochures reinforce this curated harmony through the repeated use of celebratory language and inclusive slogans. Phrases like "unity in diversity," "shared heritage," and "living traditions" pervade headlines, captions, and event descriptions. These lexical choices are emotionally evocative and rhetorically effective but tend to sidestep any critical reflection. The choice of words creates a unified story of cultural togetherness, highlighting the concept of Malaysia's "unity in diversity." However, this optimistic narrative lacks depth, as it overlooks interethnic conflicts, economic disparities, or the historical complexities present within the city's varied social landscape.

The program's portrayals frequently utilize terms like "hands-on," "immersive," and "family-friendly," designed to be both inclusive and engaging. Nevertheless, these terms mainly serve as marketing language, encouraging tourists and locals to engage in picturesque heritage experiences without recognizing the genuine agency of ethnic communities or the socioeconomic factors involved in heritage conservation. By focusing solely on optimistic, homogenizing narratives, the brochures avoid addressing important issues such as historical inequality, urban marginalization, or cultural appropriation. Rather than fostering genuine interethnic dialogue or acknowledging the complexities of coexisting in a multiethnic society, the textual discourse projects a sanitized, conflict-free image of unity that echoes the larger postcolonial nation-building agenda, where

promoting ethnic harmony is often prioritized over acknowledging cultural contestation or systemic disparity.

Additionally, the layout and arrangement of visual elements within these brochures often reveal subtle spatial hierarchies. Malay figures frequently appear in central positions or in roles that connote leadership and authority, while Chinese and Indian characters are often depicted as part of the supporting cast. Although such design choices may seem innocuous, they mirror broader ethnopolitical realities in Malaysia, where Malay identity is often positioned as the cultural and political norm. This subtle privileging within promotional materials illustrates how even visual and textual portrayals of multiculturalism may unconsciously replicate hegemonic structures under the guise of inclusiveness.

Beyond representation, these brochures function ideologically as tools for cultural commodification. Ethnic identity is transformed into a visual performance, marketed for tourist consumption and economic appeal. While the events promoted such as cultural parades, hands-on workshops, and exhibitions may serve to attract community engagement, they often fall short of addressing the pressing concerns faced by local populations, including gentrification, economic inequality, and cultural displacement. The promotional narrative largely avoids such realities, focusing instead on vibrant imagery and optimistic messaging that create a polished, tourist-friendly facade. As a result, the portrayal of multicultural harmony risks becoming an ideological construct masking deeper contradictions between tourism development, social justice, and authentic cultural sustainability.

The George Town Heritage Celebration brochures across these years portray multicultural harmony through carefully selected visuals and idealistic language, presenting an image that aligns with state narratives and tourism agendas. Yet this portrayal is largely symbolic and limited, offering an aestheticized vision of unity that excludes marginalized voices and overlooks structural inequalities. For these materials to contribute meaningfully to heritage discourse and intercultural understanding, they must evolve beyond superficial representations and begin to reflect the nuanced, lived experiences and perspectives of all communities, especially those that have historically remained unseen or unheard in dominant cultural narratives. The brochures serve not only as celebratory documents but also as a means of cultural branding and nation-building, advocating for a state-approved interpretation of multiculturalism that is visually inclusive yet narratively selective. To achieve a more genuine and just representation of George Town's varied communities, future materials should transcend mere aesthetic unity and critically address the lived realities, power dynamics, and dynamic cultural identities that influence the city's heritage landscape.

DISCUSSION

As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, George Town leverages its diverse cultural history and colonial architecture to enhance its reputation and support its heritage tourism industry. This goal necessitates cooperative efforts among governmental bodies, private sector participants, and the local community. The city's promotional strategies often portray scenes of multicultural unity through a blend of visual and written elements, aiming to attract visitors while fostering a shared sense of heritage. A key aspect of George Town's transformation into a creative city is the strategic exploitation of its cultural resources, particularly its famous culinary scene, to rejuvenate the local economy.

However, following its World Heritage inscription, rising property values and rental costs have spurred gentrification, leading to the displacement of long-time residents and traditional trades, replaced by new settlers and businesses catering to tourists (Foo & Krishnapillai, 2018). These dynamics have introduced socio-spatial and temporal challenges that limit the city's ability to function inclusively as a creative urban hub. The proliferation of high-rise buildings and modern developments threatens the distinctive character and Outstanding Universal Value that earned the city its heritage status. Identifying and understanding the tangible and intangible elements that shape the city's urban landscape is essential to preserving its historic identity. While many heritage buildings have been adapted into cafes, museums, and boutique hotels to accommodate the demands of tourism, maintaining a balance between economic gain and cultural conservation remains vital. Capacity-building initiatives should aim to increase awareness among both residents and visitors about the value of traditional crafts and artisan skills (MooiKwong, 2017). Cultural and artistic collaborations also foster national and international exchanges, strengthening the city's cultural landscape. Moreover, promotional content can position

George Town as a fusion of Eastern and Western influences, enhancing its appeal as a global heritage destination.

To reinforce messages of multicultural unity, visual portrayals commonly feature various ethnic communities, Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others engaged in shared cultural expressions, such as festivals, traditional culinary practices, and performing arts. The textual narratives often delve into the historical interactions among these communities and their mutual contributions to George Town's unique identity. This strategy promotes the city as a harmonious and inclusive cultural space. Yet, the increasing emphasis on tourism also contributes to the erosion of intangible cultural elements, with gentrification playing a key role in this cultural loss.

there is a pressing need to develop strategies that minimize tourism's adverse effects while simultaneously empowering local communities and safeguarding cultural heritage. A lack of appreciation and limited understanding of heritage resources among residents, coupled with skill gaps, further hampers the town's potential to appeal to heritage-focused travellers. Introducing cultural routes that connect multiple heritage attractions under cohesive themes can enhance both the promotion and management of these assets. Additionally, diversifying visitor experiences to include the broader regional cultural and environmental offerings can help distribute economic benefits more evenly and reduce pressure on over-visited sites. Ultimately, the visual and linguistic approaches used in promotional materials must go beyond decorative or simplistic depictions, aiming instead to convey the deep-rooted historical and social dynamics that define George Town's multicultural heritage. Official heritage promotions can create a feeling of national identity in a multicultural setting. The development of tourism frequently results in the commercialization of heritage and culture, which may jeopardize the authenticity and sustainability of cultural assets.

The findings underscore the dual function of heritage promotional materials in George Town: as celebratory representations of multicultural harmony and as instruments of cultural commodification and nation-branding. These materials, while visually vibrant and rhetorically cohesive, largely promote an idealized and depoliticized version of multiculturalism that aligns with state narratives of unity. Ethnic groups are framed in performative roles, often reduced to cultural spectacles via traditional attire, food, and dance. Such representations, though positive in tone, often gloss over the social, economic, and historical complexities that underpin interethnic relations in George Town. Furthermore, the spatial and symbolic centrality of Malay figures in these brochures reflects the broader ethno-political structure of Malaysia, where Bumiputera identity is privileged. This visual privileging is subtle but significant, as it constructs a hierarchy of cultural importance that reinforces dominant ideological narratives. Meanwhile, minority and hybrid communities such as the Peranakan, Eurasians, Siamese Malays, and foreign workers remain largely invisible.

Promotional narratives also fail to reflect issues that threaten George Town's cultural sustainability, including the commodification of traditions, displacement due to gentrification, and erosion of intangible heritage. Visual and textual discourses are tightly controlled to emphasize optimism and celebration, avoiding any critical engagement with structural inequality or contested cultural politics. This contributes to the ongoing "museumification" of culture, a process in which communities are frozen in idealized pasts to satisfy tourist expectations.

1. Provide an inclusive content development, such as heritage materials should be co-created with local stakeholders from all ethnic backgrounds, including minority and migrant communities. Community participatory design can ensure representations reflect lived realities rather than state-driven spectacles.
2. Diversification of Representation, such as moving beyond the tri-ethnic template to include voices and images from underrepresented groups, thereby disrupting static categories of ethnicity and affirming the hybrid and dynamic nature of George Town's sociocultural identity.
3. Critical engagement in messaging involving heritage discourse should go beyond celebration to include acknowledgment of historical tensions, urban challenges, and ongoing cultural negotiations. Policymakers should encourage content creators to portray multiculturalism as a living, contested, and evolving condition.
4. Spatial justice and cultural equity based on urban planning and heritage conservation policies must resist gentrification pressures by protecting spaces essential to community life, especially for long-time residents and traditional artisans. Promotional materials should highlight these communities' contemporary relevance, not just their touristic appeal.

5. Capacity building and education that can empower local communities to tell their own stories through digital media training, oral history projects, and public exhibitions. This decentralizes narrative control and fosters cultural resilience from within.

6. Monitoring and accountability to establish independent review boards to periodically assess public heritage content for inclusivity, authenticity, and ideological neutrality. Evaluation metrics should be tied to sustainable tourism goals and social impact indicators.

CONCLUSION

It is crucial to acknowledge that while the city successfully utilizes its cultural diversity and colonial history to draw tourists, it confronts significant challenges that may jeopardize its long-term viability as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Marketing materials frequently emphasize the harmonious coexistence of different ethnic groups, seeking to craft an attractive image for visitors and nurture a sense of collective heritage. However, this romanticized portrayal may obscure the socio-economic realities, and the potential conflicts present within the community. Gentrification, spurred by rising property prices and rents following the city's designation as a World Heritage Site, represents a direct threat to the original residents and traditional industries. Such displacement disrupts the community's social structure and leads to a decline in intangible heritage, as local populations are supplanted by businesses catering to tourists. The development of high-rise buildings and new constructions within the historic urban landscape further endangers the city's unique character and Outstanding Universal Value.

To ensure that heritage tourism in George Town remains sustainable, a more balanced approach is essential. Initiatives aimed at capacity building should work towards educating both locals and visitors about the significance of traditional artisan trades. Marketing strategies ought to transcend superficial portrayals of multicultural harmony and delve into the more profound historical and social contexts that have shaped the identity of George Town. Authenticity must be emphasized to provide tourists with a true cultural experience that honours the community's heritage and values (Majid, 2019). George Town's ability to prosper as a heritage tourism destination hinge on its capacity to tackle these challenges and foster a more inclusive and sustainable model that benefits both the local population and tourists.

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