



FROM THE 'RICEBOWL OF MALAYSIA' TO EXOTIC CUISINES: IMAGINATION OF KEDAH BY DESTINATION MARKETERS

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Abstract:

The state tourism officials have continuously promoted places of interest and attractions within Kedah even during the enforcement of MCO in Malaysia. The ongoing marketing effort is worthwhile as potential tourists can plan and choose the places they would like to visit after the lockdown has been lifted. Hence, it is vital to evaluate the current promotion of Kedah as a tourist destination as marketing plays a crucial role in enhancing the appeal of a particular site and attracting tourists. Firstly, this paper investigates how the state of Kedah has been marketed by the national and state tourism promotional bodies. Additionally, the portrayals of Kedah by international travel organizations were also examined. The semiotic analysis method was employed in the assessment, where it focused on how Kedah has been presented on the websites of these organizations. In general, the findings of this paper uncovered several prominent visual and textual signifiers showing and describing field fields on the websites of both national and state promotional organizations. The attraction points such as Paddy Museum, Zahir Mosque, Balai Nobat, Mahathir's Birth Place, and Pekan Rabu have been featured strongly in portraying the capital city, Alor Setar. The signified meanings of the uniqueness and exoticism of local cuisines are reflected through visual and textual signifiers, including laksa Kedah, pekasam (fermented fish), and traditional snacks such as kuih dangai and kuih karas. As Kedah is popularly known as the 'Rice Bowl of Malaysia', it is reasonable that visual and textual signifiers of paddy fields and attractions associated with paddy have been presented widely on the websites. Overall, the key theme in marketing Kedah as a tourist destination via public and private travel promotional websites is reflected as the projection of cultural-rural tourism.

Keywords:

Kedah, Tourism Promotion, Semiotic Analysis, Paddy, Cuisines

Introduction

Kedah is one of the northern states in Malaysia that is well-known as the ‘Ricebowl of Malaysia’. The paddy cultivation in Kedah supplies one-third of rice production in Malaysia (MADA, 2020; Mohamad & Jamil, 2012). The flat terrain in Kedah and the ability to retain water makes this state suitable for paddy plantation. In tracing the history of paddy plantations in Kedah, Ibrahim (1991) mentioned that paddy has been planted near Sungai Muda and Merbok since a long time ago. Since then, the paddy field has spread widely to many areas of Kedah until been popularly labelled as the ‘Ricebowl of Malaysia’. Although some paddy field areas had to be sacrificed for developmental projects, the former Menteri Besar (MB) of Kedah, Datuk Seri Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah, argued that Kedah would continue to be the Ricebowl of Malaysia. This argument is because rice field areas used for development projects will be replaced for paddy plantations elsewhere in the state (Halid, 2016). Similarly, the current MB also highlighted the dilemma faced by Kedah. Specifically, the state has to retain some areas of paddy field and forest reserve rather than develop these sites that can give a better return to the state economically (Zulkifli, 2021).

Even though Kedah has been known as an agricultural state, it is vital to develop other sectors for its economic benefits and sustainability (Halid, 2016). This attempt is evident as the state has been investing in the growth of the tourism industry. Over time, numerous resources found in the state have been developed for tourism purposes. It is mentioned by Mohamad and Jamil (2012) that Kedah has several interesting historical, adventure, religious, natural, and recreation sites for touristic reasons. The value of the tourism industry was also reflected through the recent statement made by the current Menteri Besar (MB) of Kedah, who had acknowledged that the budget allocated by the federal government to expand the research for Sungai Batu Archaeological site and to fund the erosion mitigation project in Pantai Merdeka (Zulkifli, 2021). The allocation of funds for these two projects will contribute significantly to the development of tourism in Kedah, particularly in heritage, beach, and community-based tourism.

Tourism organizations responsible for tourism development and marketing of Kedah had organized and initiated several programs to boost the tourism industry in the state (“Kedah sasar perkenal 50 pakej pelancongan baharu”, 2016). A new tagline titled ‘Kedah, Malaysia: Where It All Began’ has been introduced as part of the ‘Discover Kedah’ campaign (“Discover Kedah 2016”, 2015). This promotional campaign highlights the archaeological sites and historical attractions located in Kedah, where Bujang Valley and Sungai Batu Complex are the two main archaeological sites in Kedah. According to researchers from USM, the civilization at Sungai Batu had been identified to be in existence since 535 BC (Seng, 2017). This discovery has placed Sungai Batu as the oldest civilization in the Southeast Asia region. Hence, the launch of the new tagline that emphasizes ancient history seems appropriate for this state. Moreover, one of the efforts undertaken by the government was the organization of a workshop to improve tourism products, mainly on the mainland of Kedah. The mainland of Kedah has several spectacular assets such as natural heritage and royal heritage attractions. The natural heritage resources such as Gunung Jerai and Tasik Pedu have been well recognized among key attributes, while Balai Besar and Zahir Mosque have been acknowledged as key heritage attractions for the state (“Kedah sasar perkenal 50 pakej pelancongan baharu”, 2016).

At the same time, several niche markets that can be marketed have been identified. Among these niche markets include tourism for backpackers, family, and honeymooners. Furthermore,

it is recommended for Kedah to focus on fishing and angling markets as these activities can provide additional income for local fishermen (Ismail, 2021). As Kedah recently entered Phase 4 of Pelan Pemulihan Negara, tourism authorities have activated some tourism activities (Ismail, 2021), such as the 'Jom Ride Ke Kedah' program that targets high power bikers.

Problem Statement

From a tourist perspective, Kedah possesses several outstanding destinations and attractions. The literature review highlights various efforts to develop Kedah as one of the premier tourist destinations in Malaysia. One of the crucial factors in positioning Kedah as a primary tourist destination is the promotion of this state. However, the promotion of the tourist sites in Kedah is still lacking and needs to be strengthened. Furthermore, the COVID-19 health pandemic outbreak has tremendously impacted the tourism industry in this state. Due to that, many tourism operators and businesses, either on Langkawi Island or on the mainland of Kedah, were required to stop their operations since March 2020. Owing to the importance of this industry, the state tourism officials continue to aggressively promote places of interest and attractions within Kedah even during the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia. These promotional efforts are apparent from the observation of the mass media. It is believed that the ongoing marketing effort is valuable as potential tourists can plan and choose the places they would like to visit after the lockdown has been lifted. Hence, it is vital to evaluate the current promotion of Kedah as a tourist destination as marketing can play a crucial role in enhancing the appeal of a particular site and drawing tourist visitations.

Therefore, this paper investigates how the state of Kedah has been marketed by the national and state tourism promotional bodies. Additionally, the portrayals of Kedah by international travel organizations Tripadvisor and Lonely Planet were also examined. In this paper, the analysis focuses on the destinations and attractions on the mainland of Kedah rather than on Langkawi Island. This is because Langkawi Island has already become one of the top tourist destinations in Malaysia and is being extensively examined. Hence, more research needs to be done in the context of the mainland of Kedah to boost its future tourism potentials.

Literature Review

The review of the literature of previous studies which have investigated Kedah as a tourist destination uncovered that past scholars have delved into a few research areas. For example, Omran and Kamran (2018) investigated the main factors which had attracted tourists to visit the state of Kedah. Findings of this study uncovered that attractive surroundings, cleanliness, friendliness, and suggestions from friends are among the main factors which lured visitors to come to Kedah. Furthermore, other variables such as cuisines, weather, safety, and variety of cultural attractions play essential roles in increasing tourist visitations to this state (Omran & Kamran, 2018). Similarly, Mohamad and Jamil (2012) had explored the motivational factors enticing tourists to visit various sites in Kedah. The findings of this research identified that rest and relaxation are the primary factors that encouraged tourists to visit Langkawi Island. Besides, tourists found the island of legend was the best place to escape, experience night entertainment, socialize, and explore the culture. The evaluation of various tourist sites in Kedah discovered that after Langkawi, the city of Alor Setar was rated by tourists as the second-best destination to visit, particularly for visiting friends and relatives. For adventure and fitness reasons, tourists have selected Sedim River as the suitable site for these activities (Mohamad & Jamil, 2012).

In terms of marketing and promotion, Kasim and Dzakiria (2001) studied the competitiveness and strategies for positioning Kedah as a tourist destination. Based on the evaluation from the market perspective, it was identified that Kedah had not been perceived positively based on its outstanding cultural heritage attributes. Yet, the mainland of Kedah and Langkawi Island has been viewed favourably by visitors as places suitable for rest and relaxation. Therefore, these authors recommended that the state of Kedah should be positioned more strongly to match the appealing attributes, particularly a destination ideal for visitors to rest and unwind. Another study carried out by Kasim (2000) utilized the importance-performance analysis in assessing the offering of tourism attractions in Kedah. Findings of this research revealed that Kedah had to improve on several characteristics such as providing comfortable accommodation, friendliness of the host populations, standard of services by restaurants and lodging properties, as well as the cleanliness of the beach.

Yusof and Ismail (2016) reviewed the brand identity of Langkawi Island as a tourist destination. It is uncovered in this research that Destination Management Organization (DMO) plays a significant role in creating and highlighting the destination brands of this island to tourists. For over 35 years, the tourism authorities of Langkawi Island had chosen and projected several themes and taglines to promote this island and attract different market segments to visit. However, Yusof and Ismail alleged that there was a lack of consultation with the stakeholders in selecting and promoting images or slogans of Langkawi Island over the years. Therefore, these authors have suggested DMOs consult various stakeholders before choosing the best destination images and taglines to represent a particular destination or place.

Food is one of the main attributes which can attract tourists to visit a particular destination or site and have been incorporated into tourism promotional materials. Two studies have explored cuisines found in the state of Kedah. Ishak, Ismail, Saad, and Md Ramli (2021) examined the Malay heritage foods in Kedah and identified some of the unique dishes eaten by locals. As the state of Kedah is well-known with rice, sticky rice with mango, durian, and salted fish are among traditional food available. Some of these dishes had a Thai influence as the location of Kedah is bordered by Thailand. Among the favourite breakfast found in Kedah is sticky rice mango or called *pulut manga*. This food has Thai influence as the state of Kedah is located close to Thailand. Other dishes such as Malay mixed herb rice or known locally as *nasi ulam*, often eaten with boiled yam stems in the sour sauce, are famous among older generations. Two other specialties commonly associated with traditional Kedahans are beef curry cooked with banana stem and grilled snakehead fish. A study by Ishak et al. (2021) demonstrated that some traditional cuisines are rice-based dishes. This preference or food culture is reasonable as the state is the primary rice producer in the country. Some of the traditional and popular heritage cuisines in this state are made from local herbs and natural ingredients available in the surrounding. As some of the heritage food of Kedah appeared fairly distinctive and exotic, it can further strengthen the identity of Kedah as a tourist destination. Wahid (2015) explores the potential of the traditional snack known as *bahulu* as a tourism product. The findings of this research confirmed that tourists considered *bahulu* could be a tourism product. However, its quality and packaging need to be improved to present *bahulu* as a tourism product representing the state of Kedah.

Zhu, Li, and Zhang (2021) mentioned that rice fields and terraces found in a number of Asian countries such as the Philippines, Southeast China, and Northern Vietnam had been used as natural resources to attract tourists. According to these scholars, there are several benefits for

the utilization of rice fields or terraces as tourism products. Among the positive outcomes include better conservation of these natural resources and opportunities for farmers and villagers to get additional incomes from the commercialization of farming resources. In the analysis of agricultural resources as products of rural tourism development, Khaokhruamuang (2015) has examined the Japonica rice production in Northern Thailand. In this context, he mentioned that Japonica rice fields and production had been commodified into part of rural tourism development in Thailand. In fact, the commodification process has been acknowledged as one of the alternatives to overcome some of the problems in the production of Japonica rice. According to this author, agriculture-based resources such as Japonica rice can be utilized creatively to match Japanese and Thai positive values for tourism purposes.

Method

In evaluating the portrayal of Kedah as a tourist destination, semiotic analysis was employed in this paper. In general, semiotic analysis, also known as semiotics, is a study of signs and symbols. According to Ramachandran (2005:70), semiotics is an analysis tool to explore sign systems methodically. Tsotra, Janson, and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2004) stated that semiotics as a linguistic assessment in human sciences is a valuable method in revealing meanings in various contexts, including online marketing. Historically, the term semiotics originated from the word *semeion*, which denotes 'sign' in the Greek language (Noth, 1990). This term has been employed as a communication or representation tool since a long time ago.

Two scholars who pioneered the study of semiotics are Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (Ramachandran, 2005). The model of the semiotics conceptualized by Saussure proposed ways to analyze signs in the context of society. He proposed three aspects to using semiotic as an assessment tool, namely i) sign, ii) a signifier, and iii) the signified (Ramachandran, 2005). Saussure (1965) described the signifier as the actual objects while the signified is the concept in the individual's mind or a mental mind.

It is, therefore, appropriate to select semiotic analysis in the assessment carried out in this paper as destination marketers commonly use semiotic touristic language comprising of signs and images to present and project tourist destinations to potential visitors (Naghizadeh, 2021). Additionally, Bonarou (2021) argued that visual images or signifiers are particularly crucial in the projections of realities of tourism discourses by tourist destinations. In this paper, semiotic analysis was applied to assess the portrayal of Kedah as a tourist destination in contemporary tourism websites developed by public and private marketing organizations. For public organizations, the recent websites of Tourism Malaysia and the state tourism body, and the private travel agencies such as Lonely Planet and Trip Advisor were assessed in this paper. The visual images and textual descriptions featured on the websites are considered signs for this study. Then, the main signifiers in the projection of Kedah were identified, and the signified meanings were reviewed in this paper. Finally, the overall representation of Kedah as a tourist destination based on the signifiers and signified meanings was also discussed.

Findings

National and State Promotional Websites

In the tourism promotional websites, visual signs are the main highlights in presenting the destinations and sites to enhance the appeal of these places to potential visitors. As a famous

phrase claimed that a picture is worth a thousand words, the visual signs have immersed value in the context of tourism promotional websites. In general, tourism promotional websites are filled with many graphical images. The first website examined in this paper is the promotional website of Tourism Malaysia, as it is the official tourism organization responsible for marketing the country. In promoting Kedah as a tourist destination, the promotional video incorporated into the interactive brochure titled 'Malaysia Travel Guide' starts with an image of a paddy field. In actual fact, paddy fields are shown more than once in the promotional video. A caption 'Ancient Ruins, Beach Holidays and Pastoral Charms' has been featured as part of this pictorial image. This caption acts as a signifier to accentuate the association of this state with archaeological sites, beach tourism, and rural and agricultural lifestyles. Attractions associated with these themes are projected prominently in the promotional video and online brochures created by Tourism Malaysia. Owing to the importance of paddy to Kedah, visual signifiers of paddy fields have been presented on the front cover of two brochures promoting the districts of Kubang Pasu and Pendang by the state government of Kedah. The relatively large images of paddy fields are among the main highlight of these two districts promoted to visitors. Overall, pictures of paddy fields in online brochures featured in national and state promotional websites project Kedah as a rural heritage destination.

In addition to paddy fields, several other main signifiers are represented on tourism websites. For example, the online brochure incorporated into the website of Tourism Malaysia titled 'Kedah Map and Guide' (2015) presented Zahir Mosque on its front cover. The relatively large size of the mosque, which appeared on the cover, showcases the uniqueness of the architecture of this historical mosque. Furthermore, the signified meaning of the visual signifier of a mosque demonstrates the importance of Islam to the state and Kedahans. Another relatively new mosque that is presented as a place of interest is the Al-Bukhary Mosque. The spectacular architecture is also accentuated through the visuals presented in the promotional materials. Both of these mosques are located in the capital city of Kedah, Alor Setar. Overall, there are several top visual signifiers being incorporated as central places of interest in the state of Kedah. These visual signifiers denoted the portrayal of heritage attractions, particularly the built heritage associated with religious sites such as the mosque and Wat Nikrodharam, a Buddhist temple. In addition, these visuals portrayed to readers that Kedah is a multi-ethnic state supporting the national tagline of Malaysia as a "Truly Asia" destination.

Several spectacular visual signifiers depict the royal heritage of Kedah, which are manifested on the national and state online brochures and projects Kedah as a cultural heritage place. These include Balai Nobat, Balai Besar, and Royal Museum. Other fascinating visuals include Paddy Museum, Big Clock Building, Pekan Rabu, Terusan Wan Muhamad Saman, and Tun Mahathir's Birth Place. In addition, signifiers to denote archaeological themes and natural attractions in rural settings are evident via images of Gunung Jerai, Gunung Keriang, Bujang Valley Archaeological Site, Ulu Muda Eco Park, Sungai Sedim Whitewater Rafting, and Ulu Legong Hot Spring. Based on the assessment of the visual signifiers, it is apparent that this state is depicting several niche markets for tourists, from a few sub-categories of heritage tourism to natural and rural tourism.

Additionally, several traditional cuisines and snacks known to be consumed by the local population in Kedah, such as laksa Kedah, have been presented on the website of Tourism Malaysia. Several visuals of traditional cuisines and snacks associated with Kedahans such as *gulai daging batang pisang*, *kuih dangai*, *kuih bunga pundak*, *kuih pek nga*, and *kuih karas* are

depicted on the website of the state government. The portrayal of these rare local cuisines and snacks accentuates Kedah as an exotic destination to potential visitors. Furthermore, one of the familiar cuisines, which is beef noodle soup, has also been added to the promotional material. The projection of more familiar cuisine together with a few exotic dishes makes sites and destinations in Kedah more attractive to both potential foreign and domestic visitors who might prefer modern cuisines.

The textual signifiers are essential in providing detailed descriptions to support the visuals included on the website. In introducing the state, one brochure states that Kedah is known as the 'Ricebowl of Malaysia', and visitors will encounter massive stretches of paddy fields in the state. It is elaborated in the online brochure titled 'Kedah Map and Guide' that the archaeological site, Bujang Valley is one of the primary sites in this state. However, the modern capital city called Alor Setar is also mentioned in this brochure. Firstly, these textual descriptions act as textual signifiers to project the rural lifestyle of Kedah and the agricultural landscape. The inclusion of verbal descriptions supports visual images represented on the websites, particularly in relation to paddy fields. Furthermore, the focus on archaeology demonstrates another key attraction promoted in Kedah. This finding is parallel with the tagline 'Where It All Began' employed by both national and state promotional bodies since 2016. As apparent in textual descriptions, a combination of rural and modern elements has been presented on the website. It is essential to add some elements of modernity rather than just focusing on rurality and traditional attributes. More than one category of tourism attraction is presented to tourists on the websites of national and state organizations, particularly emphasizing its rural, historical, and modernity.

Several textual signifiers describing local cuisines have been presented on the websites of national promotional websites. On the national promotional website, Kedah is stated as the place to enjoy diverse types of popular dishes in the northern region. One of the well-known cuisines associated with this state is 'laksa Kedah'. Despite the fact that several other states also have their own version of 'laksa', this dish found in Kedah is considered a signature cuisine and should be eaten by visitors if they come to Kedah. As *laksa* is relatively unique, it has also been incorporated into the state brochures. For example, under a section labelled as 'Kedah Cuisine and a Cuppa', it is mentioned that "there are recipes so original to the state until it bears its name". Moreover, rare delicacies, particularly *Pekasam*, *Nasi Ulam*, and *Gulai Rebung* are also represented on the state promotional website to accentuate the portrayal of Kedah as a rural cultural heritage destination. The current state promotional website also featured local coffee known as *kopi Kedah* and *kopi cap gantang*. The inclusion of local coffee highlights the element tradition associated with this state. Overall, visual images and textual descriptions of traditional cuisines, snacks, and local beverages are among the main components included in the promotional websites developed by national and state organizations.

Lonely Planet and Tripadvisor

The websites of Lonely Planet and Tripadvisor were also analyzed in this paper. The assessment of both public and private organizations are essential to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how the state of Kedah has been marketed currently. Moreover, potential visitors will look into various public or private websites. Both Tripadvisor and Lonely Planet websites have incorporated numerous visual and verbal signifiers in promoting Kedah. A number of signifiers that appeared in the portrayal of the capital city Alor Setar are Aman Central, Zahir Mosque, Paddy Museum, Pekan Rabu Complex, Alor Setar Tower, Tun

Mahathir Birth Place, Kedah Royal Museum, Al-Bukhary Mosque, and Wat Nikrodharam. The archaeological site, Bujang Valley, is highlighted as one of the main tourist attractions that tourists should visit. Nature-based sites are also marketed by these websites. For example, Tripadvisor has included Sungai Sedim Recreational Forest and Pantai Merdeka, among core tourist attractions in the state of Kedah.

In addition to visual images, verbal signifiers provide essential information, and the best part of the attractions and places are mentioned. These two websites mainly highlight the top tourist attractions in different regions of Kedah that tourists should visit. Furthermore, comments and remarks made by the previous tourists who have visited these sites and attractions are also available on these websites. For example, there are some positive feedbacks from past tourists who have visited the Paddy Museum that describe the uniqueness of this museum. Lastly, both local and modern food outlets have been incorporated into the promotion of Kedah by Tripadvisor and Lonely Planet. This is done to inform foreign tourists of the availability of both traditional and modern cuisines in this state.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of the visual and verbal signs on the tourism websites, it is apparent that there are some similarities in the promotion of the state of Kedah as a tourist destination. In particular, the four websites featured almost similar visual images or signifiers to promote Kedah to potential visitors. However, a more detailed explanation in the form of verbal signifiers is available on the state tourism website. Similarly, as the official body selected to market destinations in Malaysia, including Kedah, Tourism Malaysia incorporated fairly extensive information on Kedah.

As mentioned in the introduction and literature sections, Kedah is widely known as the 'Ricebowl of Malaysia'; it is not surprising that visual signifiers of paddy fields landscape and paddy museum have featured prominently in the websites of the four promotional organizations. One of the iconic visual signifiers in the promotion of Kedah is the pictorial image of the paddy field area surrounding Gunung Keriang, which is located not far from the capital city of Alor Setar. In terms of destinations, sites, and attractions located surrounding the capital city, Alor Setar has been listed as the place of interest in the four websites. Tourist sites such as Zahir Mosque, Balai Nobat, Balai Besar, Paddy Museum, and Pekan Rabu are among the main features to mark the identity of the city. This observation is consistent with findings reported by Mohamad and Jamil (2012), which stated that the capital city Alor Setar is considered by tourists as the second-best site to be visited in Kedah after Langkawi. Hence, this finding found that tourism promotional organizations, either public or private, had incorporated many sites and attractions within Alor Setar to lure tourists.

Besides, in the literature review section, Ishak et al. (2021) claimed that local foods play a significant role in tourism. Specifically, Omran and Kamran (2018) revealed that one of the motivation factors to visit Kedah is its gastronomy. The findings of this paper support claims made by these scholars. It is demonstrated through visual and verbal signifiers associated with food and beverages (including local cuisines) were incorporated into tourism promotional websites to entice potential visitors. In addition, some of the unique traditional dishes and local snacks and coffee, including those made from rice, are showcased on tourism websites. In fact, several exotic dishes commonly consumed by locals have been included to accentuate the identity of Kedah as a distinctive tourist destination in Malaysia.

On the whole, the findings of this paper demonstrated that both public and private destination marketers play significant roles in creating and projecting a particular image of a destination through the selection of signifiers to represent the destinations. In the context of Kedah, the original image of this state as the 'Ricebowl of Malaysia' has been further accentuated by the four websites. As mentioned in the introduction section, programs and workshops to discuss tourism growth in Kedah have been carried out with several stakeholders. The findings of this paper are different from the observation made by Yusof and Ismail (2016), which mentioned that the branding and taglines of Langkawi had been modified over the years without consultation with stakeholders.

In the literature section, Kasim and Dzikiria (2001) had argued that the positioning of Kedah as a cultural heritage attribute has not been perceived favourably from the demand side. Indeed, these scholars proposed that Kedah should highlight its appealing attributes, particularly rest and relaxation attributes, in its promotional strategy. However, the analysis undertaken in this paper uncovered that these images and attributes associated with cultural heritage had been consistently utilized to market Kedah for these past years. Although features depicting rest and relaxation have been added to these promotional websites, the dominant image of Kedah currently still revolves around cultural heritage icons. As shown in the finding section, paddy fields and attractions connected to paddy or rice, such as museums and local cuisines, are among the unique resources being incorporated widely. This finding parallels previous studies (Khaokhrueamuang, 2015; Zhu et al., 2021), which illustrated how several Asian destinations had exploited rice terraces and their local paddy industries as part of rural culture heritage development to attract tourists.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper evaluated the portrayal of Kedah as a tourist destination using semiotic analysis. Based on the assessment, the websites of Tourism Malaysia, state government, Lonely Planet, and Tripadvisor were identified to have incorporated many similar signifiers in highlighting the core tourism destinations and attractions within the mainland of Kedah. The assessment also pointed that several visual and verbal signifiers, particularly paddy fields, paddy museums, local cuisines made from rice, and exotic local dishes, have been represented to attract potential tourists. Several categories of tourism attractions have been highlighted on these websites, where heritage tourism such as royal heritage, built heritage, *archaeological heritage*, religious heritage, and cultural heritage have been portrayed extensively. However, some modern attractions such as shopping malls, towers, and western food outlets have been included in the description of Alor Setar as the capital city of Kedah. These attractions were integrated into promotional websites to balance the portrayal of Kedah as a rural and exotic destination to reflect its branding and identity as the 'Ricebowl of Malaysia'.

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