

Heritage Lens: Empowering Malaysia's Tourism Industry through Photographic Synesthesia and Visual Influence

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the significant role of photography, visual arts, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology in empowering the Malaysian tourism industry in the contemporary digital era. Along with the development of tourism, which has become reliant on visual communication, photography has flourished from a mere documentation medium into a strategic instrument for destination branding, cultural storytelling, and economic promotion. Through visual aesthetics and digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, Malaysia's cultural diversity, heritage architecture, natural landscapes, and local identities can be effectively promoted to the global community. This research also highlights case studies, such as George Town and Danum Valley, to show how visual culture and tourism photography can contribute to cultural tourism, sustainable ecotourism, and economic growth. Other than that, the integration of AI technology into tourism visual marketing, such as smart editing, virtual tourist experiences, predictive analytics, and personalized promotions, has changed the way tourism content is produced. This research also emphasizes the importance of legal and ethical frameworks for copyright protection, drone regulation, privacy, and AI-based visual governance to ensure responsible and sustainable tourism practices. Overall, this study concludes that integrating photography, visual arts, and ethical AI technology can be a major catalyst for strengthening Malaysia's tourism identity, preserving cultural heritage, and increasing the country's competitiveness in the global tourism industry.

Keywords: Photography, Artificial Intelligence, Tourism Industry, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

The New Landscape of the Visual Era Tourism

Today's world is driven and empowered by visual communication (Berger, 1972; Urry & Larsen, 2011). Today's society not only reads about a tourist destination, but also sees, feels, and experiences it visually before they arrive at the real location. In the context of fierce global competition, the Malaysian tourism industry currently faces the challenge of maintaining the uniqueness and attractiveness of its destinations. Visual representation nowadays is a major factor in shaping perceptions, expectations, and tourists' decisions to travel (MacCannell, 1976; Echtner & Ritchie, 1991; Jenkins, 2003). Photography and visual arts are no longer just documentation media; they have flourished as strategic drivers of the digital economy and branding of tourist destinations (Richards & Wilson, 2006; Dinnie, 2008). Through a visual narrative approach, dynamic images can convey Malaysia's cultural richness, biodiversity, heritage, gastronomy, and identity in a universal language that can be understood worldwide without the need for translation (Sontag, 1977; Hall, 1997). Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are very important platforms because they reinforce the importance of visual content in shaping tourism behavior and forming the destination image (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). In tourism studies, the visual image of a destination is closely linked to the use of visuals and tourists' emotional involvement. Tourists today are more attracted to aesthetic experiences that are authentic and easy to share on social media (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). High-quality photographs and visual art

exhibitions not only can reinforce a place's identity but also increase cultural appreciation and create a more meaningful and memorable tourism experience (Florida, 2002; UNESCO, 2013). In Malaysia, the integration of visual arts and cultural heritage is increasingly seen as a tourism strategy with great potential to position the country as a unique cultural destination in Southeast Asia.



Fig 1 : The Role of Visual Arts in Enhancing Tourism Destination Branding and Economic Impact

In this regard, the country's tourism sector needs a paradigm shift that aligns with the development of contemporary technology and culture. Reliance on traditional marketing approaches such as printed brochures and physical exhibitions should be balanced with a strategy that emphasizes digital visual cultural photography, immersive storytelling, and creative content based on AI technology. Digital visual campaigns can not only expand Malaysia's visibility globally but also allow tourism destinations to interact directly with global audiences in real time (Castells, 2010; Manovich, 2020). In addition, the integration of photography and visual arts in tourism promotion can also support sustainable cultural tourism through the preservation of local narratives, the empowerment of creative communities, and the strengthening of Malaysia's national identity on the world stage (UNWTO, 2018; Richards, 2021).

Therefore, this article discusses holistically how the empowerment of photography and visual arts can re-establish Malaysia as a leading global tourism destination, while contributing to the development of the country's creative economy, cultural sustainability, and digital innovation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Power of First Impressions

Based on studies and expert opinions in photography and visual arts, a tourism destination is evaluated within seconds through screen displays on digital devices. High-quality visuals possess the psychological ability to trigger wanderlust. Since the human brain processes visual information significantly faster than text, photography has become one of the most efficient media for capturing market attention (Lester, 2013).



Fig. 2: Coastal Landscape and Relaxation Experience at a Malaysian Island Destination



Fig.3 : Scenic Waterfront Environment Enhancing Nature-Based Tourism Appeal

The visual image showcases how the landscape remains the main contributor to the destination's branding and influences tourists' perceptions of relaxation, escapism, and the authenticity of the environment. The aesthetic composition of beach and seaside imagery is also reflected in the significant visual narrative that is being enhanced to attract digital tourists through social media platforms.

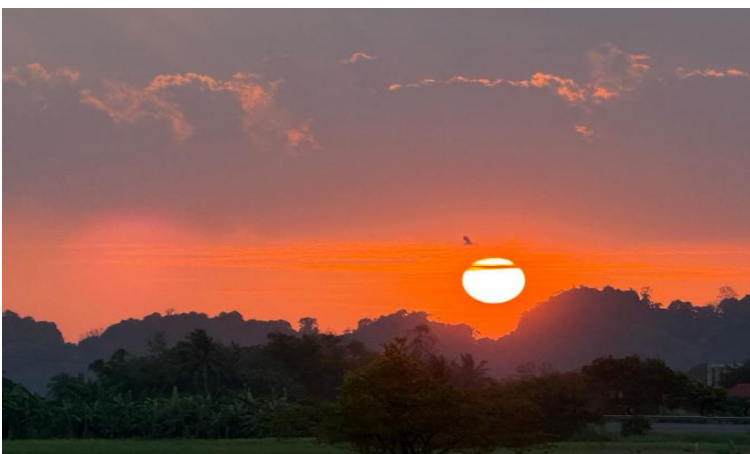


Fig. 4: Sunset Photography as a Visual Element in Promoting Rural Tourism Identity

Silent Storytelling: A photograph of Kuala Lumpur's skyscrapers against a rainbow backdrop narrates economic progress without words.

Emotional Trigger: Images of morning mist in Danum Valley evoke serenity and mystery.

Message Accuracy: Visual arts reduce misunderstandings compared to lengthy textual descriptions.

Nation Branding

Referring to John Berger in his 1976 book *Ways of Seeing* (Berger, 1976), “seeing comes before words. A child looks and recognizes before he/she can speak.” This reinforces the importance of photography in shaping first impressions and building destination identity.

Malaysia competes with neighboring countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. Photography and the visual industry play a crucial role in constructing a unique visual identity for the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” campaign. Through effective visual curation, ethnic diversity, heritage architecture, and local gastronomy are combined into a cohesive national identity.

Visual Collage: “Malaysia, Truly Asia

HERITAGE AESTHETICS	BIODIVERSITY
● Traditional Malay House ● Sri Mahamariamman Temple ● Kek Lok Si Temple	● Orang Utan Sepilok ● Terumbu Karang Sipadan ● Periuk Kera Gunung Kinabalu

Table 1. Malaysia’s cultural heritage and biodiversity under the “Malaysia, Truly Asia” identity

Digital Promotion Through Social Media

The rise of visual-based platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest has transformed destination marketing. Algorithms prioritize visual content with high engagement rates. Professional and amateur photography now acts as a catalyst for organic promotional campaigns without requiring high advertising costs.

The Evolution of Photography as an Essential Tourism Culture

For modern tourists, traveling feels incomplete without visual evidence. The phrase “Pics or it didn’t happen” reflects contemporary tourist psychology. Taking photographs at iconic landmarks has become part of the travel ritual.

Similarly, travelers exploring Malaysia’s forests, especially Taman Negara—often embrace the phrase: “Take nothing but photographs and leave nothing but footprints.”

[Traveling]—>[Capturing Visuals]—>[Uploading]—>[Social Validation]

Sharing photos on social media functions as social validation. Indirectly, every tourist becomes an “unofficial tourism ambassador” for Malaysia. Each post serves as trusted referral marketing within their social network.

Photography culture has also reshaped tourism product design:

- Visual-focused attraction layouts
- Natural lighting optimized for selfies
- Dedicated scenic platforms for sunrise photography

From Observer to Content Creator

Advancements in smartphone camera technology have narrowed the gap between amateur and professional photographers. Tourists now actively create their own travel narratives through creative visual storytelling, documenting everything from street food to luxury hotels.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative conceptual research to identify the roles of photography, visual art, and artificial intelligence AI in supporting the tourism industry in Malaysia. This conceptual approach was chosen because this research aims to develop a more critical and integrative understanding of how visual communication, tourism branding, digital media, and AI interact to promote contemporary tourism. Instead of collecting primary data, this research relies on secondary sources, including journal articles, books, policy documents, travel reports, official campaign materials, and credible online media sources related to visual culture and tourism marketing in Malaysia. This study also uses thematic analysis to identify recurring ideas and patterns across the literature and selected case studies. This analysis focuses on several key themes, namely destination branding, visual identity, tourist involvement, AI-based digital promotion, sustainability, and ethical governance.

Furthermore, two case studies in Malaysia, specifically in George Town, Penang, and Danum Valley, Sabah, were used as examples to illustrate how visual culture and photography contribute to the formation of tourism images, visitor attraction, and destination identity. These cases were chosen because they represent different types of tourism, such as urban heritage tourism and nature-based ecotourism. This study discusses the legal and ethical dimensions of visual tourism practices, including copyright, privacy, drone use, and manipulation of AI-generated images. By synthesizing insights from the literature and case studies, this research develops a conceptual discussion on how photography and AI can be strategically integrated into Malaysian tourism development while maintaining cultural sensitivity, authenticity, and sustainability.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Case Studies of Malaysian Tourism Destinations

Sample Case Study 1: George Town, Penang – The Open-Air Mural Revolution

Case Study 1: Impact Of The Aesthetic Visual

George Town, Pulau Pinang	● Mural Art ● The Rise of Cultural Tourism
Lembah Danum, Sabah	● Landscape & Macro Photography ● Premium Ecotourism Conservation

Table 2: Case studies on the impact of aesthetic visuals in Malaysia’s tourism industry.



Fig 5: Street view of George Town, Penang, highlighting cultural heritage and urban tourism activities.

Source: from internet

In 2012, George Town was primarily known for its UNESCO World Heritage status and culinary uniqueness. However, the introduction of the “Mirrors George Town” street art project by Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic during the George Town Festival sparked a visual tourism revolution.

- Interactive murals encouraged tourists to pose and take photos.
- Viral Instagram exposure transformed back alleys into economic hubs filled with cafés, souvenir shops, and bicycle rentals.
- Street art extended tourist stays and distributed visitor traffic beyond major attractions.

The George Town mural phenomenon demonstrates how participatory visual culture can transform ordinary urban spaces into globally recognizable tourism attractions.

Case Study 2: Danum Valley, Sabah – Premium Nature Photography

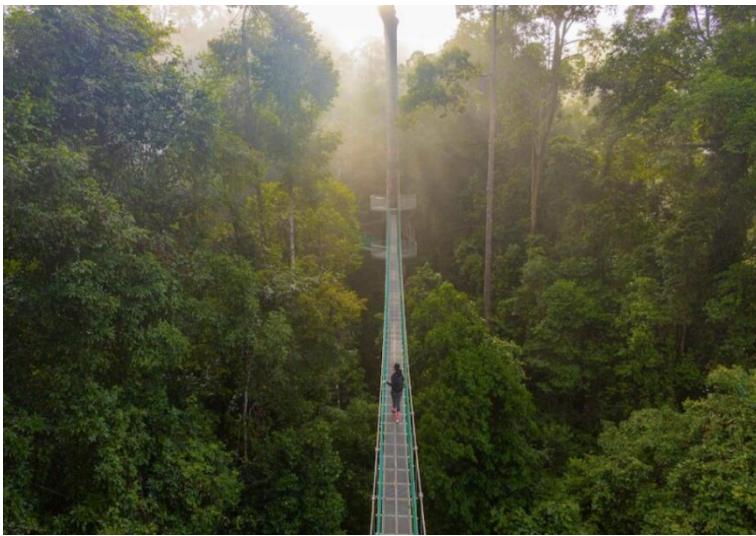


Fig 6 : Forest canopy walkway in Danum Valley, Sabah, highlighting ecotourism and natural biodiversity.

Source: Internet sources

Danum Valley represents a high-value ecotourism segment where photography serves as both a conservation and marketing instrument.

- Wildlife and rainforest imagery attract premium tourists, scientists, and nature enthusiasts.
- High-quality visuals published in outlets such as National Geographic positioned Danum Valley as a bucket-list destination.
- Premium pricing limits visitor numbers to maintain ecological sustainability.

Visual depictions of the Danum Valley area highlighted the role of photography in promoting sustainable ecotourism and environmental awareness.

The Role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Visual Tourism Marketing

The tourism landscape is now witnessing the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology (Gretzel et al., 2020) as a complementary branch of technology within the photography and visual arts industry, transforming the way visual content is created, managed, and analyzed to promote the nation’s tourism sector.

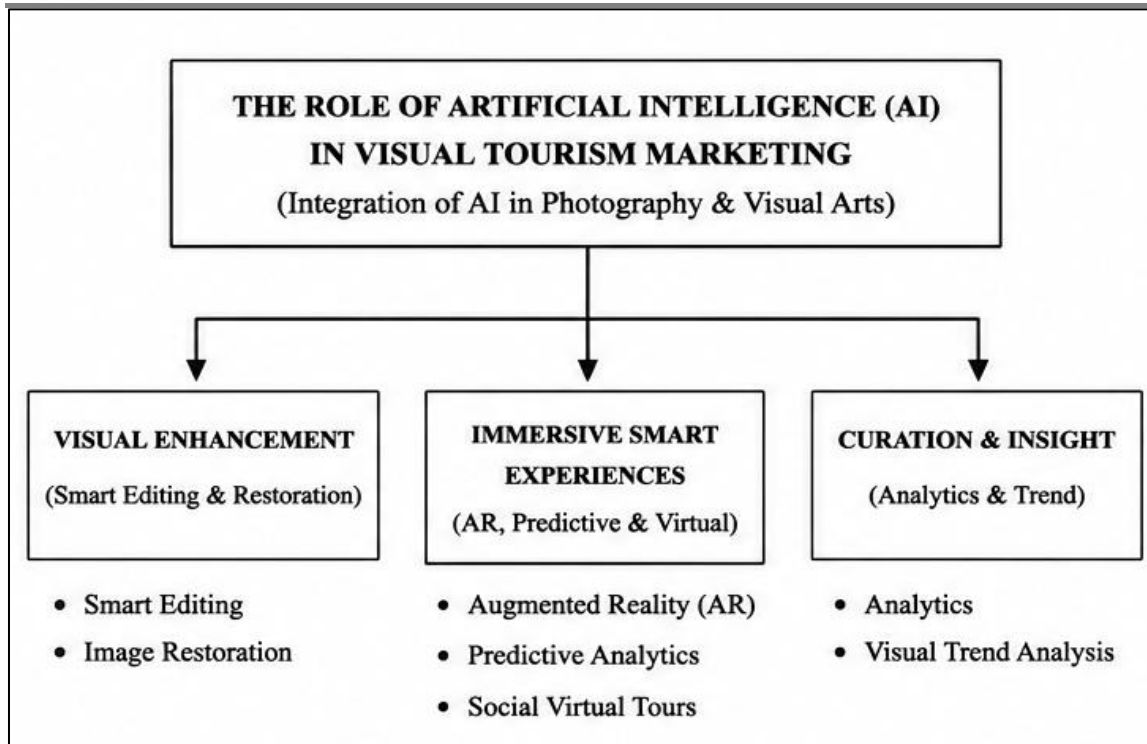


Fig 7: The role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in visual tourism marketing.

i. Smart Editing and Image Restoration

AI enables tourism agencies and creators to produce polished visuals without expensive studio equipment.

- AI software can automatically remove distracting tourists from landmark images such as Batu Caves.
- Generative AI can simulate different weather conditions or “golden hour” lighting effects.

ii. AR, VR, and Virtual Tourism

AI-powered immersive experiences allow potential tourists to virtually explore destinations before booking flights.

- Virtual tours of Mulu Caves or Muzium Negara.
- AR applications at AFamosa reconstruct historical visuals through smartphone cameras.

iii. Predictive Analytics and Personalized Marketing

Tourism Malaysia can use AI analytics to study visual trends preferred by international tourists.

- AI analyzes millions of social media posts tagged with Malaysia.
- Personalized tourism advertisements can target hikers with Mount Kinabalu visuals and food enthusiasts with seafood imagery from Sabah.

The integration of AI towards tourism visual marketing is reflected in the transition from conventional promotional strategic towards a more personalized and data-driven tourism experience.

Policies, Laws, and Regulatory Frameworks for Tourism Visuals

The rapid growth of visual culture and advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology require the enforcement of strict laws and policies to protect the rights of creative practitioners, safeguard community

privacy, and preserve the nation's image from malicious manipulation.

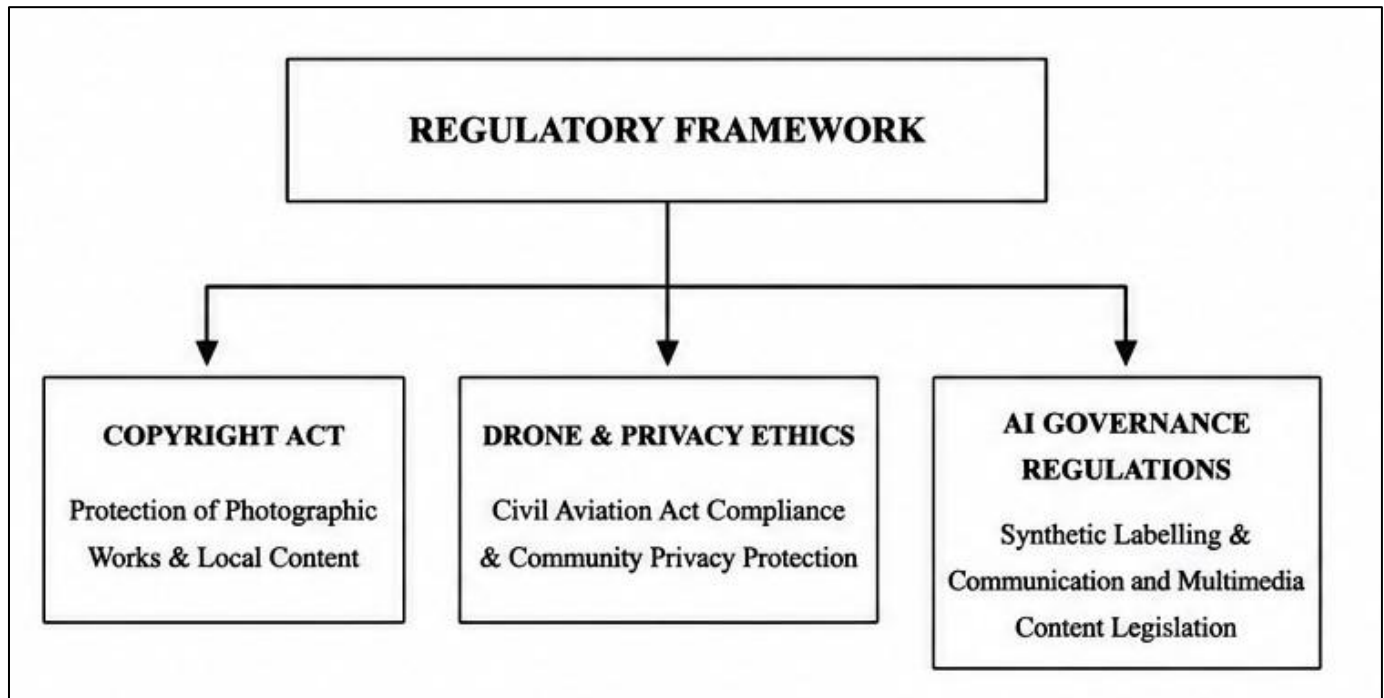


Fig 8: Regulatory framework for sustainable visual tourism.

i. Copyright Act 1987: Protection of Local Creative Works

Photography and visual artworks are intellectual assets protected under Malaysian law under the Copyright Act 1987 (Malaysia, 1987).

Commercial Copyright Infringement: Tourism agencies, hotel operators, and advertising companies are strictly prohibited from using photographs belonging to local photographers from social media platforms for commercial promotional purposes without a license or written permission. Violations of this law may result in civil lawsuits under the Copyright Act 1987.

Artists' Moral Rights: Even if the copyright of a photograph has been sold to a government tourism agency, the original photographer's moral right to be acknowledged as the creator of the work (attribution) must still be respected in order to build a healthy creative industry ecosystem.

ii. Drone Usage Regulations and Community Privacy Issues

The use of drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles - UAV) for the purpose of recording the Malaysian landscape is increasingly well-known and popular. Nevertheless, it needs to be subject to strict regulations to safeguard public safety and privacy.

Civil Aviation Regulations (MCAR 2016):

Operation of drones for commercial tourism purposes requires a valid permit from the Malaysian Civil Aviation Authority under the law of MCAR 2016 (CAAM,2016). This visual recording in sensitive areas such as airports, military installations and government buildings is not allowed.

Personal Data Protection (PDPA 2010) & Community Sensitivity:

Tourism photographers are not allowed to take close-up photos of individuals or local communities, especially indigenous villages for commercial purposes without obtaining prior consent. This step is important to prevent unethical visual exploitation.

iii. AI Content Regulation and Dealing with “Deepfake” and Visual Manipulation

The emergence of generative AI visuals carries the risk of spreading confusing tourism information and can affect the country’s reputation.

AI Image Labeling Ethics:

Any tourism marketing visual that is created or significantly changed using AI technology should be accompanied by a label or AI watermark. This aligns with global efforts to ensure transparency in the dissemination of information.

Actions under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Section 233):

The dissemination of fake images or images manipulated using AI to the point of causing confusion by the local, endangering the safety of tourists, or tarnishing the image of cleanliness and safety of Malaysia’s tourism destination may be subject to action under Section 233 of the act for misuse of network facilities to spread fake content.

Strategies for Empowering the Tourism Sector Through Visual Arts

To ensure that visual arts provide maximum economic impact to the tourism industry, a comprehensive and well-structured action plan must be implemented in an integrated manner.

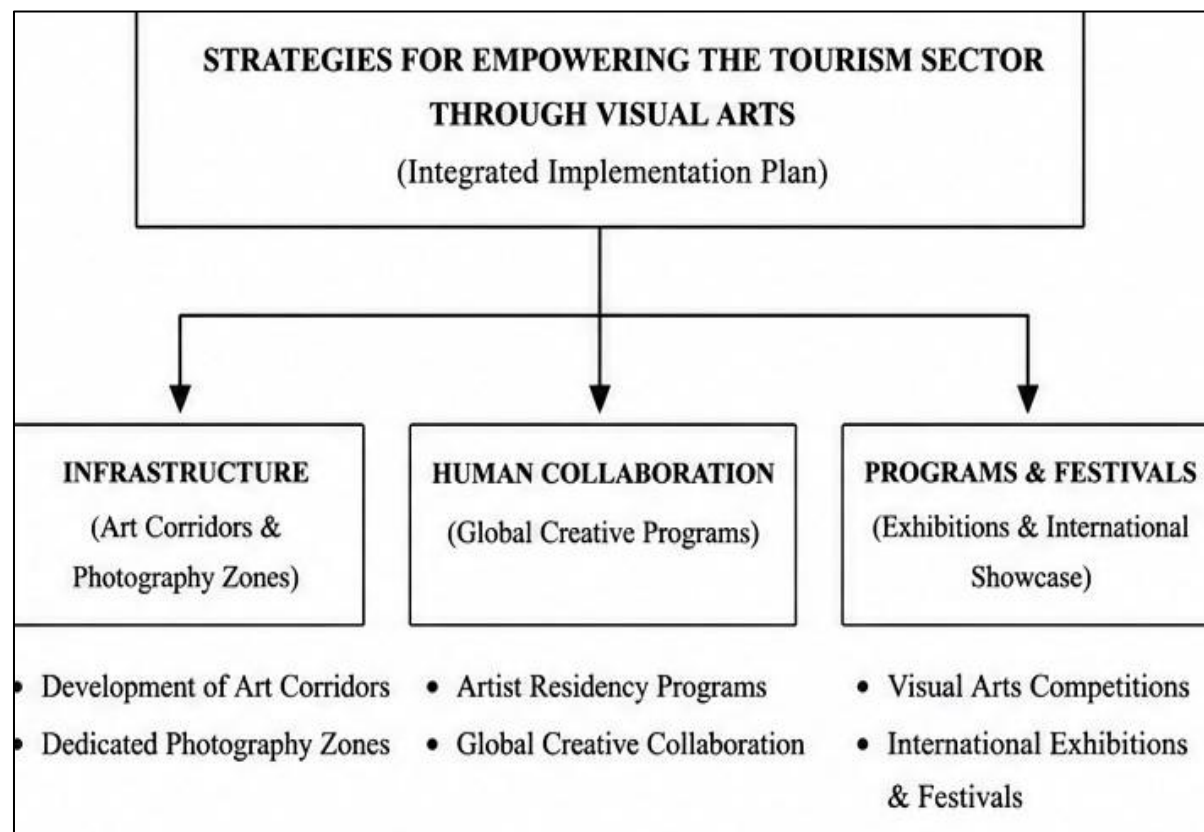


Fig 9: Strategies for empowering the tourism sector through visual arts.

i. Development of Art Corridors and Dedicated Photography Zones

The government, through local authorities, should identify and establish special zones optimized for visual arts and photography activities. These zones should be equipped with lighting facilities, historical information signage, and landscape designs that highlight local aesthetics.

- **Back Lane Transformation:** Converting abandoned alleys in major cities into open-air mural galleries, as successfully implemented in Ipoh and Penang.
- **Provision of Visual Heritage Sites:** Developing safe photography platforms in high-risk areas such as mountain cliff edges or suspension bridges to prevent accidents caused by risky photo-taking activities.

ii. Creative Residency Programs and Global Influencer Collaboration

The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) should establish strategic collaborations with global camera manufacturers such as Sony, Canon, and Fujifilm, as well as renowned international photographers.

- **“Through the Lens” Campaign:** Sponsoring international landscape photographers to explore the interior regions of Sarawak and Sabah in order to produce exclusive visual documentaries for the global market.
- **Tourism Photography Workshops:** Organizing community training programs for local tour guides so they can skillfully assist tourists in capturing photographs from the best angles.

iii. Organizing Visual Arts Festivals and Large-Scale Photography Competitions

Malaysia should establish world-class annual events dedicated entirely to tourism visual arts.

- **Malaysia Photography Biennale:** A biennial event that gathers outstanding visual works themed around Malaysia’s nature and culture from across the world.
- **National Digital Visual Competition:** Offering attractive rewards to local and international content creators who produce the most creative short videos or photographs promoting hidden tourism destinations (“hidden gems”).

Economic and Social Impact of Visual Empowerment

Investment in the photography and visual arts sector provides high returns on investment (ROI) and delivers widespread benefits to local communities.

Sector	Direct Impact	Long-Term Outcome
Local Economy	Increased hotel bookings, handicraft sales, and photo tour guides.	Diversifying income sources for rural residents through photo-based ecotourism.
Heritage Conservation	Restoration of colonial buildings and cultural sites to be used as visual subjects.	Awareness among the younger generation to preserve traditional customs and arts because of their commercial value.
Natural Sustainability	Forest conservation awareness campaign through wildlife photo exhibition.	Reduction of illegal logging activities in areas that are the focus of nature photographers.

Table 3: Economic and social impacts of visual empowerment in Malaysia’s tourism sector.

Creating New Employment Opportunities: Local Tourism Photographers

The culture of photography has created a new economic subsector: personal vacation photography services. Tourists are now willing to pay professional photographers to accompany them throughout their vacations, ensuring high-quality images for social media. This provides profitable alternative employment opportunities for young people in tourism areas.

Challenges and Constraints in Integrating Tourism Photography

Although the industry has enormous potential, it is not free from challenges that may damage the nation's image if not managed wisely. This is partly due to the culture and mindset of some local communities who perceive the photography industry as simple, unimportant, and lacking significant contribution to the national economy. As a result, the industry is often regarded as a second-class sector.

Over-Tourism and Site Damage Due to Visual Hunting

The obsession with capturing viral photographs frequently results in an excessive influx of visitors at specific locations beyond the area's carrying capacity. Physical damage to heritage structures and natural ecosystems may result from irresponsible tourist behavior seeking unique photo opportunities. This situation reflects the exaggerated dependence on visual culture that can create sustainability challenges for the tourist destination if the tourist activity is not managed properly.

Viral Destination → Tourist Overflow → Infrastructure Pressure → Ecosystem Damage

Ethical Conflicts, Privacy, and Cultural Sensitivity

Not all local communities are comfortable being photographed without permission. Issues involving the invasion of privacy among indigenous communities or photography in sacred places of worship without respecting religious sensitivities may create social tension. Therefore, education on ethical practices in tourism photography is critically important and should be widely promoted. This issue emphasizes the importance of balancing tourism promotion with respect for cultural values, local traditions, and community privacy.

Threat of Excessive Visual Manipulation (Hyper-Realism & AI)

Excessive photo editing or image generation using Artificial Intelligence (AI) can create false expectations among tourists. When the actual destination does not live up to the images circulated on social media, it can lead to disappointment and negative reviews that could damage the reputation of Malaysia's tourism industry. This situation raises concerns about the authenticity and trust of tourists in digitally manipulated tourism visuals.

Integration Model: Synergy Between Agencies, Communities, and Technology

To ensure long-term sustainability, a balanced visual ecosystem model must be established by involving three main components:

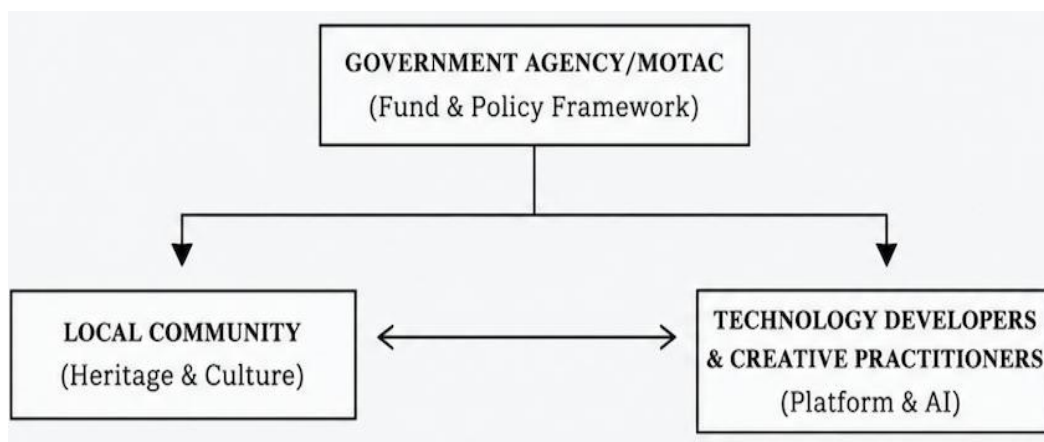


Fig 11: Framework of Collaboration Between

Government Agencies, Local Communities, and Technology Developers

- Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) & Tourism Malaysia: Act as policy regulators, creative grant funders, and organizers of large-scale promotional platforms while ensuring compliance with

copyright regulations and ethical use of AI.

- Local Communities: Act as guardians of cultural heritage and the environment. They ensure that photography activities respect local customs and traditions, while receiving direct economic benefits from tourism activities.
- Technology Developers & Creative Industry Enablers: Provide technical expertise, high-tech equipment, ethical operation of AI, and digital platforms to widely and responsibly disseminate visual content

CONCLUSION

Photography, visual arts, and artificial intelligence (AI) play pivotal roles in empowering the Malaysian tourism industry in the current digital era. Through visual communication and social media platforms, the tourism destination in Malaysia can be promoted more effectively to the global community while strengthening the destination's cultural identity and branding. Studies such as those in George Town and Danum Valley have shown that visual culture and photography can support tourism and economic development, as well as foster appreciation for cultural and natural heritage. At the same time, the use of AI technology has changed the method of tourism marketing through smart visual production, virtual experiences, and more structured promotional strategies. However, ethical issues of copyright, privacy, cultural sensitivity, and AI manipulation should be highlighted to ensure sustainable tourism development. In total, the combination of photography, visual arts, and AI technology has the potential to strengthen Malaysia's position as a competitive and culturally rich tourism destination on a global scale. However, this study is conceptual in nature and does not involve empirical data collection. Future research is encouraged to incorporate surveys, interviews, or observational studies involving tourists, tourism practitioners, and local communities to strengthen further the understanding of AI-driven tourism visual culture in Malaysia.

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