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# Exploring Tourism Diplomacy: Strategies Implementation for Strengthening Global Relations in Malaysia

## Abstract

Tourism diplomacy is utilising tourism to intensify bilateral and multilateral ties between states. This study corroborates the Malaysian strategy of benefitting from tourism diplomacy, enabling this Southeast destination to compete among leading destinations in the region and worldwide. Embarking on the potential of tourism, the stakeholders of Malaysian tourism have envisioned tourism diplomacy as another avenue to further develop tourism in the context of regional and international relations. While analysing the secondary data, this study discusses Malaysia's approach to benefit from the eventualities of tourism diplomacy. Secondary data was collected through Google searches using the terms "tourism diplomacy in Malaysia" and "tourism diplomacy as a dynamic tool." The data was analysed using content analysis. The findings provide insight into how tourism diplomacy has been utilised as a tool for promoting the tourism potential of this country, on the one hand, and strengthening international relations on the other. The study concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

**Keywords:** tourism diplomacy, cultural exchange, bilateral and multilateral connections, global relations, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

Tourism and diplomacy have certain commonalities; both can provide a stage for individuals or groups to interact. However, the nature of the interaction differs significantly. Despite this, considering this 'win-win' potential of tourism and diplomacy in the domain of people-to-people interaction (Kudinova, 2023), tourism diplomacy has gained fame and focus primarily among countries with political strains (Ozturk, 2021) and, eventually, opened avenues for developing tourism diplomacy as a focal segment (Ghalia et al., 2019). Similarly, the variety of tourism products in host countries has also been emphasised to offer specific tourism experiences. For example, Gastro-diplomacy has been initiated to utilise the food cuisines of a destination as a product to brand a nation in the domain of tourism diplomacy (Suntikul, 2019).

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Tourism and diplomacy have emerged as dynamic forces shaping international relations due to globalisation. Many strategies are used to implement tourism diplomacy, including promotional campaigns, cultural exchanges, and collaborative initiatives (Hussin, 2018; Gasura et al., 2023). However, it is always essential to understand the basis for a particular strategy to confirm its efficiency in building connections between nations. Tourism diplomacy encompasses a range of impacts, including economic considerations, as well as cultural, social, and political aspects.

Malaysia is renowned for its vibrant cultural heritage, prime location, and strong emphasis on international tourism (Kumar et al., 2023). As a multicultural and multiethnic country, Malaysia showcases a colourful mosaic of traditions, languages, and cuisines, making it an enticing destination for travellers. Its strategic position at the heart of Southeast Asia allows Malaysia to become a hub for travel and cultural exchange (Hussain et al., 2017). The Malaysian government's active efforts in promoting tourism and nurturing diplomatic ties through initiatives such as gastro-diplomacy and cultural exchanges underscore the country's commitment to utilising tourism as a bridge for international engagement.

This study conducts a comprehensive assessment of tourism diplomacy within the Malaysian context, critically evaluating the strategies, impacts, and considerations associated with tourism diplomacy initiatives. As Malaysia's actions to solidify its position on the global stage, this research enquires into the multifaceted roles that tourism can play in fostering diplomatic engagement. By analysing the intricate interplay between tourism and international relations, this study aims to elucidate the potential of tourism as a strategic tool for enhancing Malaysia's diplomatic efforts.

Therefore, studying how a nation can seamlessly incorporate tourism diplomacy into its foreign policy strategies is significant. This approach supports economic growth, cultural exchange, and sustainable development, providing a holistic model for other countries. Malaysia's journey demonstrates how tourism can strengthen international ties and elevate a country's reputation on the global stage, offering invaluable lessons for nations looking to enhance their diplomatic relations through innovative tourism strategies.

Hence, this research aims to understand how increasing tourist arrivals and cultural connections enhance Malaysia's international reputation and diplomatic relationships with other nations while also providing valuable insights into the strategic and impactful dimensions of tourism diplomacy. Moving beyond conventional economic dialogue, the study emphasises the potential of tourism to adopt sincere understanding, collaboration, and goodwill among nations. Thus, it aspires to shape future policies and practices, promoting a broader and more sustainable approach to strengthening global relations. Tourism diplomacy aims to foster favourable perceptions and collaboration, as well as mitigate cross-border tensions, by promoting bilateral ties. The study provides implications for policymakers and tourism stakeholders, encouraging an approach that balances economic practicability with social responsibility and environmental sustainability to pursue enhanced international connections.

This study acknowledges the potential drawbacks of commodifying culture and the environment, emphasising the need for a framework that prioritises sustainability and local community engagement. By examining the dimensions of tourism diplomacy, the research seeks to inform policymakers and tourism stakeholders on adopting practices that are not only economically viable but also socially responsible and environmentally sustainable.

The study follows a structured format, starting with an introduction, followed by a literature review, methodology, and discussion. The paper concludes by discussing implications and suggesting future research directions.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical background

#### 2.1.1. *Tourism diplomacy: A global perspective*

Tourism diplomacy has emerged as a distinct tourism typology aimed at strengthening public-to-public and state-to-state relationships (Dada et al., 2022; de San Eugenio et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Huijbens & Alessio, 2015; Biyun & Margaret, 2023; Suntikul, 2019). However, due to states' authority and influence, state-oriented tourism diplomacy dominates the individually channelled tourism diplomacy. For instance, China, one of the leading outbound tourism markets, initiated Approved Destination Status (ADS), a bilateral agreement allowing tourists to travel comfortably in groups (Arita et al., 2012; Tse, 2013). Similarly, panda diplomacy has been foreseen as another strategy to enhance tourism diplomacy (Okafor et al., 2021). Likewise, the campaign between the United States of America and Australia in pursuit of impacting tourism diplomacy has resulted in considerable implications (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2013). The typology of Root Tourism has been explored to examine the historical connection between Europe and America, aiming to enhance national economies and international relations (Hjorthén, 2021). Nevertheless, the political aspect of tourism diplomacy presents both advantages and disadvantages among friendly, neutral, and hostile nations. Further, tourism diplomacy is discussed from a political standpoint that supports the direction of the research.

#### 2.1.2. *Tourism diplomacy and political archrivalry*

Tourism diplomacy is crucial in establishing relations between countries with a longstanding history of political antagonism and resentment. Tourism fosters dialogue and mutual understanding among opposing parties by employing soft power through cultural exchanges and shared experiences. Although political difficulties may persist, tourism's capacity to foster political relationships is crucial in promoting harmonious coexistence and collaboration across various spheres. Salman (2023) asserted that tourism has a significant impact on enhancing diplomatic ties between Israel and Tanzania and contextualised tourism in economic diplomacy. According to Gasura et al. (2023), tourism facilitates the establishment of bilateral relations between governments, underscoring its substantial role in traditional diplomacy. The development of the Kartarpur Corridor is a notable example of successful tourist diplomacy between Pakistan and India, garnering global attention by promoting religious tourism (Ahmed et al., 2022). Similarly, Dada et al. (2022) demonstrated that implementing tourist diplomacy, mainly focusing on religious tourism, has substantially impacted the relationship between the people of Nepal and India. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that tourist diplomacy faces specific obstacles, for instance, security concerns, particularly when contending states are involved.

Kudinova (2023) highlighted the possibility of assaults targeting visitors or tourist destinations to worsen conflicts further and hinder diplomatic efforts. The case of Pakistan and India, a prime example of such contention, resulted in a negative impact on overall tourism between the two countries (Xie, 2023). Furthermore, Knowles (2019) noted that addressing the complex relationships between social and economic issues, political ecology significantly influences the demand for tourism. Likewise, taking the example of Korea, the participation of locals in the tourism industry, especially their interest in business, hinders the limitations and restrictions imposed by the government, leading to a decline in tourism demand (Kim et al., 2007). Ghalia et al. (2019) also noted that the political challenges make it difficult to attract visitors. While exploring the situation in Bangladesh and Myanmar, Ahmad and Naeem (2020) concluded that political instability in one region can create obstacles to tourism in neighbouring countries.

Tourism diplomacy is vital in altering political hostility into mutual understanding and cooperation between nations and countries (Sidhu, 2023). Through cultural exchanges and the establishment of collective experiences, it aims to promote harmonious collaboration and catalyse political tensions among the nations. The

Katapur Corridor initiative, a joint effort by the Indian and Pakistani governments, as well as Indian-Nepal interactions from the perspective of religious tourism, are examples of diplomatic engagements facilitated through tourism (Shukla, 2019). These examples clearly and effectively demonstrate the advantageous outcomes resulting from tourism diplomacy in bolstering bilateral relations. Nevertheless, it is essential to emphasise the obstacles related to tourism diplomacy, namely security risks and political instability, which could undermine the positive sides. The constraints above could diminish the sound effects of tourist diplomacy. However, the advantages may outweigh the obstacles through proficient management and international collaboration, fostering enhanced diplomatic relations and global stability.

### *2.1.3. Tourism diplomacy and apolitical paradigm*

Tourism diplomacy is crucial in facilitating international relations and cultural exchange, especially during periods marked by global challenges and disasters. According to Carbone (2017), tourism is a vital human activity that promotes intercultural understanding through cultural heritage initiatives, facilitating the exchange of ideas, arts, information, and other cultural aspects. According to Robinson and Picard (2006), tourism is a fundamental mechanism that facilitates international conversation and promotes cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, adopting a diplomatic approach strengthens bilateral ties, fosters economic development, and encourages job creation, providing reciprocal advantages to countries that maintain friendly connections (Ozturk, 2021). For instance, The Nordic nations have targeted this tourism diplomacy to promote the image of their countries in terms of tourism (Genc, 2010). According to the Nordic Council of Ministers (2019), one of its primary objectives is to strengthen cooperation in tourism within the Nordic region, aiming to achieve four extended tourism objectives: Competitive Nordics, Innovative and Smart Nordics, Sustainable Nordics, and Attractive Nordics.

Øian et al. (2018) noted that the right to public access is crucial in enabling recreational and tourism activities in the Nordic outdoors, thereby promoting and contributing to sustainable tourism. According to the European Commission and the Council of Europe (2020), Nordic countries prioritise collaborative activities that focus on the collective promotion of tourist destinations, the implementation of sustainable travel methods, and the strategic use of tourism to foster cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. Considering the two-fold impact of diplomacy and tourism, the collaborative activities of Australia and New Zealand in promoting indigenous cultures, pristine landscapes, and thrilling tourism experiences have led to a significant increase in tourist arrivals to both nations. The Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement is a bilateral agreement that allows for visa-free travel between the two countries, as mutually agreed upon (Sidhu, 2023).

In addition, Zhu et al. (2022) in their study unveiled the diplomatic approach of the European Union to economics, represented by the implementation of the Marshall Plan and its makeover into the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which demonstrates how economic integration can be intentionally used to foster peace, stability, and trade between nations. Regarding tourism diplomacy in the European Union (EU), Estol and Front (2016) further explained that emphasising its cultural variety, historical importance, and natural scenery aims to enhance the region's global standing. Moreover, cross-border tourist initiatives, such as the International Peace Garden, strengthen diplomatic ties between North America and Canada by highlighting shared historical and natural characteristics (Timothy & Tosun, 2003).

### *2.1.4. Blurring the borders*

Tourism diplomacy is crucial for global relations and international travel, particularly for softening and managing borders (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). Grundy-Warr and Perry (2001) highlighted the positive outcomes of international cooperation in the tourism industry, for instance, enhancing destinations' appeal, optimising resource allocation for infrastructure, and generating widespread economic benefits. Researchers

have suggested that tourism can foster cultural understanding and reduce political disputes, particularly within the European Union. Stoffelen and Vanneste (2017) examined the role of the European Union (EU) in promoting tourism, enhancing unity with neighbouring and other nations, especially driving economic progress through intergovernmental partnerships and agreements, under the sign of 'The European Union as a Tourism Actor'. Their study highlighted the potential for tourism operations in international areas to exacerbate socioeconomic development disparities across adjacent borders. Several destinations, such as the Caribbean (Dookeran, 2023), China (Zhu & Chen, 2023), and the United Arab Emirates (Guéraiche, 2023), have adopted similar diplomatic strategies to facilitate ease and leniency in crossing borders. In this regard, Seyfi et al. (2020) conducted a study illustrating the connection between the tourism industry and sanctions, which affected the international reputation of destinations, ultimately leading to substantial consequences for businesses and financial investments.

Furthermore, Su and Li (2021) illustrated the significant economic influence of cross-border tourism, using China and Myanmar as comparative cases, and argued that illegal operations, political instability, and security issues dominate the industry's possibilities, especially when governments control their border regions. Tourism diplomacy is essential for all countries, as it maximises cultural connections, nurtures economic ties, and cherishes positive national views. The present study showcases the potential of tourist diplomacy in strengthening diplomatic ties and facilitating future collaborative activities. The significance of tourist diplomacy in enhancing relations between countries should not be underestimated, particularly in a world that is becoming more linked (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021; Grundy-Warr & Perry, 2001; Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017; Dookeran, 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2023; Guéraiche, 2023; Seyfi et al., 2020; Su & Li, 2021). In addition, tourism has also been recognised as a tool for fostering peace. For example, Salman (2024) explored the role of tourism over two decades as a peacemaker between Morocco and Israel, noting that although its direct impact is limited, tourism exchanges have substantially bolstered informal relations through emotional campaigns, pilgrimages, and economic development.

Furthermore, tourism diplomacy has also imprinted several other dimensions, leaving an open debate for future research avenues. For instance, the dyad of tourism diplomacy and sustainability has been argued as a win-win situation. Diplomacy for sustainable planning (Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2021) and leverage for SDG 17 – Partnership for Goals (Movono & Hughes, 2022) have been considered significant. Moreover, catalysis for peace and justice (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2022), reduction tool for economic, political, and social inequalities (Farmaki & Stergiou, 2021), diplomacy to enhance exports and foreign trade amid national branding (Hurn, 2016), diplomacy as people-to-people oriented nation branding (Dubinsky, 2021), synthesis of tourism diplomacy and language (Favi, 2023), tourism as financial diplomacy between countries (Okano-Heijmans, 2012), goodwill tours for enhancing the diplomatic relationships (Shannon, 2014), the synergy of cultural diplomacy through heritage tourism (Singh & Rana, 2021), supports the argument that tourism diplomacy has several other facets. These facets necessitate further academic efforts to expand the existing body of literature, yielding novel scientific insights.

## 2.2. Tourism diplomacy and Malaysia

Tourism diplomacy is a pivotal and versatile medium for promoting international relations, facilitating cultural interchange, and stimulating economic development (Genc, 2010). In Asia, tourism has also been used as a diplomatic strategy to enhance relationships with other countries. In Southeast Asia, Malaysia presents a credible example of the synergy between tourism and diplomacy in diplomatic affairs (Hussain et al., 2017). Covering numerous domains, Malaysia's state and non-state stakeholders have excelled in utilising the determinants of tourism – demand, supply, and intermediaries – as tools of tourism diplomacy. The tourism industry in Malaysia has enabled the country to achieve a position among the top 10 global destinations, making a substantial contribution to the country's gross domestic product. Malaysia's achievement

has established it as an exemplary model for other developing nations (Mosbah et al., 2014; Hussain et al., 2017). It has effectively utilised tourism as a soft power to showcase its unique culture, scenery, and cuisine, thereby gaining a favourable worldwide reputation. This method has been incorporated into Malaysia's comprehensive diplomatic strategy to foster connections and enhance relationships with several nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2015). In response to this strategy, specific initiatives have also been expedited to differentiate themselves from competitors in the tourism and cultural diplomacy landscape. For instance, Gastrodiplomacy at the national foreign policy level has been floated as a tool to develop and disseminate soft power through national cuisines (Hussin, 2018; Solleh, 2018). The "Malaysian Kitchen for the World Program" (WKP) has successfully broadcast the preparation and presentation of Malaysia's national cuisines to the global audience, ultimately highlighting the country's cultural face (Nahar et al., 2018). This branding campaign has been coupled with the slogan 'Malaysia Truly Asia' to create a national identity at the national level and promote Gastro Diplomacy at the international level (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014). Embedded in the multicultural history, the traditional food list of Malaysia presents a unique blend of traditional Chinese, Indian, and Malay cuisines, contributing to the country's food brand image (Jalis et al., 2014). From 2010 to 2015, the Malaysian government ran a similar campaign in the United Kingdom under the "Malaysian Kitchen for the World" initiative to promote gastro-diplomacy among British citizens (Putri & Baskoro, 2021). In addition to the development of gastro diplomacy, specific targeted initiatives have also been launched to cater to the needs of a particular religious segment of global society.

Malaysia's tourism strategy has actively incorporated measures to meet the needs of Muslim travellers, resulting in a positive impact on the number of visitors from Muslim-majority countries (Ghani, 2016). In collaboration with neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, under the strategy of Islamic Diplomacy, Malaysia has developed the Halal tourism industry to focus on the potential of Muslim tourists worldwide, specifically (Candra et al., 2024). Concomitantly, Malaysia has provided a safe, hospitable, and welcoming alternative to Middle Eastern Muslim tourists who were quite reluctant to visit Western countries amid hostile attitudes toward them in the aftermath of the 9/11 incident (Salman & Hasim, 2012). Moreover, according to Putri and Baskoro (2016), Malaysia and Indonesia employed public diplomacy to enhance their national reputation and entice foreign visitors and investment. Specifically, Muhammadiyah's diaspora diplomacy protected Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia via mediation, advocacy, and representation (Anam et al., 2022). Despite several efforts to substantiate tourism diplomacy, the Malaysian tourism industry has faced downsides. Refraining from carrying capacity amid over-tourism has resulted in dissatisfaction among incoming tourists and discouragement for potential tourists. Hegemonic emphasis on the Muslim tourist market neglected the non-Muslim market. Furthermore, in the Muslim tourist market, the limited average wealth per person, population preferences, and considerable geographical distance of these countries contribute to the scarcity of visitors from this demographic (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021; Ghani, 2016).

In terms of state-to-state relationships, specific programs have also been introduced to normalise the tension with neighbouring states and strengthen existing good relations with countries. Educational programs between Malaysia and Indonesia have been initiated to promote cultural diplomacy amid tense political relationships and shared transnational societal spaces, aiming to encourage the interplay of ethnic, social, and political values (Hrubý, 2021). Moreover, under the concept of global health diplomacy, the Malaysian health sector has been promoted to declare the country as the "hepatitis C treatment hub of Asia" (Farber & Taylor, 2023). Given the health diplomacy facilitated by health tourism, several strategies were launched, including public-private partnerships and tax waivers. In addition, until 2009, the Malaysian Ministry of Health and the Association of Private Hospitals Malaysia were authorised to manage the health tourism sector of Malaysia (Acharya, 2013). These collaborations and citations validate that Malaysia has utilised its various products and services of tourism, gastronomy, education, health, and politics to generate soft power and promote cultural diplomacy among neighbouring states and countries from other regions (Hussin, 2018). Tourism diplomacy

has been a vital asset for Malaysia, showcasing vibrant culture, cuisine, and landscapes while building bridges with other nations. It is a unique way to foster goodwill and create connections beyond traditional diplomacy. However, there are downsides as well. A heavy focus on specific markets, such as Muslim-centric tourism, risks excluding other potential visitors, making the strategy appear less inclusive (Ghani, 2016). Plus, the surge in tourist numbers can lead to overcrowding and environmental strain, damaging Malaysia's sustainable and welcoming destination image. Balancing growth and inclusivity remains a challenge. Despite its success, Malaysia's tourism diplomacy faces challenges, including the environmental impact of over-tourism and a narrow focus on Muslim markets, which limits its broader appeal. To strengthen its position, Malaysia could diversify into eco-tourism and digital tourism, adopt sustainable practices, and promote inclusive policies to attract a wider audience and enhance its global soft power.

### 3. Methodology

This study analyses how tourism diplomacy enhances Malaysia's international reputation and strengthens its diplomatic relationships. Specifically, it examines the strategic use of tourism to influence economic, social, and cultural dimensions of international relations. To achieve this, the research focuses on how increasing tourist arrivals, promoting cultural exchange, and leveraging unique tourism strategies impact Malaysia's global standing. The data used in this study were secondary and were collected from newsletters, media reports, press releases, and government and ministry websites. In general, secondary data is available through online materials, publications, websites, annual reports, and social media (Connelly, 2017). As it is accessible and readily available, collecting secondary data saves time and costs (Clow & James, 2013). The secondary data was collected by researchers through searches on Google using the terms "tourism diplomacy in Malaysia" and "tourism diplomacy as a dynamic tool". The data was analysed by reading through the descriptions using content analysis. Content analysis is context-sensitive, unobtrusive, accepts unstructured material, and can deal with large volumes of data (Krippendorff, 1980). The advantage of this analysis is that it can easily be applied to sampling units taken from websites and other media, such as newspapers and television (Hashim et al., 2007). Researchers explored the most recent publications from academic journals, websites, and other sources to get the most up-to-date information. This approach focuses on understanding how the Malaysian government employs tourism diplomacy to influence economic, social, and political realms. The study identifies the crucial elements that are harnessed in this process, exploring the multifaceted strategies that contribute to the country's diplomatic activities.

### 4. Discussion

Diplomacy is crucial in fostering trust, peace, and harmony, which are essential for tourism to thrive, with its activities and services being rendered and promoted (Carbone, 2017). Hence, tourism diplomacy in Malaysia is even more critical to ensure intercultural exchange can be achieved successfully. As the country's population makeup is multiracial, multicultural, and multi-religious, local diplomacy is required by different levels of stakeholders to create an environment that is diverse and unique and has become a unique selling point for the rest of the world to cherish and appreciate. The diplomatic requirements of promoting international relations, facilitating cultural exchange, and stimulating economic development further enable the creation of tourism activities and promotions tailored to different target market segments, thereby directly boosting tourism arrivals.

Malaysia has a long-standing marketing campaign, "Malaysia Truly Asia" (Hussin, 2018), which serves as a form of diplomatic outreach. This campaign has successfully recognised the shared heritage background that originated from various neighbouring countries, making Malaysia "Asia in miniature" (Andaya & Andaya, 2017). Malaysia has successfully leveraged tourism as a form of soft power to showcase its distinctive landscapes,

cultures, and culinary traditions, earning a positive global reputation. This approach has been integrated into Malaysia's diplomatic strategy to foster and enhance relations with multiple countries. This allows Malaysia to acknowledge a shared cultural influence with Asian countries and promote the country successfully through shared representations, which encompass diverse religious festivities, history, cuisine, and local lifestyles. This approach allowed Malaysia to preserve their culture and heritage, leading to sustainability.

With this in mind, tourism diplomacy is crucial for international travel and relations, particularly in managing and mitigating border issues (Więckowski & Timothy, 2021). For tourism to develop further, tourism diplomacy enables different stakeholders to communicate and collaborate on creating policies and plans that support both local and international tourism needs, which are organised, facilitated, and implemented by local players (Shamsi, 2023). As discussed, immigration development benefits from diplomacy between countries. For instance, tourists from India and China can now travel visa-free to Malaysia (Yuan, 2023). These are the actions of the government in supporting tourism arrivals, which, in turn, would create more income for local businesses and their workforce. When tourists arrive and spend on tourism activities, products, and services, all stakeholders are likely to benefit economically, as well as through future developments in destination infrastructure, products, and services. Tourism activities will always involve cultural interactions between visiting tourists and the host nation. These cultural interactions can create a wonderful experience; however, they can also irritate the local population of the host nation (Cui et al., 2016). However, multiple misunderstandings may arise when cultures collide, leaving tourists dissatisfied and locals disgruntled (Bernama, 2018). Tourism players can achieve diplomacy by briefing tourists on their conduct, and tourists will be more sensitive to their behaviours. This allows tourism to advocate for diplomacy.

Tourism diplomacy opens the doors to creating policies that support the development of products and services tailored to specific target markets. Food is one such market. Malaysia has long been recognised as a food haven; as further discussed, gastro-diplomacy has promoted Malaysia internationally as a gourmet paradise (Nahar et al., 2018). Cuisines can influence tourists' perceptions of a host nation. The cuisine is often discussed along ethnic lines; some dishes are a mix of foods from different ethnicities. With the various cuisines offered in Malaysia, there are many parallels between foods from neighbouring countries and other ethnicities. Cultural fusion is reflected in the food style, encouraging inclusivity and curiosity to discover new cultural flavours and broaden tolerance for cultures that differ from one's own. This has benefited tourists, as they can enjoy a variety of Asian foods in Malaysia (Jalis et al., 2014). Malaysia is promoted as a Muslim-friendly tourist destination, allowing business operators to enter the halal food sector to cater to the growing demand (Hussin, 2018; Sangaran & Selvanayagam, 2021). Being a food paradise due to Malaysia's multicultural uniqueness, it also caters to the diverse needs of all travellers. This will allow us to observe that local community businesses can choose to cater to specific tourist group requirements or provide for a more general market. Tourism diplomacy additionally plays a crucial role in global relations and cultural inclusions. Tourism diplomacy further enhances the sustainable practices that support local community engagement. This would enable a favourable and authentic tourist experience, supporting sustainable tourism by involving locals in planning and aligning tourism diplomacy goals with those of the locals and stakeholders.

Other tourism products have gained popularity in Malaysia. In health and education, tourism is gaining popularity. Diplomacy has led the way for the health and education sector to utilise international standards accepted by other nations. With policies and plans addressing both local and global needs, there is an increase in the number of tourists seeking health and educational opportunities. Economic gains for local businesses and the local workforce are created due to the demand requirements. This situation has driven the growth of public and private hospitals, as well as universities. Professionals from the local communities are being developed in various fields to support the requirements of these industries. Diplomacy has played a crucial

role in facilitating cultural exchange, fostering cultural understanding, and promoting national interests, making Malaysia a strong advocate for diplomacy (Farber & Taylor, 2023).

Tourism diplomacy has strengthened Malaysia's international status as a destination that fosters collaboration and mutual exchange, thereby protecting tourists' rights and interests. Malaysia has plenty to benefit from tourism diplomacy. However, prioritising sustainable practices is crucial in supporting diplomacy. Further campaigns highlighting cultures, norms, and best practices at destinations are required to ensure that all participating in tourism activities can advocate for diplomacy through their actions.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

This study emphasises the crucial role of intertwining tourism with diplomacy to fully realise a destination's potential and mitigate regional and global tensions. The research illustrates successful approaches to embedding tourism diplomacy within Malaysia's national and international affairs framework. Malaysia's strategic initiatives offer vital lessons for other nations on leveraging tourism to foster robust diplomatic ties, promote intercultural dialogue, and drive economic prosperity. Through Malaysia's experience, the study demonstrates how tourism diplomacy can serve as a bridge between diverse cultures, facilitating mutual understanding and cooperation across borders. Tourism diplomacy can contribute to regional stability and strengthen international partnerships by promoting respectful and meaningful interactions. Moreover, Malaysia's innovative strategies offer a roadmap for other countries to leverage their unique cultural heritage and natural resources, attracting global attention and bolstering their international standing. Overall, this study provides a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted benefits of tourism diplomacy, offering actionable insights for countries seeking to navigate the complex landscape of global relations while simultaneously nurturing their tourism industries.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This current study makes four contributions to the existing body of literature on tourism diplomacy. First, from a generic standpoint, it provides a holistic conceptualisation of tourism diplomacy, particularly from the political, apolitical, and state-to-state oriented dimensions. This research theoretically examines the synergy between tourism diplomacy and its determinants. Secondly, in the specific context of Malaysia, this current research integrates the fragmented aspects of tourism diplomacy strategies and tools into a single research contribution, allowing the general reader to understand the previous and ongoing functionality of tourism diplomacy in Malaysia. Thirdly, it critically analyses the pros and cons of the duality between tourism and diplomacy within the socio-political context of Malaysia. Given this critical analysis, this study draws a fine line between a low and extreme emphasis on tourism diplomacy through various strategies and tools. Fourthly, the findings of this study provide a framework for exploring future avenues related to tourism diplomacy through various scientific and industrial lenses.

### 5.2. Practical implications

The current study provides actionable managerial implications. First, for policymakers, the study emphasises the importance of strategic initiatives that align with Malaysia's multicultural identity and rich heritage. Considering this significance, policymakers should strategise in introducing and maintaining visa-free travel agreements with crucial partner nations, such as India and China, to encourage tourism growth and strengthen international ties. Moreover, regarding cultural facets, the policymakers must also address cultural sensitivity and education for tourists and locals to avoid misunderstandings and promote respectful interactions. To this end, tourism stakeholders should diversify their offerings to cater to various market segments. Malaysia's multicultural landscape supports niche markets, including halal, gastronomy, and cultural tourism, which

appeal to many travellers. In acquiescence to this demand, tourism stakeholders should collaborate with the public sector to create a seamless and culturally sensitive experience, educating tourists about local customs and offering unique insights into Malaysia's heritage. Public and private tourism stakeholders can harness tourism diplomacy by prioritising sustainable practices to solidify Malaysia's reputation as a welcoming, diverse, and globally connected destination. This approach fosters long-lasting diplomatic ties and contributes to Malaysia's economic growth and cultural exchange.

## 6. Limitations and directions for future research

Like other studies, this study also has certain limitations. Firstly, it is limited to the context of Malaysia and, in a certain way, provides specific findings associated with the locale under probe. However, these findings underscore the need for future studies that can address this academic constraint and yield novel avenues. Secondly, a limitation of this study is its methodology, as it was conceptual and based on a narrative review. This shortcoming can also be addressed in future studies, which could employ a quantitative or mixed-methods approach to gain a deeper understanding of the research issue.

Similarly, the study still needs to construct an empirical model to examine the research issue. However, this limitation calls for future studies to incorporate statistical data and advance the existing literature accordingly. Overall, this study provides specific results in the Malaysian context. However, certain generic implications are also sketched. These generic implications would prove suitable in all three determinants of tourism diplomacy, namely demand, supply, and ancillary.

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