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Promoting Diversity Via Linguistic and Visual Resources: An Analysis of the Malaysian Tourism Website

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of information and communication technology has greatly supported the promotion of tourism destinations. Arguably, the most popular and effective method of promotion is through websites or blogs. Hence, along with the growth of tourism is the development of tourism websites as the main resource for assessing information about the potential destinations. By focusing on the official tourism website of Malaysia, this paper attempts to investigate how the website portrays the diversity of culture, destinations and architecture of the country. Adopting a multimodal discourse approach, analysis was carried out on both language and visual elements. It is revealed that both these resources are strategically utilised to portray the diversity of Malaysia in an attempt to attract potential tourists.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In recent decade, the enthusiasm to explore and discover the beauty and uniqueness of the world is becoming a trend. This is the result of the relationship between tourism and global mobility that has enabled people to recover their sense of seeking and exploring the planet through touristic activities (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). In fact, United Nation World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2012) recorded 1,035 million international arrivals, up from 995 million arrivals in 2011. The tourist population movement has been shown to be closely related to how a country provides significant information regarding the tourist attraction or destination. In addition, the fundamental source of information on the destination for potential tourist comes from tourism promotion websites and documents. Since they are the most efficient and effective forms of communication between tourism organisers and the potential tourists, the exploitation of these promotional sources in the tourism industry has grown significantly. It is also not surprising that a growing number of research is concerned with the empirical analysis of printed promotional media such as brochures, magazines, pamphlet, booklet, and guidebook (Salim, Ibrahim & Hassan, 2012) with only a few studies focusing on the analysis of electronic tourism promotion, for instance, websites and blogs.

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Notwithstanding the development of information and communication technology, the use of electronic media as part of tourism promotion is becoming a norm. The most popular and arguably the most effective means of promotion is through websites or blogs. Loda (2011) attributes the effectiveness of this form of online marketing to the combination of different form of linguistic and visual images to portray the destination which help to realise the different discourses of tourism found in the websites. For example, the language used plays an important role in the stylisation of the exoticism and authenticity of the tourist destination (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2010). This is even more apparent in the digital era where it is evident that language has been transformed into digitalised communication through the internet to create a more interactive form of communication. A significant case in point is the monologue form of interaction on the internet which has now been transformed into dialogue or triologue form of communication (Dann, 2012). In addition, several studies (Zhang, 2011; Molina & Esteban, 2006; Kim, and Hwang & Fassenmaier, 2005) have pointed to the significant role played by language in introducing and promoting the destination in order to attract and persuade potential tourists in decision-making.

Along with the considerable growth of electronic tourism promotion in recent years (Horng & Tsai, 2010), many destination countries are now establishing or improving official government tourism websites, with the expectation that more potential tourists will access information regarding tourist destinations in their country (Choia, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). Both textual and visual content of a tourism website can provide a great deal of important information and play a significant role in the valorisation and enhancement of the tourism products. Hence, the official tourism websites have become an important tool in promoting and advertising local cultures, identities, uniqueness and cuisines found in different tourist destinations (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012). Nevertheless, there has been very little research focusing on the role of official tourism websites in the promotion of tourist destinations (Lepp, Gibson, Lane, 2011; Lam & McKercher, 2013). Therefore, this paper attempts to discuss the role of language and visual image in enhancing the diversity of Malaysian tourism destinations on the Official Tourism Websites of Malaysia (OTWM). Previous studies have shown that the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, tradition, lifestyle and religions are salient features found in Malaysian tourism brochures (Hassan, In print).

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Language for Tourism

Socially, tourism encourages the interaction of people from different language, culture and countries and thus has become the largest population movement in the world. In contemporary discourse, tourism has been defined as a discourse of identity construction, promotion, acceptance and recognition which is created through the manipulation and creation of visual and linguistic elements (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Gupta, 2011). Hence, language use and semiotic modalities may be examined in the contexts of the new paradigm of modalities in order to understand how language and semiotic as mediators describe the social practice and social action (Leistyna, 2001; Wodak, 2006). A case in point is the employments of certain discourse strategies in tourism discourse as a means of portraying self-

presentation (Hassan *et al.*, 2008). In fact, in tourism promotion, language use particularly syntactical and word choice plays significant role in introducing and portraying the tourists' destinations.

Apart from the language use, visual elements play an important role in relation to tourists' decision making of the choice of the destination. Language use in the advertisement can demonstrate the persuasive elements of image and language (Cook, 1994; Patpong, 2009; El Daly, 2011). Furthermore, there are evidence to show language and visual elements play significant role in portraying the destination, hence enhancing the tourists' perceptions of a particular destination (Xiong, 2012).

Clearly, language and semiotic modes play a significant role in serving the representation of the destination that language even as speech and as writing can be seen as secondary to other semiotic modes. However, language of tourism refers to the linguistic devices which become a powerful driving force in tourism promotion in a complex manner (Dann, 1996). In contrast, visual image can be seen as a representation of reality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Hence, the combination between visual image and language can create a narrative which charms and eventually influences the decision making of potential holiday makers (Srivastava, 2012). For that reason, language and images play a very significant role in enhancing the value of the destination and become vital factors in depicting the identity of the destination.

2.2 Multimodal Discourse of Tourism Websites

Multimodal discourse approach is a relatively new paradigm within discourse which began in the 1990s, which concerns the study of language and merging it with the analysis of other resources such as gesture, sound and images (O'Halloran, 2011).

The importance of a multimodal approach is on meaning making. Multimodal analysis should be set off with a dynamic view on semiotic (Iedema, 2003). In fact, multimodal approach provides multiple perspectives which link discourse and society and facilitate a better understanding of the way discourse work in different societies (Hassan, 2012; Lirola, 2006). Therefore, the essential aspect of designing multimodal text is the choices of how to organise it. This is influenced by the context and the imagined audience. For example, employing the theory and practice in analysing the discourse and site encourage the use of multi semiotic resources. Hence, the interpretation and analysis of language use are conceptualised in relation to other semiotic resources that are in tandem with establishing the meaning.

Tourism website, an important source of information for tourists, (Pan & Fesenmaier, 2006; Guttentag, 2010; Steen Jacobsen & Munar, 2012; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012) is the combination of text, picture and sound to portray the destination. Multimodal discourse approach focuses on the language, sound and visual images used (Guo, 2004). Hence, this approach will be the most appropriate approach to analyse tourism websites.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Websites and blogs continue to be the most important source of information for would be tourists to gather important decision making information about potential destinations. Brochures/advertisement remain supporting mediation for tourists in decision-making. This study is supported by a number of

previous studies on language and visual images on tourism promotion (for example, Loda, 2011; Pan, Tsai & Lee, 2011). The main analytical focus of this study was at the micro meaning making level with a particular interest in the use of linguistic devices, such as lexical and syntactical choices. In addition, the visual analysis was particularly interested in examining the use of modality, salience, and collage. The findings shed light on how the linguistic and visual elements help to illustrate the idea of a multi diverse Malaysia to potential tourists.

As the Malaysian official tourism website consists of several pages and a plethora of accessible links, the data collection was focused on the homepage and the selected links to the most popular tourist destination. Data gathering was conducted by visiting the Malaysian official tourism website. Identifying and downloading or capturing techniques were used to collect the data in particular text and visual elements on the tourism website.

The analysis of the language and visual images of the official tourism website of Malaysia shows that the role of the website is to portray the destination through text and visual images. Then, the identified imagery was compared across data sources, to determine the central discursive themes which are prevalent in the data. Often text and visual image in the websites commonly have more than one meaning, and in this respect, multimodal emerges as a key tool in identifying and analysing the underlying meaning of text and picture or visual image (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The triangulation of the examined text and visual images on the Malaysian tourism website helps to identify themes and ideas that govern the discourse about Malaysia as a tourist destination.

It is important to note, however, that linguistic analysis is an integrally interpretive process. The phenomenon of promoting Malaysia as tourist's destination can never be analysed into enduring "correct" themes or categories. Thus, the discursive themes noted in this study are not the only way to conceptualise the tourist's destination. Rather, they should basically be viewed as an organising instrument for discussing the way that discourses about the "*diversity of Malaysia*" as a uniqueness which sets it apart from other countries. These interpretations, like all interpretations proposed, but one window into this process. Focusing on the multimodal discourse framework, textual and visual analysis revealed a primary representation of Malaysia that can be identified as "*the diversity of Malaysia*".

4.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Malaysia is commonly referred to as a multicultural society. In fact, Malaysian diversity includes diversity in the ethnicity, culture, and religion which impact on the uniqueness and the beauty of Malaysia (Henderson, 2003; Hassan, In print). Malaysian ethnic diversity is not only recognised by the existence of a number of ethnic groups such as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Kadazan, and ethnic minorities such as the *Orang Asli* and the *Siamese*; but also of recent migrants (mostly Indonesians) who play an important role in shaping Malaysian history and social participation in citizen-making (Abdul Rahman, 2002). This cultural diversity which encompasses ethnic and religious variety in Malaysia is one of the aspects that make Malaysia unique and different from other neighbouring countries. The diversity of Malaysia is made apparent through the linguistic and visual resources found in the data analysed. In fact, the "*diversity*" theme goes beyond the usual cultural diversity that has

often been associated with Malaysia; instead the diversity theme portrayed in the data extends beyond culture. In short, the analysis revealed, three main themes of diversity which are i) cultural, ii) destination and iii) architectural.

4.1 Diversity of Culture

Although diversity is still used rather ambiguously in debates on multiculturalism, identity, races, and religion (Vertovec/Wessendorf 2004), in this study, the discursive theme “*cultural diversity*” was communicated largely through an emphasis on ethnic, culture, and religion. The diversity themes available on the Malaysian tourism websites are realised through the linguistic and visual elements. The linguistic resources focused on the lexical and syntactical choices, while the visual resources focused on the visual elements which are found on OTWM such as modality, salience, and collage.

4.1.1 Linguistic Resources

In the linguistic context, the lexical choices found on the tourism websites are verbalised through lexis or words highlighting the positive aspects of the tourist destination from its *fascination, excitement, diversity, exoticism, beauty, and peacefulness*. These particular lexical choices manipulate and create the tourist’s gaze towards the destination (Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger 2010). Similarly, the utilisation of such lexis is also apparent on the page *about Malaysia* on the official tourism website of Malaysia (see Figure 1).

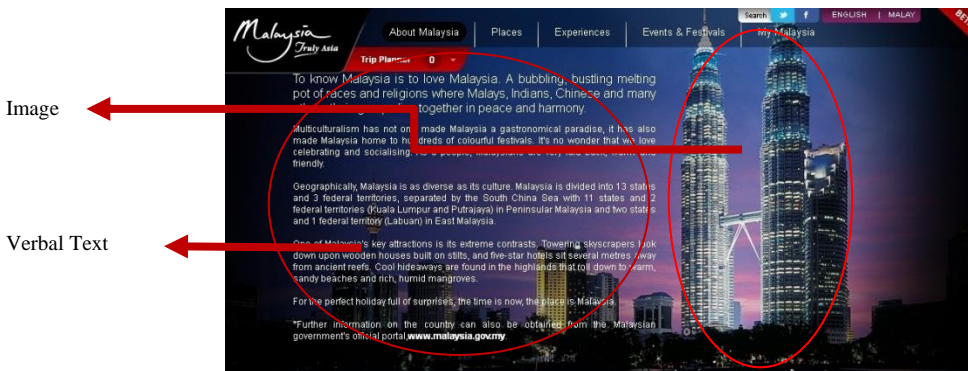


Figure 1 The homepage of official tourism website of Malaysia (Source: http://www.tourism.gov.my/intl_en/home retrieved on September 22, 2012)

The lexical choices on this page signify the value of diversity in Malaysia (Calvi, 2000; Kelly, 1997; Dann, 1996). The viewers are encouraged through the special lexis or terms used in the description to explore and experience the diversity of Malaysia. The words *bubbling, bustling* and *melting port of races and religions* can present the cultural diversity. These special terms attempt to create an image that can lure and seduce the client or potential visitors (Xiong, 2012; Dann, 1996). The careful selection of the lexis is a strategy to create a positive image of Malaysia as the country is home for people from different ethnic groups and religions who live in harmony (see Extract 1)

Extract [1] *To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. A bubbling, bustling, melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Indians, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony*

Furthermore, the following descriptive words put across a strong sense of diversity: *gastronomical paradise, colorful, festival*. These words stimulate the eagerness of the potential tourists to enjoy and experience the diversity in Malaysia (see Extracts 2 and 3). These word choices contribute to the image of the novelty and in this case the uniqueness of diversity offered by the destination (Dann 1996 Hoffman, 1998). The experience is thus transformed into an adventure and a discovery.

Extract [2] *Multiculturalism has not only made Malaysia a gastronomic paradise, it has also made Malaysia home to hundreds of colourful festivals.*

Extract [3] *It's no wonder that we love celebrating and socializing. As a people, Malaysians are very laid back, warm and friendly.*

The use of the positive adjective reveals the schemata of the viewers to experience Malaysia as a country with different cultures and ethnic groups. The text in the official tourism website of Malaysia employs present tense. The present tense signals a universal timeliness (Dann, 1996; Wodak, 2006). On this occasion, the present tense or present perfect tense is used in this website to emphasise the enduring existence of cultural diversity in Malaysia as shown in Extracts 4, 5 and 6).

Extract [4] *A bubbling, bustling melting pot of races and religions where Malays, Indians, Chinese and many other ethnic groups live together in peace and harmony.*

Extract [5] *Multiculturalism has not only made Malaysia a gastronomic paradise, it has also made Malaysia home to hundreds of colorful festivals.*

Extract [6] *Geographically, Malaysia is as diverse as its culture*

In addition, the Malaysian tourism slogan is *Malaysia Truly Asia*. The slogan is a simple sentence in which the verb is left out. The complete sentence would be Malaysia is truly Asia. Asia itself is a geographical region which houses a combination of various ethnic groups and subgroups, culture, religion and language. So *Malaysia truly Asia* refers to Malaysia being as diverse as Asia itself or encompassing the diversity of Asia.

4.1.2 Visual Resources

In line with the linguistic resources, visual elements on the subpage which features Brickfield, Penang, Taiping and the Malaysian flag also depict the cultural diversity theme (see Figure 3). The flag symbolises the Malaysian identity which represents integrity, nationality and cultural diversity while the first picture illustrates the history of one race, that of the different occupation periods. The slogan '*Malaysia truly Asia*' on the OTWM is written in white using a specific typography and background by black in order to signify the ethnic and cultural diversity in Malaysia (Jia Lou, 2010). Furthermore, Figure 2 illustrates the elements of Malaysian culture. The images show the traditional dance of one

ethnic in Malaysia and the diverse traditional costumes belonging to different ethnic groups warmly welcoming the potential tourists to Malaysia.



Figure 2 The Malaysian cultures (Source: <http://www.tourism.gov.my/en/my/web-page/experiences/top-25-experiences/20?page=4/2>)

It would appear that these images are strategically utilised to present the diverse cultures of Malaysia as the representations of Malaysian. Therefore, the cultural diversity of Malaysia is manifested through the images of different people, costumes, places or things (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996). In fact, cultural diversity remains as one of the key elements to promote Malaysia to the potential tourists.

4.2 Diversity of Destination

The second aspect of diversity is diversity of destination which is reflected through the use of different lexical and syntactical items as well as visual elements.

4.2.1 Linguistic Resources

The diversity of destination is achieved through the use of different lexical and syntactical items. For example in Extract 7, the syntactical item which portrays the diversity of the destination is carefully chosen via the reference to both Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya. This will activate the viewers' schemata (Patpong, 2009; Cook, 1994) of the metropolitan city and administrative government centre.

Extract [7] *Geographically, Malaysia is as diverse as its culture. Malaysia is divided into 13 states and 3 federal territories, separated by the South China Sea with 11 states and 2 federal territories (Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya) in Peninsular Malaysia and two states and 1 federal territory (Labuan) in East Malaysia.*

Furthermore, Extract 8 shows that the careful selection of words achieved to portray two important forms of diversity i) diversity of landscape and ii) diversity of weather condition that can be found in these destinations. The use of different nouns such as hideaways, beaches and mangroves, reflect a destination that promises diversity of landscapes from the highland to the sandy beaches and exotic mangroves.

In addition, the adjectives that precedes these nouns such as ‘cool (*hideaways*),’ warm (*beaches*) and humid (*mangrove*)’ appear to portray the diversity of weather conditions or temperature of the different destinations in Malaysia. The descriptions of the cool hideaways, warm beaches and humid mangrove will enable potential tourists to form a new schema which goes beyond a mental constructive image of the destinations but also arouses the tourists' other senses (Cook, 1994).

Extract [8] *Cool hideaways are found in the highlands that roll down to warm, sandy beaches and rich, humid mangroves.*

Therefore, the use of language plays a very significant role to portray diversity of destination. The website constructs the images via a very careful selection of words, adjectives and nouns to describe the different destinations in Malaysia.

4.2.2 Visual Resources

Similar to the linguistic resources, the subpage of the tourism website of Malaysia reveals the truth of images used in portraying diversity of the destinations (Jewitt, 2009; Lirola, 2006). In this subpage, the three photos which are lined up across the centre of the page, stand out. The prominent appeal of these three images foreground the portrayal of the diversity of destinations in Malaysia (refer to Figure 3), from the historic city of Melaka on the left, the sandy beaches in Penang to the lush greenery of Taiping.



Figure 3 The subpage of official tourism website of Malaysia (Source: http://www.tourism.gov.my/intl_en/home retrieved on September 22, 2012)

One of the outstanding image features found in the tourism promotional tools is collage. It is the most typical feature of place promotional advertising. The website provider engages the multi-sensory

nature of visual modes to portray the destination. Often, the tourists' first contact with the destination is primarily through visual mode which plays an influential role in determining the tourists' emotive experience toward the destination (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The sensibility isotropy plays a significant function to evoke the tourists' emotion and desire toward the destinations. For example, the image of the beach in Figure 4 provides potential tourists with a semiotic experience which pushes them to really feel themselves as part of the world that is represented in the subpage.



Coming soon: My Penang

My Penang is the story of an Australian couple who have been living in Penang for a few years. For him, it's a return to a place where, a decade earlier, he discovered the delights of Malaysia; for her, it's her first exhilarating taste of Southeast Asia.

Figure 4 The subpage of official tourism website of Malaysia (Source: http://www.tourism.gov.my/intl_en/home retrieved on September 22, 2012)

More generally, the tourism website is designed to play on people's emotion and to portray the diversity of destinations which tempt viewers with emotional experience. The visual image demonstrates the greenery of Taiping, one of the destinations in Perak - a state up north. Images have cognitive, emotional and behavioural effect on the audience (Brochers, 2001) and the scenery in figure 5 contributes to the tourists' attitude toward the message. It performs the representation of reality of Taiping as an area which is filled with greenery. In line with the visual image, the accompanying text offers a depiction of the experience of a young Indian novelist in Taiping. He shares his personal experience of the friendly Taiping and how he feels a part of the destination, as shown in following example:



Coming soon: My Taiping

My Taiping is the story of a young Indian novelist who grew up in Taiping. He shares what Taiping means to him, including Taiping's "40 firsts": an impressive yet lesser known list of Taiping's achievements in the nation's history.

Figure 5 The subpage of official tourism website of Malaysia (Source: http://www.tourism.gov.my/intl_en/home retrieved on September 22, 2012)

4.3 Diversity of Architecture

The third aspect of diversity that is found in the data analysed in this study is the diversity of architecture. Architecture is one of the tourism products and is conveyed as tourism commodity intended for tourists' consumption. The diversity of the architecture is portrayed through lexical choice and visual resources found in the Malaysian official tourism website.

4.3.1 Linguistic Resources

The choice of the words reveals that tourism discourse has a tendency to convey messages in an exaggerated manner to achieve some form of meaning (Dann, 1996). This is shown in Extract 9 in which two different types of architecture is described to foreground the adverse architecture found in Malaysia. The lexical choice is used to reflect the extreme contrast, from skyscrapers to (wooden) houses as well as (five stars) hotel. This clearly shows the diversity of architecture, with the modern and impressive skyscrapers standing, as if side by side, with the traditional Malay wooden houses built on stilts. Such a description also clearly but powerfully depicts a country that is not only modern but also is able to preserve its cultural heritage.

Extract [9] one of Malaysia's key attractions is its extreme contrasts. Towering skyscrapers look down upon wooden houses built on stilts, and five-star hotels sit several metres away from ancient reefs.

4.3.2 Visual Resources

It interesting to note that the visual image shown in the homepage of the official tourism website of Malaysia is the twin tower of KLCC at dusk with a blue almost purplish and a touch of red hues (see Figure 1). Given that the Twin Tower is the iconic representation of Malaysian architecture, the

sophisticated photo of the tower among the buildings is in fact the truest visual representation of the reality of the uniqueness and diversity of Malaysia (see Figure 6). The use of full colour saturation, bright colour tone and great pictorial detail are the main indicators (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006)



Figure 6 Homepage of official tourism website on Malaysia (Source : http://www.tourism.gov.my/intl_en/home retrieved on September 22, 2012)

5.0 CONCLUSION

Online resources such as website and blogs continue to play an important role in tourism promotion. The linguistic and visual resources available for meaning making in online resources have been the key factors for its appeal as a promotional tool. Therefore, understanding the way linguistic and visual resources are utilised as a resource for enhancing the portrayal of tourism destination is important for researchers, website developers and those involved in promoting the tourism industry.

Taking on a multimodal approach, this study examined functions of language and visual elements found in the official tourism website of Malaysia, as a resource for building the notion of *Diversity of Malaysia*. The findings of this study provided insights into how language and visual elements are strategically used to enhance the description of Malaysia as one of the popular destinations in Southeast Asia.

The theoretical and practical implications of this analysis suggest that promoting Malaysia's diversity signifies the institutionalisation of visits to Malaysia, in which language and visual aspects of diversity are emphasised and developed to be gazed upon and consumed by visitors (Urry 2010). As noted, this study emphasises that it is important to pay careful attention to how the tourism website of Malaysia promotes the diversity of culture, diversity of destination and diversity of architecture through a combination of language and visual elements. This outcome yields a larger lesson by considering the relationship between text and visual images. However, the study must be regarded as a preliminary to a more extensive investigation of the method responsible for certain meaning effect in the field of tourism discourse.

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