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POLYSEMY AND VISUAL RHETORIC: BRIDGING AMBIGUITY AND MULTICULTURAL EXPRESSION MEANINGS IN PRODUCT PACKAGING

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Abstract: The visual communication is an essential tool for bridging linguistic and cultural divides. By utilizing with a vibrant range of images, symbol and emotion, it effectively embrace the powerful potential of visual communication. It also transcend visual interpretation with diverse audience in meaningful ways. Today, product packaging emerges as a dynamic medium for storytelling, shaping brand identity, conveying cultural narrative and uplifting national spirit. The exploration of multicultural expression in Malaysia's product packaging design has received limited attention by researchers. Enhancing the value of visual characteristic is crucial to create a more impactful and meaningful visual interpretation. The research aim to identify the visual characteristics that powerfully represent multicultural identity in the context of food packaging design by Kintry's cookies. The research presents a comprehensive thematic analysis supported by visual analysis, expert interview and conceptual theory using qualitative. Kintry's Merdeka edition packaging has been selected to emphasize the significance of cultural symbols that successfully represent Malaysia identity. Also, the research presents a conceptual framework to effectively identify research gaps. Understanding visual rhetoric is important for conveying the cultural significance of design across different ethnicities in Malaysia. Further, the semiotic of signs can convey multiple meanings. The interpretation aspects involve cultural, social and ethnic group contexts. The interplay between visual rhetoric and polysemy semiotic reveals how signs and symbols can communicate rich visual meanings. The concepts of signifier and signified reveal the transformative power of interpreting meanings. This exploration enhances visual effectiveness and underscores the visual strategies to create meaningful product packaging for Merdeka edition in the future. The research effectively demonstrate the



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significant visual interpretation into a powerful multicultural expression. Also, research reveals the important relationship between polysemy and the various multicultural dimensions of multiple cultural meanings. Ultimately, the research presents contributing knowledge of design strategy for academicians and designers in creating impactful multicultural design expressions that define Malaysia. Moreover, this research provides valuable guidelines for future design strategies. It promotes meaningful multicultural design expression that effectively reflects Malaysia's unique identity.

Keywords: Polysemy Semiotic, Visual Rhetoric, Multicultural Expression, Product Packaging, Visual Communication.

Introduction

Cultural expression reflects the vibrant traditions and values of communities and society. The exploration of cultural expression significantly contributes to the preservation of cultural diversity. Moreover, it ensures that the cultural heritage and identity are appreciated by future generations. Verbal signs representing symbolic meaning to be understood through mutual agreement or culturally learnt (Fiske, 1990). The preservation of cultural values is critically important for sustaining the vibrancy and richness of cultural heritage. Understanding the knowledge and practices enhances mutual respect in the context of Malaysia. This approach inspires a spirit of unity and harmony among various ethnic group. This research highlights the powerful impact of multicultural expression in shaping Malaysia's unique identity. Furthermore, the research reveals the valuable understanding of custom, tradition, artistic expression and symbolic meaning that represent Malaysia identities. It also showcases the important role of design in elevating the cultural values and heritage. Cultural expression is an important fundamental to understanding human diversity, fostering cultural understanding and preserving cultural heritage. It plays a significant role in shaping identity, promoting social cohesion, inspiring creativity and preserving cultural identity. Thus, it will create a strong emotional connection and foster mutual respect among ethnicities. This research highlights the importance of cultural values in designing more inclusive multicultural expression, particularly in Kintry's cookies packaging design. It contributes deeper understanding of design that reflects a diverse range of consumers.

Furthermore, the elements and principle of design empower the powerful and effective visual communication. It helped to deliver the overall impact of visual content and narrative. According to Aristotle, rhetoric is defined as the art of persuasion. The arguments hold the power to inspire belief either real or seem convincing. Further, the arguments are based on evidence that invites exploration and presumptions. It will lead to reasoning that transcends reconstruction (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992; Cope & Sandys, 2010). Moreover, rhetoric is the art of speech and persuasion. There will be no world without image. (Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007). Visual rhetoric refers to the strategic use of visual elements such as image color, shapes, and layout composition to convey a message quickly and effectively. Exploring visual rhetoric inspires designers to convey visual messages with meaningful design values. In the context of globalization, product serves as a powerful medium for expressing cultural identity. A strong brand communication creates meaningful cultural value.



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On the other hand, semiotic explore how images and words convey meanings through various forms of symbolism. Embracing this understanding significantly enhances effective visual communication. The richness of meanings that can arise from different cultural contexts (Barthes, 1964). He believed in the meaning of what signs signify and how what signs are communicating, as well as how meaning is constructed and understood. The primary sign can become an expression of a secondary sign that expresses and delays the secondary meaning. Moreover, according to Barthes' theory, every sign is involved the Denotative and Connotative sign system. A sign is formed through the combination of the signifier (image) and the signified (concept). The interpretation changes due to various factors such as cultural shifts, changes in terminology, significant cultural and belief, or simply the passage of time to understand meaning. By understanding rhetoric from the beginning, we can also claim to argue that semiotics is closely related to the field of rhetoric (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992). On the other hand, would as a verbal sign are one of the symbolic sign that are generally understood through mutual agreement or are culturally learn (Fiske, 1990). The relationship between visual rhetoric and semiotic theory provides a framework for designers to critically engage with cultural symbols and signs. This understanding is essential for more impactful multicultural expression. Designers utilize semiotic theory to create persuasive visual messages, making their designs more effective in conveying meaning (Alim, 2021). Most recent research focusing the use of visual rhetoric and semiotic interpretation focus on branding (Kucuk, 2014), corporate identity (Christensen& Askegaard, 2001) and marketing activity (Feire, 2014). Unfortunately, very limited research explores the relationship between product packaging design and the representation of multicultural values to represent Malaysia's identities.

Literature Review

Understanding cultural expression value in product packaging

Visual expression can be interpreted in various ways. It advocates the relationship between visual characteristic and valuable design implementation. Furthermore, language play a crucial role in conveying visual impression, enhancing the understanding of meanings in different contexts (Biaggam, 2012). The integration of cultural expression are implemented in various disciplines including visual design, sociology, anthropology and psychology. The use of cultural expression a crucial role in conveying complex concepts in diverse audiences. It represent various way of communication and representation of ideas through imagery and other visual medium. Culture is defined as the collective knowledge, belief, laws, moral, custom, lifestyle and capabilities that ship the identity of a group (Abdulla, 2018). Ultimately, cultural expression represent the way individuals and communities articulate their beliefs, values and identities. Through various symbolic, artistic and communicative medium, it also enrich the understanding of meaningful visual interpretation and culture values. Furthermore, the role of cultural expression in shaping aesthetic preferences, consumer behavior, and design practices, emphasizing various interdisciplinary relevance and its potential for fostering cultural understanding and appreciation.

On the other hand, the understanding of different meanings of racialization and ethnicity are important for fostering unity and national integration among Malaysian. It foster unity and enrich the collective identity that shapes Malaysian. Shamsul A.B (2020) explores the historical development of ethnicity in Malaysia, showcasing the impact of colonial legacy, migration patterns, and the formation of ethnic identities in Malaysia. According to him, ethnicity is

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significantly represented through richness cultural background and fostering meaningful connection among various ethnic group. It involves the aspect of shared heritage, culture and tradition among community. By emphasizing elements such as language, customs and social practice, it help to create a strong sense of belonging among Malaysia. Additionally, the multicultural expression help to deliver a meaningful cultural narrative that express culture, celebrating the beauty and shared identity. By identifying emerging trends, challenges and opportunities related to ethnicity, design can effectively address issues of tension, conflict and discrimination. This strategy allows for more constructive solutions through design perspectives. Ultimately, embracing the understanding can significantly strengthen social cohesion and foster a more vibrant ethnicity as Malaysia. The use of cultural elements significantly influences consumer perception toward the brand identity (Kushwah, 2020). The use of cultural elements can be represented through symbols, values, traditions, colors and language that represent a specific cultural background. The right cultural elements powerfully convey deeper meaning that enhance clarity in the visual representation. Moreover, it can also evoke the historical and internal connection that represents the cultural value of society. This study aims to identify how cultural characteristics reflect cultural identities that define Malaysia. The right cultural relevant implementation in design enhances emotional connection and engagement with an appropriate visual narrative. Lack of systematic research on culture elements in packaging design influences consumer emotion (Jun Cui, 2024).

The Relationship Between Visual Rhetoric Elements and Semiotic in Product Packaging

Visual rhetoric serves as a fundamental aspect utilizing images, typography, symbols and color as persuasive elements to convey impactful messages. The understanding of rhetoric enhances the effectiveness of understanding visual content. On the other hand, the visual literary can be represented through color, facial expression, composition and imagery (Aristotle & Kennedy, 2007). Visual rhetoric embodies the significant impact of imagery to create meaning and deliver messages effectively. The analysis of visual rhetoric helps to integrate various design elements to construct an argument in visual information. Visual imagery can be presented as a sign or symbolic that involve human intervention to deliver message communication (Foss, 2012).

The semiotic provides a comprehensive understanding of the sign in conveying meaning effectively. It helped to produce the science of communication significance (Saussure, 1915). Semiotic plays a crucial role in examining the intricate relationship between sign and the interpretation meaning across different contexts, situations and backgrounds. The basic assumption of semiotic involves communication that tied together to create meaning behind it (Pierce, 1902). Furthermore, the use of polysemy in semiotic represent a single sign to multiple meanings of interpretation. The sign can be interpreted differently based on context, cultural background, individual interpretation and experience. The polysemy in semiotic reflect the cultural symbols in representing meaning in culture, history, identity and visual representation. The transformative layer of polysemy able to modernize traditional symbols and visual characteristics. Embracing significance of cultural symbols is important to reflect Malaysia's rich cultural values of impactful product packaging design.

Bridging Ambiguity: Transformative Layer Meaning through Polysemy

The polysemy is derived from the Greek words poly (many) and seam (sign) that represent a single sign that conveys multiple related meanings. It embodies the multiple beauty of visual



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messages through words, images, symbols and other visual element. The concept powerfully highlight the complexity and richness of interpretation across various layer. It advocates the power of a single sign that can represent multiple interpretation and empower persuasion. The polysemy concept highlights that meanings of signs are not fixed. They are adaptable and can change based on different contexts and perspectives. A single signs can be represented in different layer of meaning in diverse fields (Barthes, 1973). He believed that by exploring a range of style, contexts and modalities of expression will provides the underlying message construction. The perception can be interpreted by using Denotation and Connotation. Ultimately, the polysemy concept play a significant role in the Connotation level where allowing signs to have multiple interpretations. This richness of interpretation enhances the flexibility to understand various social and cultural background. Polysemy foster a deeper appreciation for the role of symbolism and visual representation presenting visual expression. This concept offers a flexible way to interpret visual language the embracing inclusivity and celebrating cultural richness and symbolic significance effectively.

On the other hand, polysemy in semiotic transforms visual design into an engaging visual narrative, utilizing elements of visual rhetoric and semiotic interpretation. Each elements delivers a powerful layer of meaning visual of various meanings. Designers strategically employs symbols that carry both universal and cultural significance through symbolism. Example, the tiger represent as visual sign but can possibly interpreted to represent strength, danger or brave. Meanwhile, the red color stand as a powerful visual symbol, embracing interpretation of love, warning or patriotism. Polysemy allows designer, advertiser and educator the opportunity to explore different layers of meaning in more critical thinking. The concept evokes a variation of cultural and ideological contexts in visual interpretation. It effectively conveys meaning shaped by culture, history, identity and individual experiences. The existing literature on exploring and interpreting the use of polysemy in cultural value for Malaysian product packaging are limited. Therefore, this study aim to develop three dimensional framework that powerfully expresses multicultural expression. It integrates surface layer (Visual rhetoric characteristics), interpretive layer (Semiotic) and transformative layer (Polysemy). The new layering conceptual framework reflect multicultural expression that beautifully conveys the essence of Malaysia through product packaging.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presents the new cultural value that emphasizes level within visual rhetoric, semiotic interpretation and polysemy (Signifier and Signified). The framework presented effectively integrates visual rhetoric with semiotic interpretation to achieve a cohesive understanding of cultural meanings, particularly in the context of product packaging. The concept of polysemy plays a crucial role as a narrative bridge to modernize with traditional value while preserving symbolic relevance in design execution. The proposed conceptual framework of this study, powerfully illustrates how design features are used to represent cultural meaning on three main levels. Most existing conceptual framework focused on examining visual rhetoric and semiotic interpretation individually. None research has integrated various cultural layers using polysemy to effectively convey the complexity of multi-cultural expression, particularly in the context of product packaging that reflects Malaysian identity. This study introduces a new integrated conceptual framework to fill the gap



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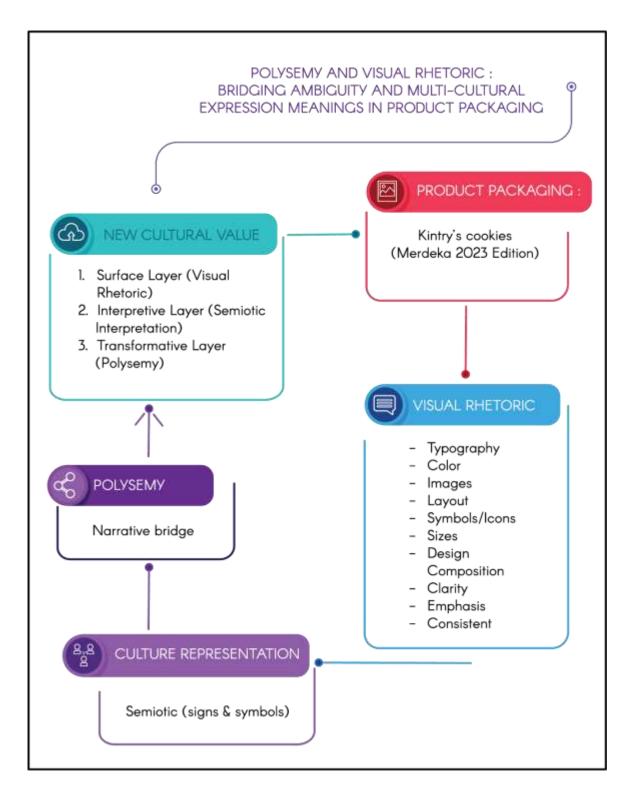


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the research study



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This research study used visual rhetoric, semiotic and polysemy to interpret cultural value in the context of Kintry's packaging design. Visual rhetoric helped to decode how visual element and principle create appeal and visual meaning on the surface layer. On the other hand, semiotic theory reveals the deeper interpretation of cultural and symbolic meaning. The meanings represented through signs and symbols in the interpretive layer. Meanwhile, polysemy provide the exploration of multiple meaning that are influenced by context, culture and individual perspective. Polysemy provide a significant understanding of various interpretation of visual meaning within the transformative layer of visual communication. Together, this conceptual framework provides a comprehensive and inclusive visual interpretation of Malaysia's multicultural expression in product advertisement.

Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative methodology to analyze the relationship between visual rhetoric and the intricate process of semiotic visual interpretation. It involves the exploration of cultural characteristic in Kintry's product packaging. Visual rhetoric and semiotic play a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of visual communication. The characteristic shape the understanding of visual direction and design interpretation. By exploring the intricate layer of the polysemy concept. This study explores how visual meaning is not fixed ininterpretation. The richness of interpretation can present the unique context of Malaysia.

Result

Visual Analysis and Expert Validation

The study explores the role of cultural value in Kintry's Merdeka 2023 limited-edition packaging design that portrays multicultural expression. The selection of product packaging is base on the most relevant cultural influence that portray Malaysian identity. Data analysis was analyzed in three phases. First, visual analysis the brand Merdeka edition packaging (Figure 2). Second, data analysis was also coordinated with descriptive codes, category and theme using NVivo software. Third, semi structured interview with experts (Figure 3,4,5 and 6).



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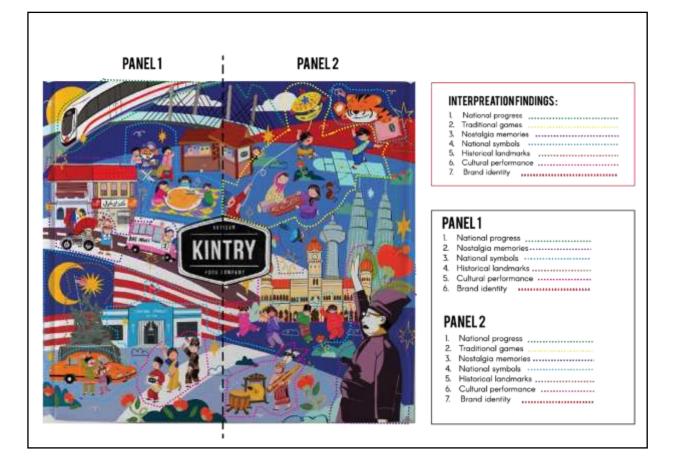


Figure 2: Kintry's packaging analysis using visual rhetoric elements from panel to two panel

The visual analysis reveals that each of visual characteristics conveys meaning on various level of interpretation. 5 interpretations have been identified and analyzed like national progress, traditional games, nostalgia memory, national symbols, historical landscape, cultural performance and brand identity. The finding was analyzed in different coding color presented in the visual analysis above. The interpretation of visual analysis findings reveal the cultural meaning reflect the new cultural value in 3 surface layers explained above.

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SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED (What It Represents)	POLYSEMY (How Meaning present multiple meanings)
1. National progress	Rapid KL transit system, Petronas Twin Towers, KL Tower, Penang Bridge	Seen as symbols of development and modernity, but may also trigger concern about cultural loss or the implications of urban expansion
2. Traditional games	Congkak, Wau bulan, teng teng, gasing	To older generations: nostalgic cultural bonding; To youth: playful curiosity or simple tradition To tourists: cultural uniqueness and authenticity.
3. Nostalgia memories	Congkak, Wau bulan, teng teng, gasing	May signify childhood, local identity, or cultural significance. To others, it present social interaction or national heritage.
4. National symbols	Multi-ethnic society, hibiscus flower, Malaysia's tiger, Malaysian flag	It can represent national pride or national unity. Others see it as national value, patriotism or national unity. This leads to a range of patriotic emotions among different groups.
5. Historical landmarks	National Monument (Tugu Negara), Sultan Abdul Samad building	Advocate symbols of national history, colonial memory or independence. For older people, these symbols bring strong emotional connections history or cultural heritage. For younger genarations, they might represent architectural beauty.
6. Cultural performance	Iban dance, Rebana, Gong	Indicate symbols of national history, colonial memory or independence. For older people, these symbols bring strong emotional connections history or cultural heritage. For younger genarations, they might represent architectural beauty.
7. Brand identity	KIntry's logo, Kintry's stall	Symbols of branding, built trust or authenticity

Figure 3: The analysis of Semiotic and Polysemy

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The visual analysis revealed the use of visual rhetoric elements such as typography, color, images, layout, symbol and icon, sizes, design composition.

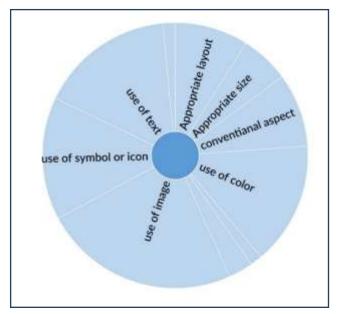


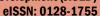
Figure 4: Codes found in Category "Visual elements of communication in design" apply in F&B packaging

The category "Visual element of communication in design" in NVivo 14 analysis revealed that the visual characteristic like the use of image, use of symbol or icon, use of color and use of text appear consistently coded across data interview session. These four main characteristic elements strongly influence visual communication supported by experts.

"Illustrate our own visual characters" – Informant 1

"Symbols in daily life, culture, people making life together"- Informant 4

On the other hand, the category found is "Design principles" in design F&B packaging design" was identified. Through thematic analysis using NVivo 14, the informants highlight the significance of emphasized on image, clarity, emphasized on message, emphasized on layout design, emphasized on sizzing, emphasized on typeface, repetition, consistent layout, emphasized on color and enlarge image in understanding design direction. 4 main primary codes like emphasized on image, clarity, emphasized on message and emphasized on layout design.



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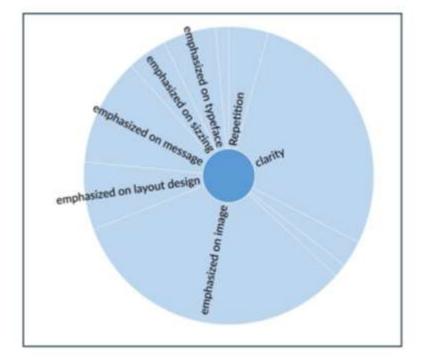


Figure 5: Codes found in Category "Design Principle" in F&B packaging design

The category "Design principles" in design F&B packaging design were repeatedly mentioned during the interview session.

"The characters shouldn't be too many, just 1 person, 2 people... our characters... these characters appear today... they appear tomorrow... they appear the day after tomorrow... so next week they appear again... one, two, three people keep appearing... when they appear, the readers will recognize them"—Informant 1

"The advantage of Lat is that he often displays the graphic novel.. it often showcases cultural elements from different perspectives that illustrate which is more complex" – Informant 3

"It has to be everything.. everything has to gel in together as one.. so you have to know consumer habits, what consumer like, color paly very important role in layout" – Informant 4

Furthermore, research study found the category of "Storytelling style in designing F&B packaging design" was identified. Through thematic analysis using NVivo 14, the informants highlight the significance of message with meanings, depicting life scenario, message with humor, material aspect, non-material aspect and conventional aspect is important to understand the design direction. The category highlight the role meaningful storytelling appearance in conveying impactful cultural meanings using visual storytelling style in design implementation. Through NVivo 14 coding and themes, 4 main primary codes like significance of message with meanings, depicting life scenario, message with humor and material aspect consistently emphasize during the visual analysis and expert interview session.



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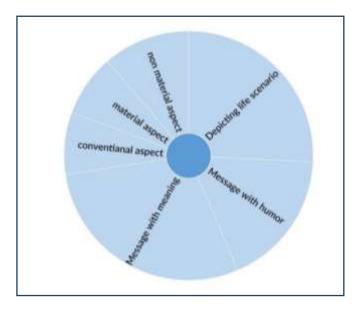


Figure 6: Codes found in Category "Storytelling styles"

The category "Storytelling style in designing F&B packaging design" in NVivo 14 analysis revealed that the storytelling style included the significance of message with meanings, depicting life scenario, message with humor and material aspect consistently coded across data interview session. These four main storytelling styles strongly influence visual messages also support by informants.

"For example, values of gotong royong, rewang and so on.. these values can be conveyed through images, figures, symbolism, and so on that reflect the diversity of the nation." – Informant 3

"A culture is the material (physical)" – Informant 6

Moreover, the others category found are "National identity representation in F&B packaging design" in design F&B packaging design" was . The codes like the significance multi ethnic identity, migration, national unity, Malaysian lifestyle, nostalgia memories, visionaries, friendship and national progress was found. 4 main primary codes like the significance multi ethnic identity, migration, national unity and Malaysian lifestyle also often mentioned by informants and visual analysis.

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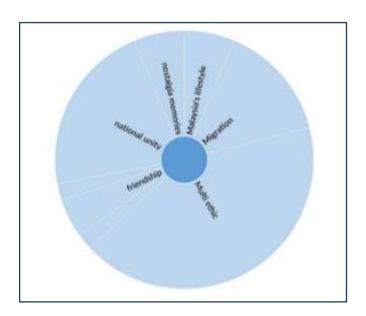


Figure 7: Codes found in Category "National identity representation" in F&B packaging design"

The category "National identity representation in F&B packaging design" in NVivo 14 analysis revealed these symbolism can be the valuable aspect for enhancing the F&B packaging design. The finding was also discussed in the interview session.

"I see 'racialisation' as 'ethnicization.' Racial has elements of color.. black and white in America.. that's race.. there are only 3 races.. Mongoloid, Caucasian, Negroid.. Negroid - Negro.. Caucasian - white skin.. Mongoloid - Asian people.. if we use 'race', these are the 3.. So in Malaysia, 'racialisation' is used where is the white skin? Where is the black skin? In Malaysia, they are not races.. they are ethnic groups.. one of the basic races is color.. like in America until today there are color restaurants that you cannot enter.. even if you enter, they won't serve you anyway.." – Informant 1

- "The story experiences of life from village to city.. the way he grew up and migrated.. so what he went through he tells honestly.. what he saw, what he experienced.—Informant 5
- "Culture exists, and it is the component that build society. Yes, culture means differences, as race and ethnic groups differ based on many factors, biological and social." – Informant 6

Contribution

The research study explores how multicultural expression should be represented to express Malaysia identity. The visual representation reveals how packaging design influences public perception by promoting positive value, mutual respect and build Muhibah spirit among various ethnic group. The findings explained how aesthetic appeal can carry emotional



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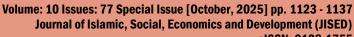
connection, cultural pride and national integration. It showcases the contemporary relevance in presenting effective multicultural design that reflect rich Malaysia's identities. This research contribute to five fields such as design direction, academic, policymaking, education and marketing strategy.

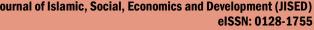
Conclusion

The research study demonstrates the cultural significance in designing multicultural expression through a structured three layer approach. The proposed conceptual framework advocates aspects of visual interpretation within the surface layer (visual rhetoric), interpretive layer (semiotic) and transformative layer (polysemy). Together, these layer create a unified understanding where visual rhetoric stimulates visual appeal. While semiotic provides meaning and polysomy fosters inclusive interpretation. The findings of this research study help to structure the visual narrative that balances modern aesthetic with traditional values. The conceptual framework presents a practical foundation for new designers in making effective multicultural design. Ultimately, it represents a valuable contribution in various fields like visual design, anthropology and sociology. It celebrates and spreads positive cultural values through product packaging design.

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