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Visual Content Analysis in Art and Design: A case study of Malaysia's National Day logo

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Abstract

National Day logos play an important role in communicating national identity and cultural values. However, systematic design-oriented approaches for analysing how formal and interpretive visual elements function within these logos remain limited. This study explores a design-based methodological approach for visual analysis by integrating formal and interpretive perspectives. Using an adapted visual content analysis method, six Malaysia National Day logos representing key evolutionary phases were analysed in terms of colour, typography, shape, and symbolism. The findings demonstrate shifts in aesthetic styles and national messaging across different periods, highlighting the relevance of structured visual analysis in art and design research.

Keywords: visual content analysis, Malaysia National Day logo, art and design methodology, Rose's four-step framework.

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1.0 Introduction

Visual design plays a central role in national celebrations by shaping how identity, values, and collective sentiment are communicated. The yearly National Day logo serves as an important cultural object in Malaysia, reflecting shifting national narratives, historical memory, and political shifts. In art and design studies, a comprehensive scholarly analysis of its design structure is still scarce, despite its prominence and symbolic significance.

National Day, which is observed on August 31 to honour independence in 1957, primarily uses visual symbols to uphold national aspirations and solidarity (Subramaniam et al., 2021; Yunus et al., 2019). Malaysia has created 35 logos and 42 themes since 1976 (S. F. M. Hashim et al., 2021), each of which uses a variety of graphic styles to convey changing cultural and political circumstances. However, most research focuses on thematic or symbolic interpretation and rarely examines the deliberate construction of formal design elements such as colour, typography, arrangement, and symbols. Because of this, research lacks an organised visual technique that incorporates the formal and interpretative aspects of design. The historical evolution of Malaysia's National Day logos reflects changing cultural values, political priorities, and design sensibilities across different periods. However, despite their cultural significance and long-term visual development, existing studies rarely examine how these evolving historical and cultural contexts are systematically embedded within the formal construction of the logos, thus revealing a clear research gap in design-oriented visual analysis.

Although frameworks such as Rose's (2016) Visual Content Analysis offer systematic procedures for image analysis, their sociological orientation limits their suitability for design-specific evaluation (Rani, 2025). The limited integration of design principles, including visual hierarchy, aesthetic intention, and form-making, reveals a methodological gap in existing research (El-bous, 2025). To address this gap, the present study adopts a design-oriented analytical approach that integrates formal and interpretive dimensions of visual communication. This approach is applied to six Malaysia National Day logos selected based on Hashim's (2023) categorisation of design evolution from 1976 to 2020, enabling focused analysis of colour, typography, form, composition, and symbolism within their sociocultural contexts. Overall, the study advances design scholarship by offering a systematic, design-focused analytical framework that supports deeper understanding of Malaysia's evolving national visual identity and informs future research in visual communication and cultural branding.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1. Visual Analysis in Art and Design Research

Visual analysis is a central approach in art and design research because it examines how meaning is produced through visual form, colour, shape, composition, typography, and imagery (Nor et al., 2021). Visual analysis highlights how visual structures convey story, emotion, symbolism, and identity, in contrast to text-based analytical techniques (Swasty & Mustafa, 2023). Visuals in design research are purposefully created artefacts that are made to reflect social or cultural settings and deliver messages rather than being passive objects. Recent studies continue to emphasise the importance of structured and design-sensitive visual analysis methods in understanding how visual artefacts communicate meaning within contemporary cultural contexts (Rani, 2025; El-bous, 2025).

Formal analysis focuses on fundamental design elements such as line, shape, texture, colour, and space (S. F. Hashim et al., 2022). Compositional analysis builds on this by looking at how these elements work together to create balance, hierarchy, contrast, or rhythm. These levels of inquiry provide deeper interpretation by allowing researchers to connect visual choices with cultural, historical, or political meaning. These analytical perspectives demonstrate how design techniques convey concepts of solidarity and resiliency, sociopolitical messages, or national objectives when applied to Malaysia's National Day logos (S. F. Hashim et al., 2024). In art and design studies, visual analysis performs several functions, such as disclosing design intention, evaluating the effectiveness of communication, and situating visual artefacts within broader cultural and historical contexts. It also enhances the visual literacy of practitioners and researchers (Nor et al., 2021). Despite its importance, design research now lacks a discipline-specific, formalised method for doing visual analysis in a dependable and reproducible manner. The fact that a significant amount of existing work relies on sociological or semiotic methodologies that do not fully incorporate design reasoning or aesthetic considerations highlights the need for a methodological framework created specifically for design study.

2.2 Frameworks for Visual Content Analysis

Visual Content Analysis (VCA), particularly the structured four-step model proposed by Rose (2016), offers a systematic process for analysing visuals through image selection, coding, categorisation, and interpretation. Its clarity and replicability have made it widely used in sociology, media studies, and cultural research. However, its application in art and design studies remains limited.

One of the main challenges is that Rose's model was not developed with design artefacts in mind. While it provides an organised analytical structure, it does not explicitly incorporate design-specific considerations such as visual hierarchy, spatial arrangement, typographic style, or aesthetic intent (Melissa A. Maier, 2017). In design contexts, especially when examining logos, posters, or visual identity systems, formal attributes play a central role in communicating meaning.

Researchers in art and design frequently adjust Rose's Visual Content Analysis framework to suit the demands of design inquiry; however, these modifications are rarely articulated or systematically documented. The absence of a clear methodological justification results in inconsistent applications and limits analytical transparency, as noted by (Chumiran et al., 2019). This situation underscores the need to refine VCA so that it meaningfully accommodates the requirements of design research, particularly through the integration of core visual elements such as colour, typography, form, and composition, as well as principles of visual organisation, symbolic meaning-making, and the socio-cultural contexts in which visual artefacts are produced and interpreted. The present study addresses this gap by adapting Rose's VCA in a way that aligns with analytical needs in design research. Accordingly, the issues identified in the literature directly inform the research objectives of this study, which focus on developing and applying a design-oriented visual analysis framework to examine formal elements, symbolic meaning, and their evolution in Malaysia's National Day logos.

2.3 Logos as Cultural and Visual Artefacts

A logo functions as a visual identifier that encapsulates the values, identity, and personality of an organisation, event, or nation. Scholars describe logos as symbolic constructs combining imagery and typography to communicate meaning and strengthen recognition (Jayanegara, 2017). Beyond graphic representation, logos operate as cultural artefacts that connect audiences to shared narratives and reinforce a sense of belonging.

Design components such as colour, typography, shape, and layout contribute significantly to a logo's communicative power (Nan et al., 2024). These elements establish visual tone, emotional resonance, and symbolic significance. In national contexts, logos carry additional weight, serving as visual expressions of unity, pride, and collective memory. Malaysia's National Day logos belong to this category of cultural artefacts. Their annual creation provides a unique archive for studying evolving visual strategies and representations of national identity.

2.4 Malaysia National Day Logos in Existing Research

Malaysia's National Day logos have seen significant evolution since the first official design in 1976. Changes in the political environment, cultural values, governmental interests, and design trends are all reflected in their visual development (S. F. Hashim et al., 2024). These logos are among the most recognisable and consistent design outputs in the country because they are extensively disseminated through commercial platforms, government initiatives, education systems, and the media.

Previous studies have investigated their cultural relevance, motifs, and symbols (Hashim SF., 2025; S.F.M. Hashim et al., 2021; Mohd Yusoff & Hassan, 2014; Subramaniam et al., 2021; Yunus et al., 2019). Previous research examines how these logos convey political discourse, national unity, or patriotic aspirations. However, rather than formal visual structure, a large portion of this study is on interpretation and meaning.

Hashim's (2023) doctoral research identifies six major phases in the evolution of Malaysia's National Day logo design, spanning from visually intricate traditional compositions to geometric modernity, organic minimalism, politically driven slogan-based forms, publicly contested designs, and contemporary digital aesthetics. Although this classification offers valuable contextual insight into the shifting visual language of the logos, it does not advance a structured, design-oriented analytical method capable of explaining how individual visual components operate within these phases.

Current research rarely looks at the relationship between visual tactics and the national narratives they are meant to convey, ignores the underlying visual logic that guides design decisions, and pays little attention to how formal features change over time (Nor et al., 2021; Hashim SF., 2025; Subramaniam et al., 2021). Furthermore, systematic and repeatable techniques that meet the methodological requirements of design research are frequently absent from these investigations. All these gaps highlight the necessity for a thorough analytical framework that views logos as purposefully created visual artefacts influenced by design principles and cultural meaning rather than just symbolic representations.

While previous studies have examined Malaysia's National Day logos primarily through symbolic interpretation and thematic meaning, the present study extends this body of work by introducing a design-oriented adaptation of Visual Content Analysis that systematically examines formal visual construction across different historical phases.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design centred on the systematic examination of visual artefacts. Because the Malaysia National Day logo is produced annually and carries deep cultural, symbolic, and political meanings, qualitative inquiry provides the most suitable approach for interpreting how its visual construction evolves across time. The study focuses on interpreting formal design elements as well as embedded socio-cultural meanings, consistent with methodology often used in art and design research.

3.2 Case Study Approach and Case Selection

A qualitative case study approach is used to analyse six Malaysian National Day logos selected as bounded cases that reflect key stages of Malaysia's visual identity progression. Case studies are particularly appropriate for design artefacts as they allow the researcher to situate each logo within its sociocultural and historical context while examining its visual structure in depth. Scholars such as Creswell, (2018); Lebar, (2017), emphasise that case studies enable multiple forms of evidence, documents, visuals, and archival materials to be integrated, thus supporting rich, contextualised interpretation.

Rather than analysing all logos produced between 1976 and 2020, the study uses purposive sampling based on evolutionary phases identified in Hashim's (2023) longitudinal research. Each selected logo represents a major stylistic and conceptual shift. This study adopts purposive sampling because the objective is not to represent the full population of Malaysia's National Day logos, but to support an in-depth, design-oriented visual analysis. The selected logos function as bounded analytical cases through which the adapted Visual Content Analysis framework can be applied to examine formal design structures and interpretive meaning. Hashim's (2023) longitudinal classification provides a theoretically grounded basis for identifying key evolutionary phases characterised by distinct visual forms, compositional strategies, and symbolic emphases. Selecting one representative logo from each phase therefore ensures that the analysis captures variation in visual structure and meaning across time, while remaining analytically focused and manageable. This sampling strategy directly supports the study's objective to integrate formal and interpretive aspects of visual communication, rather than to produce statistical generalisations.

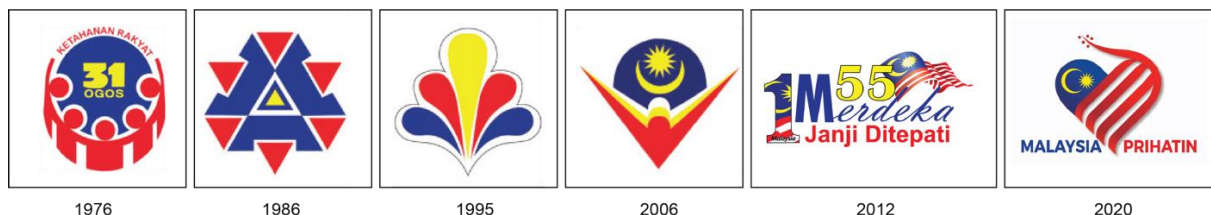


Fig. 1: Evolutionary phases of Malaysia's National Day logo
(Source: S. F. M. Hashim, 2023)

- 1976 – Complex ornamental compositions
- 1986 – Geometric and static modernist forms
- 1995 – Organic minimalism
- 2006 – Politically driven slogan-centred design
- 2012 – Publicly contested and criticised design
- 2020 – Contemporary digital symbolic aesthetic

This selection enables both depth and breadth; it captures key transitions in Malaysia's visual identity while allowing detailed cross-case comparison of design shifts, symbolism, and narrative emphasis.

3.3 Data Sources and Data Collection

The primary data consist of official Malaysia National Day logos obtained from government archives, media repositories, and published design documentation. Supporting documents such as policy statements, public announcements, and historical commentaries were used to contextualise each logo's production and reception. All logos were digitised, redrawn when necessary, and standardised to ensure analytical consistency.

3.4 Analytical Method — Visual Content Analysis (Rose, 2016)

This study adopts an adapted version of Rose's (2016) Visual Content Analysis (VCA), a structured four-stage analytical framework originally developed for sociological research. When integrated with formal design principles and visual grammar, VCA provides a robust foundation for design-oriented visual analysis. In this study, Rose's procedural structure is retained and extended to address the analytical requirements of art and design research. The first stage involved the purposive selection of National Day logos representing key evolutionary phases in Malaysia's visual history and broader discourses of national identity. The second stage focused on image preparation, where all logos were standardised through resizing, vectorisation, and the production of colour and greyscale versions to ensure consistent examination of form, hierarchy, and composition. The third stage employed a dual-layer coding approach combining formal design attributes—such as colour, typography, composition, and shape—with interpretive dimensions, including symbolism, emotional resonance, and narrative or political intent. The final stage synthesised the coded data to identify thematic patterns related to identity construction and shifting visual strategies across historical contexts.

To enhance methodological relevance for design research, the framework was further refined through longitudinal comparison and the explicit application of design principles, visual grammar, and interpretive analysis. This adaptation ensures balanced attention to both the technical structure and cultural meaning of visual communication.

3.5 Adapted Theoretical Visual Framework (Layer + Flow Framework)

To strengthen methodological rigour, this study constructs an adapted theoretical visual framework that integrates Rose's Visual Content Analysis procedure with design-specific analytical layers and contextual dimensions. This framework functions as the core analytical model, guiding the systematic interpretation of the visual, symbolic, and cultural characteristics of the selected Malaysia National Day logos.

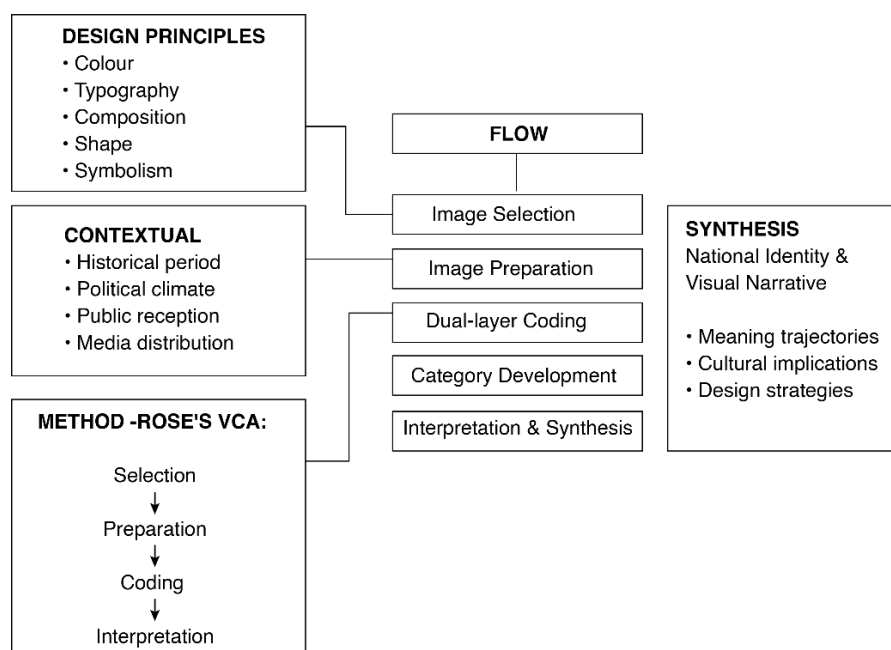


Fig. 2: Layer-Flow Analytical Framework for Design-Oriented Visual Content Analysis
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

The diagram shows how Rose's Visual Content Analysis (VCA) and layered design elements are integrated into the study's analytical procedure. The Design Principles Layer, which covers colour, typography, composition, shape, and symbolism;(Hashim SF., 2025) the Contextual Layer, which places each artefact within its historical period, political climate, public reception, and media circulation; and the Method Layer, which directly references Rose's procedural steps of selection, preparation, coding, and interpretation, are the three analytical layers that guide the interpretation of each logo.

The successive steps of analysis are represented by the centre flow, which starts with picture preparation and selection and continues with dual-layer coding that combines formal visual characteristics with interpretive meaning (S. F. Hashim et al., 2022). Consolidation of these coded pieces through category formation is followed by the last stage of interpretation and synthesis.

The result of this integrated process, which combines contextual knowledge with visual evidence to create a cohesive understanding of national identity and visual narrative, is highlighted in the right column. The evolving trajectories of meaning, cultural ramifications, and design techniques incorporated into the Malaysia National Day logos are captured in this synthesis.

4.0 Finding

This paper summarises the visual content analysis of six Malaysian National Day logos representing key stages in the country's evolving visual identity from 1976 to 2020. The dual-layer coding technique was used to examine the formal design aspects and cultural meaning of each logo, showing how shifts in visual style link to broader sociopolitical trends, communication strategies, and public expectations. The results support the objective of creating a design-oriented analytical tool that integrates the structural and interpretive aspects of visual communication. Figure 3 presents a visual comparison of the selected Malaysia National Day logos across key evolutionary phases, enabling direct observation of formal design shifts discussed in this study. The side-by-side arrangement highlights changes in compositional structure, typographic emphasis, and symbolic representation, supporting the dual-layer visual content analysis by linking textual interpretation with visual evidence.



Fig. 3: Visual comparison of selected Malaysia National Day logos across evolutionary phases (1976–2020).

(Source: Government archives; researcher compilation)

The key findings from the analysis are as follows:

- i. 1976 – Complex-Simplified Form
The first logo is characterised by symmetry, serif text, and multiple national themes. It reflects the early nation-building priorities and emphasises institutional identity and unity.
- ii. 1986 – Geometric and Organised Design
By 1986, the design had become more geometric and organised, reflecting a modern culture that valued clarity and structured visual communication.
- iii. 1995 – Inclusion and Modern Minimalism
The 1995 logo introduced organic minimalism, rounded shapes, softer colours, and a simpler composition. This indicates an increasing influence of international design trends and a shift towards inclusivity in national symbolism.
- iv. 2006 – Politic-Slogan-Driven Design
The 2006 logo emphasised slogans, with strong typefaces and vivid colours that reinforced political discourse. Symbolic images were downplayed in favour of narrative reinforcement.
- v. 2012 – Controversy Issue-Public Criticism and Professional Standards
This logo faced public criticism due to inconsistent visual execution and lack of compositional coherence. It highlights the growing importance of professional design standards and the public's expectations for cultural credibility in national branding.
- vi. 2020– Achieve Perfection- Contemporary Design
The 2020 logo combines emotive iconography with contemporary vector shapes to express unity and resilience, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to these stage-specific findings, several broader observations can be made. Over time, there is a clear transition from elaborate decoration to sleek modern aesthetics, reflecting changes in both design trends and national communication strategies. The relative balance between political statements and design objectives has shifted across decades, indicating the dynamic role of national symbols in responding to sociopolitical contexts. Public opinion has become increasingly influential in shaping design choices, as seen in the reaction to the 2012 logo. Despite these changes, certain elements, such as colour and basic shapes, have remained consistent carriers of national identity. Collectively, these patterns demonstrate that Malaysia's National Day logos serve as dynamic cultural texts that not only communicate visual identity but also reflect evolving design principles, sociopolitical conditions, and national objectives.

5.0 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Malaysia's National Day logos evolve in response to shifting sociopolitical contexts, public expectations, and design priorities. Early logos emphasised formal structure, symmetry, and traditional symbolism to project authority and national unity during the post-independence period. This aligns with formalist design theory, where visual order and complexity are used to convey institutional stability.

As Malaysia progressed, later logos adopted simplified forms, modern typography, and inclusive visual language, reflecting principles of modernist and minimal design that prioritise clarity, accessibility, and emotional engagement. The slogan-centred designs of the mid-2000s illustrate how visual identity was strategically employed to reinforce political messaging, supporting the view that logos function as communicative tools rather than purely aesthetic artefacts.

The public criticism surrounding the 2012 logo highlights the growing role of audience perception in national branding, indicating that visual coherence and cultural sensitivity are critical to design acceptance. In contrast, the 2020 logo demonstrates how cohesive symbolism and contemporary visual grammar can effectively respond to collective experiences, particularly during national crises.

By triangulating visual evidence, contextual background, and interpretive analysis, this study reinforces the idea that national logos operate as layered cultural texts shaped by design logic, historical conditions, and public reception. The adapted Visual Content Analysis framework enables a clearer connection between formal design elements and socio-cultural meaning, strengthening its applicability for art and design research.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study examined how Malaysia's National Day logos construct national identity through a design-oriented adaptation of Rose's (2016) Visual Content Analysis, integrating formal, interpretive, and contextual perspectives. Analysis of six representative logos from 1976 to 2020 demonstrates how these visual artefacts evolve in response to political contexts, design trends, and public expectations, highlighting the value of systematic visual analysis in understanding national narratives. Beyond its empirical findings, this research contributes to sustainable art and design scholarship by proposing a transferable, design-oriented analytical framework. By treating national logos as evolving visual systems rather than isolated symbols, the study supports critical reflection on national design practices and visual identity formation.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on six logos limits historical breadth, while qualitative interpretation introduces subjectivity and reliance on visual and archival sources restricts insight into design intent. Future studies may address these limitations by expanding the dataset, incorporating interviews with designers or policymakers, and applying multi-researcher coding to enhance analytical reliability. To strengthen future research outcomes, comparative studies across different national or cultural contexts and longitudinal analysis over extended timeframes are recommended, as these approaches would deepen validation and understanding of visual continuity and transformation. In addition, integrating digital and computational techniques such as image recognition, colour frequency analysis, or pattern detection algorithms could complement visual content analysis by enabling more objective and large-scale examination of visual features.

Overall, this study demonstrates a clear methodological contribution by adapting Visual Content Analysis into a design-sensitive framework aligned with the expectations of social and behavioural design research.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to sustainable art and design research by proposing a design-oriented adaptation of Visual Content Analysis that integrates formal, interpretive, and contextual perspectives. By extending Rose's framework to address design-specific concerns, the study offers a replicable method for analysing national visual artefacts and examining the longitudinal evolution of visual identity in response to sociopolitical and cultural change.

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