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A Review of Malaysian Street Photography: Reflections on economic culture and visual identity

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Abstract
This study examines the relationship between Malaysia's economic culture and its visual identity as depicted through street photography. The study draws on interviews and a visual ethnographic collection from a still-active street photographer. It analyzes selected photographs of Malaysian urban settings to reveal how economic activities, cultural practices, and social interactions manifest visually. It emphasizes spontaneous urban scenes, particularly on weekends, when interactions between residents and migrant workers are most prominent. The study explores imagery from Malaysian festivals and different communities to identify shared themes and unique visual patterns. Findings demonstrate that street photography reflects Malaysia's socio-economic dynamics and shapes national identity and cultural discourse.

Keywords: Street photography, Visual identity, Culture, Economic-cultures, Community

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Introduction

This study examines how Malaysia's economic culture shapes and is reflected in its visual identity through street photography. It argues that the demand for foreign labourers is essential to Malaysia's economy and social development. By analyzing street photography from major Malaysian cities, the study reveals how the daily lives and cultural practices of local and foreign workers interconnect. The objective is to clarify how street photography documents shifts in the nation's economic health by highlighting the coexistence and cultural exchange between diverse communities of foreign workers and local residents in business hubs.

Photojournalistic studies visually depict the social interactions of foreign workers, significantly influencing Malaysia's economic identity and representing key cultural and visual narratives. Geise et al. (2021) explain that news images foster social engagement in political communication strategies and provide more comprehensive, nuanced information than text alone.

This visual investigation examines how locals and foreign workers appear and are represented in Malaysia's current economic landscape. It compares these findings with earlier portrayals. Previously, street photographs did not emphasize the barriers and challenges in showing foreign workers in economic scenes. Recently, changes in Malaysia's economy have drawn greater focus to foreign workers, who are now compelling subjects for street photography. By their visibility, foreign workers are identified by distinctive

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cultural styles, unique body language, and recognizable features. These photographs also show subtle but meaningful interactions among individuals of different backgrounds. Together, they reflect Malaysia's economic conditions and labour market dynamics.

Malaysia's bustling streets showcase remarkable diversity and vibrancy. This research conducts in-depth interviews and analyzes visual ethnography by the street photographer Wan Zuharuddin. He deliberately selects subjects from diverse urban settlements and documents daily routines in both public and private sectors. The study spotlights urban visual documentation to reveal various economic sectors within the community. The researcher observes that migrants attend weekend social and community activities organized by locals more frequently than locals do. Participants display distinguishing facial features and distinct dress styles.

Poudyal (2020) stated that street photography showcases various aspects of life and acts as a marker of diverse identities when archived. It creates the impression that viewers are physically present at the scene. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (July 2023), the estimated total number of migrants was about 5.5 million, or 8.9% of the population of 33.4 million. Most migrants come from Asian countries. They constitute approximately 15.3% of the workforce, contributing to the Malaysian economy while primarily working in low- and semi-skilled roles. Migrants also help the economy by paying into health programs and insurance for government social protection schemes (IOM UN Migration 2024). Street photography provides visual evidence that these foreign groups have formed families and built lasting communities in Malaysia. This influx of migrants has played a dominant role in the economy, especially in major cities.

2.0 Literature Review

Street photography is a genre that emphasizes aesthetic qualities for public viewing. It captures urban realities, embedding many stories and meanings. These images prompt viewers to consider what happens beyond the frame. Bordeniuk et al. (2021) argue that, unless a photographer immerses the audience in a cinematic portrayal of street life, images lack significance. Viewers may wonder about the stories, people, location, timing, frequency, reasons, and context behind the photos. However, these questions often remain unanswered. Street photographers rarely provide textual narratives, relying on the impact of the visual content. Photojournalism combines accurate information and storytelling through artistic and technical aesthetics, making content more engaging and creative (Lirishati Soethama & Komang Sumaryana, 2024). Street photographs on social media display public spaces with an aesthetic emphasis, inviting viewers to find deeper meaning. These images also subtly highlight themes about the country's economic situation. Olier and Spadavecchia (2024) note that visual media reflect migrant experiences through socioeconomic data, thereby linking to broader societal discussions. These images serve as historical records, showing economic changes over time (Edwards, 2021).

Several factors affect the visual impact of economic changes within a country, including population shifts. Malaysia was originally home to three main ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Now, it includes a growing number of foreign nationals seeking new lives and forming communities. Anderson (2020) notes the need for balanced immigration policies that consider both the demand for foreign workers and the challenges posed by undocumented labor. Street photographers investigate who, where, when, what, why, and how. Their work helps us understand culture, environment, and communication. These images give glimpses of reality, even if viewers sometimes make inaccurate assumptions. Complete narratives depend on the photographers. Kuo and Jiang (2021) stress that truth comes through images, emotions, and perspectives. This reflects urgent social and political shifts.

3.0 Methodology

This study examines the symbolic significance of visual elements in street photography, highlighting how local economic status is reflected in photographic identity. In this paper, researchers analyze recent trends in street photography to inform the study's direction and objectives and to highlight the frequency of specific features in related images, particularly faces and community activities. Several photographs of migrant workers engaged in socio-cultural activities in the community were collected through street photography and interviews with the photo owners to obtain reliable, verified information for the research. The selected street photography images were drawn from the photographers' collections shared on their social media accounts. The themes were analyzed and mapped to related literature, based on the latest publications indexed in Google Scholar, to elucidate the concepts, purposes, and significance of these street photography features. Olmo-Extremera et al. (2024) used interviews as instruments, incorporating visual features that transform abstract data into richer information, thereby strengthening the research process. This method aligns with the study's objective of clearly demonstrating, through visuals, the characteristics of migration into the country and the community's economic development. According to (Tanrikulu, 2020) trained laborers in contributing to the national economy through migration contribute positively to economic development with the existence of trained human resources working in unskilled job positions, showing that most of them work in areas where local residents do not want to work, where they can create additional jobs for local residents, depending on the increasing needs even though it leads to an increase in unemployment of the local community in the short term.

4.0 Street Photography Exhibit Visual Identity

Street photography is a distinct genre capturing images in public spaces, emphasizing symbolic and artistic elements over mere documentation. Street photographers convey deeper meanings through their work, employing artistic techniques to amplify visual impact across physical and digital platforms. These images engage audiences by facilitating information dissemination and knowledge sharing, allowing viewers to evaluate and interpret conveyed messages (García-Roa, 2024). Using human subjects in street photography highlights this study's goal of showcasing the country's economic landscape by depicting those present. Individual portrayals through

clothing, behaviors, and gestures effectively reflect citizens' cultural strength. Early street photography featured lively portraits and scenes that incorporated the surrounding environment, creating narratives that resembled stage plays, representing people's commercial value and evidencing their economic standing. Wallhead (2019) concluded from the Sydney Museum street photography exhibition that images captured from the 1930s to 1950s were intentionally composed for viewer appreciation. Selected subjects, particularly children and couples, highlighted themes of stability and family harmony, reflecting broader societal, cultural, and political dynamics across those decades.



Fig. 1: Bukit Bintang public cultural performance.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)



Fig. 2: September 2024, Maulidurasul celebration at Masjid Negara Kuala Lumpur.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

This study aims to highlight the visibility of foreign workers, particularly in public spaces on weekends and holidays, underscoring cultural diversity and distinct lifestyles relative to local communities. Comparative analysis of street photography from various Malaysian festivals identifies common patterns, distinguishing elements, and overarching themes that collectively reflect the nation's economic culture. The prominence of certain cultures within society is reflected in celebrations held in key urban areas, such as Petaling Street and Bukit Bintang, which regularly host cultural and religious events, particularly for communities such as the Chinese, who play dominant roles in the local economy. These visual narratives document how different ethnic groups contribute to and shape Malaysia's economic and cultural landscape.

The findings of this study not only shed light on the various aspects of Malaysia’s socioeconomic activities but also provide important insights into the role of visual representation in shaping national identity and cultural discourse. As is widely recognized, Malaysia is a developed nation with a diverse population comprising multiple ethnicities and religions. The celebrations of different beliefs are

respected by one another, fostering peaceful coexistence, which is likewise recognized by other groups within defined boundaries. For instance, foreign workers who share the same religious beliefs, such as Islam, also partake in these activities according to their faith's requirements, albeit in different ways.

Street photographers document diverse cultural celebrations, thereby raising awareness of the growing presence of foreign workers in Malaysia. These communities' bonds with locals, rooted in shared faith, transform spaces such as the National Mosque into vibrant gathering places for multicultural Muslim events. Locals and migrant families now celebrate festivals together openly and joyfully, reflecting integration and community cohesion.

4.1 Economic Activities, Cultural Practices, and Social Interactions Are Visually Interconnected with the People Surrounding

Street photographers prioritize self-expression and public reflection over profit, using photography as a form of commentary that captures both the harmony and the melancholy inherent in complex situations. Their primary objective is to document temporal changes and reveal economic shifts through environmental symbols and signs. Photographs from the same locations across different periods illustrate societal transformations, such as the transition of street vendors to permanent establishments, thereby highlighting economic evolution. These images also expose ongoing injustices, including persistent inflation and economic inequalities, creating narratives of contemporary times. Work begins as a hobby but evolves into a powerful platform for social commentary. As these visuals circulate, media outlets value them as competitive assets, appreciating their independent nature regardless of contributors' identities or backgrounds, making street photography an important tool for documenting and communicating societal change. (Mains, 2022).



(a) (b)

Fig. 3. (a) Rohingya community is conducting a sacrificial ritual in front of shop blocks; (b) Currently the ritual is performed properly in designated areas.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

Figs 3a and 3b show images of the Rohingya refugee community in Selayang in 2018 conducting their sacrificial ritual in a manner distinct from that of the local community. Previously, sacrificial practices occurred in less appropriate locations, like shop fronts, without considering other racial groups' sensitivities. Currently, the local Malay community conducts these rituals more systematically, in accordance with DBKL guidelines that require designated areas for such ceremonies. These cultural celebrations and rituals serve dual purposes: enhancing organizers' economic activities by attracting tourists and community members to commercial zones, thereby strengthening the local economy, and preserving cultural heritage. The festive atmosphere benefits nearby traders while exposing diverse ethnic groups to specific community traditions. This organized approach balances cultural preservation with economic development, creating opportunities for cross-cultural understanding and commercial growth within the area.



(a) (b)

Fig. 4. (a) The Chinese Opera in Jalan Panggung ; (b) Thaipusam by Indian communities in Batu Caves.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

Each culture, representing different ethnic groups, possesses unique characteristics. Understanding and distinguishing the identities of Malaysian and foreign workers is essential for recognising the contributions of various groups to the economy over time. If early visuals were captured in the same locations, they would clearly illustrate the evolving characteristics of both local and foreign workers,

reflecting their respective cultures in the job market. This raises important questions about why foreign workers are needed to fill unoccupied positions, particularly in major cities, and how their presence positively impacts the country's economic development during periods of recession and inflation.

4.2 Identity of People in Malaysia, Reflecting the Country's Economic Landscape Through the Nuances of Daily Life

To distinguish their work, street photographers must be discerning and selective, carefully choosing the most compelling shots before pressing the shutter. This selection process is essential for creating images that are both aesthetically pleasing and meaningful, focusing on people as subjects and their surroundings, thereby encouraging viewers to engage with the underlying message. The widespread sharing of these images keeps the spirit alive by awakening the inner self through their visual significance and meaning, even in monochromatic compositions. Each photograph invites viewers to explore and connect with the depicted scene, enabling them to fully experience and interpret its meaning (Szabłowska-Zaremba, 2021). This dynamic is evident in candid images captured throughout the city, particularly on weekends, highlighting a blend of residents and foreign migrants. However, these differences can be subtle, as individuals often wear clothing similar to that of locals outside working hours. Distinctions are typically drawn based on variations in skin tone and the facial features associated with different ethnic groups (Figs 4a and 4b). The exploration of the various layers contributing to Malaysia's diverse visual identity involves examining the nuances of daily life and cultural expressions depicted in a range of stylistic images, distinguished for their contemporary and future reference. Approaching street photography as a historical record raises concerns about its connection to modernism, which shapes the roles and movements of the individuals and witnesses present on the streets. These individuals act as representatives of the issues at hand, conveying a message to the future about what has transpired (Schwartz & Stephanie, 2021)



Fig. 5: Dec 2018, Foreign workers gathered in their community in front of a shop lot near Central Market.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

Street photography significantly differs from traditional press photography. Press photographers focus on capturing current news and events, whereas street photographers prioritize artistic expression, regardless of the time, more for historical purposes. The use of photographs as a historical archive not only highlights the subject and significance of the image but also requires photographers to possess a deep understanding of the context surrounding the moment of capture (de Rapper, G. 2022). For street photographers, the artistic approach takes precedence, with storytelling as a secondary concern. Their work is designed to engage viewers by offering aesthetic experiences that encourage repeated viewing and deeper exploration of underlying meanings. Ultimately, every photograph and visual expression serves as a means for citizens to convey a message while incorporating artistic elements into the presentation (Duhnkrack, J. 2020).

Consideration of various elements produces compelling images that reflect identity, the economic landscape, and cultural and artistic values. Individual identity is linked to the development environment, which encompasses a country's economic structure. Even seemingly simple scenes are carefully framed to capture every detail and provide info, often utilising technical skills to ensure nothing is overlooked from many angles. According to Eddie Tay (2024), observations and interpretations of aesthetic works do not solely originate from the creator; instead, they aim to provide the audience with an aesthetic experience through a phenomenological exploration of meaningful creative encounters.

4.3 Malaysia's Distinct Visual Identity in Most of the Style's Images

Despite the city's abundance of foreign workers and tourists, the ethics of taking each photo remain crucial. It's essential to respect a person's privacy and dignity, even in public spaces, as capturing images can subject them to prolonged scrutiny and exposure. Street photography often employs techniques that challenge traditional artistic norms and societal conventions. However, photographers

should approach their subjects with sensitivity, avoiding actions that could cause discomfort or embarrassment. Effective communication is crucial; photographers should seek consent when necessary while maintaining a respectful, nonconfrontational demeanor. Hadley (2022) emphasizes that ethical street photography prioritizes respect for the subject's autonomy. Ethical issues arise when negative perceptions of a subject's background, or their discomfort and anger, come into play, especially when they are photographed without permission, thereby creating ethical controversies. A responsible photographer upholds ethical standards by engaging with subjects and seeking their permission and consent to record and publish, rather than employing non-consensual surveillance methods.

Cultural differences shape how tourists, migrants, and locals perceive identity and photography. Western tourists typically embrace being photographed, often posing openly like celebrities, as seen in Magnum agency work. Public cultural activities, such as dancing, are welcomed and photographed with pride, reflecting customs that participants celebrate rather than hide, thereby demonstrating their cultural confidence and openness.



Fig. 6: The happiness of this homeless man makes a pose for his favorite street photographer who always gives him money to buy medicine for his skin disease.
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

In certain circumstances, even situations that may be deemed inappropriate in public view can be considered ethical when the subject willingly consents to being photographed. Street photography blends humor, information, juxtaposition, and art, aiming to offer a fresh perspective on the future significance of the images. These photographers need to craft compelling narratives and concepts that enhance the audience's understanding and appreciation of their work, including stories about foreign subjects and specific moments (Fig 6).

The situation depicted in Figure 7 illustrates the landscape in Kuala Lumpur before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The construction sector was primarily staffed by foreign nationals, as shown on the left. During the curfew, these workers continued to assert their identities, even using construction mannequins (Bollywood artists) and an individual wearing a mask, indicating disregard for the Malaysian government's curfew. However, in the post-pandemic period, the presence of foreigners has become increasingly dominant in certain areas. For example, in 2023 at the Selayang Market (Figure 8), buyers were primarily Myanmar citizens, and the small hawkers were also from this group. Their identity is evident through their use of Thanaka, a yellowish powder made from bark. Photography, in this context, functions as a public medium of viewing (similar to cinema) that conveys deeper meanings about life beyond what is immediately visible. By capturing a moment in time, the image invites viewers to examine it closely, fostering a connection to the documentary's purpose (Balčus, 2023).



(a) (b)

Fig. 7. (a) Before the pandemic (2018) ; (b) During the pandemic (2020).
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)



Fig. 8: Pasar Borong Selayang 2023
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

4.4 Malaysian Festivals to Identify Common Themes, Distinguishing Characteristics, and Overarching Patterns that Illustrate the Country's Economic Culture

Street photographers possess a profound understanding of the culture and dynamics of the communities they observe, even as uninvited witnesses. Through meticulous research and observation, they gain insights into ongoing rituals and social situations, indirectly studying the environments they capture. They are particularly attuned to the distinctions between immigrant and local communities, noting differences in language, communication methods, behavior, lifestyle, and attitudes. By immersing themselves in cultural events, street photographers learn about the rich diversity within these mixed communities. Photography that embodies contemporary art principles and conveys a compelling message reflects the efforts of a group dedicated to highlighting their cultural identity. This work presents them as resilient, aesthetic, and innovative representatives within the broader community action movement (Blair, 2023).

Most cultural performances, such as dragon and lion dances, Chinese opera, and various ethnic celebrations, are held publicly to showcase a community's strength (Fig 9). This emphasis indirectly highlights the ethnic majority that dominates a particular area as a hub for economic activity, while simultaneously celebrating the foreign community. The year-round celebrations of various ethnic groups in Malaysia reflect the country's economic landscape, characterized by vibrant events that attract participants from diverse local and international backgrounds. Photographic techniques are crafted to produce compelling and informative images, drawing inspiration from examples such as Magnum Photos in New York for many situations involving ethnic or economic culture. For instance, a photograph of a bustling egg market with visible price signs and vendors can reflect current economic conditions, highlighting the 5Ws and 1H (Who, what, When, Where, Why, and How) to provide a comprehensive view of the situation. The role of street photography in photojournalism should be enhanced by incorporating relevant values and fulfilling its social responsibilities, which involve reflecting the world's increasing chaos and interpreting it responsibly for the audience (Bellmer & Möller, 2023). The findings of this study have significant implications for local street photography practices, where street photographers should not only produce aesthetic value through clearer economic-narrative visuals but also use them as reference archive for economic and urban planners to prevent the disappearance of cultural character over time amid urbanization.



Fig. 9: Dragon dance performance by the Chinese culture near Jalan Ampang
(Source: Wan Zuharuddin, Street Photographer)

5.0 Conclusion

This study only focused on urban areas around Kuala Lumpur and nearby towns. The identified visual identities may not be representative of the economies of rural areas and small towns, which have distinct social dynamics. As this study uses qualitative visual analysis, visual interpretation is inherently subjective. Although street photographers do not profit directly from their work, their contributions carry significant messages through both content and historical value. Their images serve as informal archives that document and enrich the visual history of a place and its economic status, offering aesthetic and cultural insights. According to Brusius and Rico (2023), these images are not just a journey through time; they also represent the history of institutions that leave a legacy through artistic expertise, creating a valuable database. This effort helps preserve the interests of stakeholders from the original community and connects them to the narrative of cultural heritage. The diverse techniques and perspectives employed by street photographers enhance their ability to capture and convey engaging, meaningful content. Through their work, they explore cultural symbols and identities, revealing the vibrant tapestry of local and immigrant communities and their impact on the country's economy.

These photographs provide concrete evidence of societal changes over time, making them valuable records that extend beyond mere verbal accounts. Street photography is not just about capturing real images of subjects; it also serves to connect with the urban landscape as an environment. It acts as a social link, facilitating unexpected communication within the routines of daily life. The relationship between the photographer and the subject, within their shared surroundings, influences emotional engagement, shaped by the medium's defined proximity (Luvaas, 2021). It would be even more compelling if street photographers could visually narrate the lives and activities of foreign workers within the communities they help build, showcasing the cultures of those who migrate in search of livelihoods.

Over time, the number of immigrants in the area has steadily increased, indicating that the country needs their labor, particularly for jobs many local citizens are unwilling to undertake. Employers often hire foreign workers as a cost-effective means of meeting labor demands that local workers cannot meet, particularly in a declining economy. While statistics indicate an increase in the number of foreigners, street photography captures this trend, illustrating a growing diversity among them across age groups. This evidence indicates that the community has expanded over an extended period, establishing families and reproducing within their ranks. The study's findings may influence research by underrepresenting these out-migrating people and by clearly demonstrating their economic engagement with the environment, indicating their engagement with the local community, which may be misleading about the identity of the environment in Malaysia. Future research could also inform practice, policy, and understanding of street photography and the social issues arising from the presence of these migrant communities by incorporating more technical data collection techniques (such as purposive sampling and the use of NVivo software) that focus on the impact of digitalization on visual identity and the potential of street photography as an advocacy tool in urban economic reflections.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This study reveals how street photography reflects the country's socio-economic dynamics and contributes to the formation of national identity and cultural discourse through visual and narrative documentation.

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