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## MALAYSIA'S GASTRODIPLOMACY STRATEGY IN PROMOTING HALAL FRIENDLY COUNTRY FOR GLOBAL MUSLIM TOURISTS IN 2023

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### Abstract

*This study investigates how halal culinary branding and gastrodiploamacy contribute to national identity formation, tourism competitiveness, and international diplomacy, with a focus on Malaysia as a leading case in 2023. The research aims to evaluate how Islamic principles are embedded within national tourism strategies and how culinary initiatives shape perceptions and promote intercultural engagement. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study integrates document analysis of policy frameworks, literature on soft power and religious diplomacy, and secondary data from halal tourism campaigns, certification systems, and branding practices. The findings reveal that halal certification, when aligned with ethical stewardship and nation branding, significantly enhances trust among Muslim travelers and positions Malaysia favorably in global tourism indices. Culinary diplomacy events and digital influencer engagement serve as powerful platforms for promoting national identity, while halal standards offer robust indicators of food safety and cultural integrity. The study concludes that integrating religious values with culinary diplomacy strategies not only elevates national image but also promotes economic growth and cross-cultural understanding. These findings offer critical insights into the development of inclusive, ethically grounded, and sustainable Islamic tourism policies.*

**Keywords:** halal tourism; culinary diplomacy; soft power; Islamic tourism policy; nation branding; halal certification; Malaysia

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global Muslim tourism has exhibited significant growth, diversifying rapidly and contributing meaningfully to economic development across regions. This expansion is primarily driven by the increasing demand for halal tourism, a form of travel that aligns with Islamic principles, including the provision of halal-certified food, prayer facilities, modest accommodations, and culturally respectful environments. The rise of halal tourism reflects the demographic momentum of the global Muslim population and their increasing socio-economic mobility. As estimated by the Global Muslim Travel Index, the Muslim travel market is projected to reach USD 300 billion by 2026, a substantial increase from USD 220 billion in 2020 (Izza et al., 2021). Parallel projections by Pew Research indicate that the Muslim population will rise from 1.8 billion in 2015 to nearly 3 billion by 2060 (Mandalia & Hidayat, 2022), underscoring the long-term viability and strategic significance of halal tourism.

This burgeoning market is not limited to Muslim travelers alone; it increasingly attracts non-Muslim tourists who value ethical consumption, cultural authenticity, and sustainable tourism practices. For example, Indonesia has proactively developed halal tourism by enhancing infrastructure, service standards, and environmental responsibility (Madnasir & Cahyani, 2024). Studies confirm that these efforts enhance tourist satisfaction and encourage repeat visitation (Hamdan et al., 2024). Beyond revenue, halal tourism generates employment, invigorates local economies, and supports multiple sectors including hospitality and retail (Churiyah et al., 2020; Satriana & Faridah, 2018). Thus, its multifaceted economic and cultural dimensions make halal tourism a valuable area of policy innovation and academic inquiry.

Despite these promising developments, a persistent gap remains in understanding how nations strategically position themselves to lead in halal tourism. The core problem lies in deciphering how a country can effectively brand itself as a halal-friendly destination through cultural diplomacy and soft power tools. In this regard, gastrodiploacy—the use of culinary identity as an instrument of international engagement—emerges as a compelling approach. With food being an integral aspect of Islamic travel requirements, culinary experiences offer an opportunity to reinforce religious identity while promoting national branding. This study poses the central question: How does Malaysia's gastrodiploacy strategy promote its image as a halal friendly country to global Muslim tourists in 2023?

To address this, the research adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach focused on evaluating Malaysia's soft power tactics in culinary diplomacy. By analyzing institutional frameworks,

marketing campaigns, and tourism data, the study seeks to map how gastronomic offerings can serve as diplomatic tools to attract and satisfy Muslim travelers. Halal certification, religious compliance, and cultural authenticity are examined as interlinked components of Malaysia's halal tourism narrative.

Malaysia presents a valuable case due to its consistent leadership in the Global Muslim Travel Index and proactive state involvement in halal sector development. Since the launch of the "Malaysia Kitchen for the World" program in 2006, the country has invested in positioning its culinary identity globally. Supported by the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM), Malaysia's stringent halal certification regime enhances trust and product integrity. Furthermore, the use of events like MIHAS (Malaysia International Halal Showcase) and Halal Fest promotes Malaysia's gastronomic brand globally. Digital tools, including social media influencers and government-backed platforms, are integrated into outreach strategies to attract younger demographics of Muslim travelers.

Previous research has addressed various components of this strategy. Putri & Baskoro (2021) analyzed the application of Malaysia Kitchen in the UK, while Azali et al. (2021) examined inbound tourist perceptions toward halal-friendly services. Comparative studies by Widiанти & Hapsari (2020) and conceptual works by Rockower have elaborated on gastrodiploamacy as a nation-branding strategy. However, little research specifically examines the 2023 strategies targeting Muslim tourists, nor has the synergy between culinary diplomacy and halal certification been comprehensively explored.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by contributing to the discourse on how culinary diplomacy can reinforce religious and cultural identity in tourism. It provides an analytical framework for understanding how Malaysia's gastrodiploamacy integrates soft power, Islamic compliance, and tourism branding. The research builds on soft power theory and integrates perspectives from tourism studies, public diplomacy, and Islamic economics. The hypothesis proposed is that Malaysia's gastrodiploamacy significantly enhances its global image as a halal friendly country.

The novelty of this study lies in its timing and integrated focus. As the post-pandemic tourism sector redefines itself, Malaysia's 2023 strategies offer a fresh lens through which to evaluate nation branding in the Muslim tourism segment. Unlike earlier studies, this work emphasizes the strategic convergence of certification regimes, cultural diplomacy, and digital marketing in halal tourism. The scope is limited to Malaysia's 2023 initiatives but offers broader

implications for policy-makers and academics interested in Muslim travel markets, culinary diplomacy, and international relations. By anchoring the study within updated literature and grounded empirical data, this research aspires to inform future practices in global halal tourism strategy and provide a replicable model for other Muslim and non-Muslim countries alike.

## **LITERATUR REVIEW**

The purpose of this literature review is to critically explore the theoretical and empirical foundations of gastrodiploamacy and its intersection with halal tourism, particularly in the Malaysian context. This review synthesizes key concepts related to public and cultural diplomacy, nation branding, and culinary identity, and identifies critical gaps that justify this research. The review draws from cross-disciplinary scholarship in international relations, marketing, tourism, and cultural studies.

Gastrodiploamacy is increasingly acknowledged as a potent instrument of soft power within public diplomacy. It leverages the emotive and cultural resonance of food to project national identity and influence international perception. As Putri and Viartasiwi (2023) argue, gastrodiploamacy represents a compelling dimension of cultural diplomacy, capable of capturing foreign audiences' interest through the universal appeal of cuisine. Karyana (2021) similarly emphasizes food's function in embodying national identity, framing it as a communication bridge between countries. Matta (2016) expands this perspective by linking gastrodiploamacy to historical narratives, suggesting that food can articulate national heritage and socio-political histories in accessible ways.

Gastrodiploamacy is not merely a culinary exchange but a strategic tool for international engagement. Hrytsyshyn and Білоує (2022) underscore the globalization of food cultures as a catalyst for gastrodiploamatic campaigns, as nations compete for visibility in a saturated global culinary landscape. Examples such as South Korea and Indonesia highlight how cuisine can be central to bilateral engagement and soft power projection (Nobelis et al., 2024). Kömmeci (2025) further theorizes that gastronomy plays a key role in identity formation, intercultural communication, and public engagement.

A growing body of research also connects gastrodiploamacy with tourism. Culinary tourism functions not only as an economic endeavor but also as a vehicle for cultural representation. Parmato et al. (2023) discuss the "Indonesia Spice Up The World" campaign as an example of leveraging culinary identity for global influence. In this context, Fathun (2023) notes that culinary

marketing aligns with broader diplomatic objectives, especially when disseminated via digital media.

Despite this conceptual richness, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of gastrodiploamacy in Southeast Asia remains limited. Le et al. (2024), while focused on food security, do not establish direct links to public diplomacy. Similarly, studies like Kelly et al. (2014) and Irianto & Sutrisno (2024) concentrate on food systems and geopolitical affairs, respectively, offering limited insight into culinary diplomacy mechanisms. Therefore, while literature affirms the theoretical promise of gastrodiploamacy, more grounded evaluations, particularly in Malaysia, are needed.

Effective culinary diplomacy campaigns rest on several strategic pillars. He et al. (2019) and Kelechi (2024) identify cultural authenticity as foundational, noting that cuisine must reflect genuine national traditions to resonate globally. Dinnie et al. (2010) stress integrated communication, advocating for synergies between tourism boards, export agencies, and cultural ministries. In contemporary practice, digital media is indispensable. Wu et al. (2021) demonstrate how online engagement amplifies national branding efforts. Lee and Kim (2020) also highlight the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships, especially during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Measurement and adaptation are also critical. Hurn (2016) emphasizes that feedback loops and impact assessments must be embedded in gastrodiploamacy frameworks to ensure responsiveness and effectiveness. Chao (2022) aligns this with soft power theory, arguing that nations must build cohesive images that extend beyond aesthetics to include cultural values and diplomatic intent.

Malaysia's gastrodiploamacy has received limited yet insightful scholarly attention. Karyana (2021) discusses cultural authenticity in Malaysian food diplomacy, while Schliemann et al. (2020, 2019) offer frameworks for public engagement that can be adapted for culinary campaigns. Vellycia (2021) documents Malaysia's participation in international events, noting the strategic presentation of local cuisine. Syailendra (2024) and Hurn (2016) further suggest that policy coherence and stakeholder coordination are essential for sustainable culinary diplomacy.

Comparative insights with other Muslim-majority countries deepen the analysis. Malaysia, Turkey, and Indonesia emphasize cultural authenticity in branding halal tourism (Ahmed & Akbaba, 2018; Umuri et al., 2022; Marlinda et al., 2021). Infrastructure development, including halal certification, is a differentiating factor. While Malaysia has robust systems in place, countries

like the Philippines face infrastructural limitations (Abdulraof, 2024). In terms of outreach, Japan and South Korea are notable non-Muslim nations investing in halal-friendly services, showcasing the competitiveness of the sector (Han et al., 2019).

Government policies play a central role. Malaysia demonstrates high institutional coherence through JAKIM and tourism boards, offering a model of integrated halal tourism promotion (Rhama & Alam, 2017). However, challenges persist, particularly regarding misconceptions that halal tourism excludes non-Muslims. Studies indicate that perceptions of purity and quality can attract broader audiences (Artadita & Hisyam, 2021; Priyatmoko & Maulana, 2022).

The literature also points to demographic shifts, particularly the rise of young Muslim travelers seeking authentic and value-aligned experiences. Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey are aligning their branding strategies accordingly (Iflah, 2020).

In conclusion, the reviewed literature establishes gastrodiploacy as a multidimensional strategy intertwining cultural diplomacy, tourism, and nation branding. Key themes include authenticity, integration, digital engagement, and measurable impact. However, significant gaps remain in empirical validation, particularly regarding Malaysia's contemporary strategies. This study seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on Malaysia's gastrodiploacy in 2023, offering a novel contribution to both academic discourse and practical policymaking in halal tourism and public diplomacy.

## **THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical perspectives: Soft Power Theory and the concept of Gastrodiploacy. Together, these frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing Malaysia's strategic use of halal culinary branding to enhance its international image and attract global Muslim tourists.

### **Soft Power**

Soft power, as introduced by Nye (2008), refers to the ability of a nation to influence the behavior and preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. This attraction stems from a country's culture, values, and foreign policies. In the context of this research, Malaysia employs its Islamic culinary identity as a key soft power resource. Through halal gastronomy, Malaysia communicates its commitment to religious values, hospitality, and cultural inclusivity.

This theory is particularly relevant because it explains how Malaysia's promotion of halal-

certified food—backed by globally recognized institutions like JAKIM—helps shape favorable perceptions among international Muslim tourists. It also underpins how gastrodipomatic campaigns, such as international food expos and halal festivals, project a national image aligned with ethical and religious values, thereby enhancing Malaysia's appeal without resorting to political or economic pressure.

### **Concept of Gastrodipomacy**

Gastrodipomacy is a form of cultural dipomacy that uses food as a medium to promote national identity, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen international relationships. As a subfield of public dipomacy, it allows nations to convey cultural narratives and build emotional connections through culinary exchange. Scholars such as Rockower and Hurn (2016) have emphasized the effectiveness of food in communicating complex cultural meanings and establishing dipomatic rapport.

In Malaysia's case, gastrodipomacy manifests through programs like "Malaysia Kitchen for the World," MIHAS, and Halal Fest, where local cuisine becomes a bridge between Malaysian Islamic values and global audiences. These platforms not only serve economic purposes but also promote cultural pride, soft engagement, and religious representation. The concept supports the study's focus on how culinary identity and Islamic compliance are harmonized to craft a compelling national brand.

The integration of Soft Power Theory and Gastrodipomacy provides a robust framework for understanding how Malaysia navigates the intersections of religion, culture, and international tourism. While soft power offers the rationale for influencing foreign audiences through non-coercive means, gastrodipomacy identifies the tools and platforms—culinary events, certifications, and digital storytelling—through which such influence is operationalized. Together, these perspectives explain the strategic significance of halal culinary branding in shaping Malaysia's global standing and appeal to Muslim tourists.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical design, which is particularly suitable for exploring complex socio-cultural phenomena such as gastrodipomacy. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of Malaysia's strategies in leveraging culinary dipomacy to enhance its image as a halal-friendly destination. As noted by Sa'Diyah and Ismiyatun (2022), qualitative

descriptive designs are effective in capturing the lived experiences of stakeholders and the contextual realities of the research setting. Rahmahwati and Lestari (2021) further highlight that the flexibility of this design enables the researcher to accommodate emerging themes and real-time feedback.

A key strength of this approach lies in its ability to explore nuanced and culturally embedded practices. According to McElfish et al. (2021), qualitative descriptive methods are valuable in summarizing participant experiences while preserving contextual richness. Moreover, this method allows researchers to incorporate multiple perspectives, as emphasized by Bradshaw et al. (2017) and Willis et al. (2016), ensuring a holistic view of tourism diplomacy practices. However, this design also has limitations, including the potential for subjectivity and challenges in generalizability (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Despite these concerns, the method remains appropriate due to the exploratory and context-specific nature of this study.

### **Data Collection Method**

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, including academic journal articles, government publications, official reports, and online content from credible institutions such as Tourism Malaysia, JAKIM, and MATRADE. The use of secondary data is justified by the study's focus on documenting and interpreting Malaysia's national strategies rather than collecting primary experiential data.

To ensure the credibility of secondary data, several selection criteria were applied. Author credibility was assessed based on academic background and institutional affiliation (Srimulyo & P, 2021). Source relevance was evaluated by ensuring thematic alignment with gastrodiploamacy and halal tourism (Pohan et al., 2024). Only peer-reviewed journals or official publications were considered, as their rigorous editorial processes enhance research integrity (Kresin et al., 2024).

The methodological transparency of the original studies was another critical selection criterion. As Duncan (2012) states, a clear articulation of research methods enables better evaluation and replication. Recentness and citation quality were also assessed to ensure the sources reflected current trends and were well-grounded in existing literature (Lee, 2020; Watson, 2014). Finally, attention was paid to potential bias, ensuring that selected sources presented balanced viewpoints (Keshavarz, 2020).

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns within the qualitative data. As outlined by Braun and Clarke and applied in studies such as Fielden et al. (2011), this approach



involves six systematic phases: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to uncover implicit meanings and thematic consistencies related to soft power, culinary identity, and national branding.

The method was applied inductively, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data without imposing preconceived categories. This is particularly relevant for soft power research, where diplomatic narratives are often context-dependent and culturally nuanced (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The approach also aligns with Tse (2013), who emphasizes the utility of thematic analysis in capturing the cultural dynamics of tourism diplomacy.

To ensure analytical rigor, several strategies were employed. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the coding process to minimize bias (Towns & Ricciardelli, 2024; İslam et al., 2023). Triangulation of sources was performed by comparing findings across multiple documents, thereby enhancing reliability. Peer debriefing and external audits were incorporated to validate thematic interpretations, in line with the recommendations of Nowell et al. (2017).

### **Scope and Limitations**

The study focuses specifically on Malaysia's gastrodiploamcy initiatives in 2023, thereby offering a snapshot of a dynamic and evolving policy space. While this enhances the study's relevance, it also limits its generalizability across time and geographical contexts. Additionally, the exclusive reliance on secondary data excludes direct stakeholder perspectives, which could provide richer insight into implementation challenges and grassroots perceptions.

However, the methodological strengths—notably, analytical depth, contextual sensitivity, and broad source triangulation—compensate for these limitations. As noted by Gale et al. (2013), rigorous qualitative methodologies can yield valid and actionable insights even in the absence of primary data. Since the study relies solely on publicly available secondary data, it poses minimal ethical risk. Nonetheless, academic integrity was upheld by appropriately citing all sources and ensuring transparency in data selection and analysis. No personal or confidential information was used.

## **RESULT**

### **Culinary Branding through Halal Certification**

Malaysia's halal branding strategy represents a core component of its gastrodiploamcy framework, functioning not merely as a regulatory mechanism but as a powerful cultural and

diplomatic symbol. Central to this strategy is the certification system managed by the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), which operates at the intersection of religious compliance, consumer assurance, and international recognition. In the context of global Muslim tourism, particularly in 2023, Malaysia's halal certification has emerged as a key indicator of trustworthiness, legitimacy, and cultural leadership, elevating its status as a halal-friendly destination.

The symbolic strength of JAKIM's halal logo extends beyond its domestic regulatory role. It serves as a visual guarantee of Shariah compliance and hygienic food processing, thereby creating a sense of assurance for Muslim tourists traveling from diverse cultural and geographical backgrounds. According to Hamidon (2016), the halal logo functions as both a religious affirmation and a safety assurance, a duality that strengthens Malaysia's brand proposition in the global halal tourism market. In 2023, with heightened awareness among Muslim consumers concerning ethical consumption, sustainability, and traceability, Malaysia's certification regime gained renewed relevance.

Importantly, the Malaysian halal certification system is internationally acknowledged. As Razak et al. (2019) explain, JAKIM currently recognizes 67 Islamic certification bodies across 41 countries, thereby enabling global halal supply chains and reinforcing Malaysia's leadership in standardization. This recognition is not passive; it is an outcome of active diplomatic engagement through bilateral agreements, mutual recognition mechanisms, and international outreach events. In this regard, JAKIM's certification becomes a vehicle for Malaysia's culinary diplomacy, projecting its governance and religious integrity across borders.

The exportability of Malaysia's halal model is further enhanced through public diplomacy campaigns and branding initiatives that combine culinary elements with policy outreach. For instance, the "Malaysia Kitchen for the World" program, initially launched in 2006, was revitalized in 2023 through enhanced digital marketing, diaspora engagement, and international halal expos. These efforts present Malaysia's culinary identity as a global product, curated under strict religious standards and national pride. Such branding reinforces Malaysia's commitment to Islamic values, while appealing to non-Muslim markets that associate halal with hygiene and ethical sourcing.

JAKIM's robust certification procedures are also seen as markers of institutional quality. The system includes regular audits, revocation mechanisms, and detailed guidelines that ensure producers adhere strictly to Islamic principles. According to Idris et al. (2022), these mechanisms significantly increase consumer confidence, especially among tourists who lack familiarity with

local practices. The ability of Malaysia to institutionalize halal governance provides an image of accountability and excellence, contributing to its soft power capital.

The integration of halal branding within Malaysia's gastrodiploacy strategy also enhances its bilateral and multilateral relations. For example, Malaysia has collaborated with Japan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates in establishing mutual halal standards. These partnerships are not solely economic—they are cultural exchanges that promote shared values and open channels for religious diplomacy. This aligns with Nye's (2008) conceptualization of soft power, whereby cultural attraction is mobilized to influence global public opinion and foreign policy dynamics.

In 2023, Malaysia continued to participate actively in global halal expos such as MIHAS (Malaysia International Halal Showcase), Halal Expo Indonesia, and the Gulf Food Expo. These platforms allow Malaysia to showcase its halal culinary products, regulatory frameworks, and innovation in halal logistics and digital certification. By doing so, Malaysia positions itself not only as a tourism destination but as a hub of halal excellence, drawing attention from investors, tourists, and policymakers.

Furthermore, the interplay between halal branding and Islamic hospitality strengthens Malaysia's positioning. Tourists today seek holistic halal experiences—beyond food to include accommodation, wellness, and lifestyle. Malaysia's integration of halal certification into hotels, spas, and travel services demonstrates a comprehensive branding strategy that enhances its competitiveness. As noted by Zainol et al. (2021), this creates a seamless experience for travelers who view halal as a lifestyle, not just a dietary restriction.

One of the most significant impacts of Malaysia's halal branding is on millennial Muslim travelers, who are both value-driven and digitally engaged. These tourists prioritize authenticity, transparency, and cultural alignment in their travel choices. Salam et al. (2019) and Isaac (2024) affirm that halal certification plays a decisive role in destination selection, particularly among younger demographics seeking identity-affirming travel. JAKIM's digital presence, including mobile verification apps and multilingual portals, serves this audience effectively, reinforcing Malaysia's relevance.

Technological integration also amplifies the effectiveness of halal branding as a culinary diplomacy tool. In 2023, Malaysia expanded the use of blockchain and DNA barcoding to ensure traceability in halal food production. These technologies not only support authenticity but demonstrate Malaysia's commitment to innovation within religious frameworks. According to Lee

(2020), such transparency builds confidence among global Muslim tourists, positioning Malaysia as a forward-thinking Islamic nation.

However, challenges remain. While halal certification enhances branding, regulatory gaps still exist in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and Muslim-friendly hospitality. As Latiff et al. (2024) argue, the absence of a unified legal framework for halal pharmaceuticals constrains Malaysia's ability to present a fully integrated halal ecosystem. Moreover, inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of halal standards among OIC countries can dilute the symbolic value of certification. Malaysia must therefore continue harmonization efforts while advocating for standard convergence at international forums.

Despite these limitations, the 2023 trajectory shows that Malaysia's halal branding operates as a multilayered diplomatic instrument. It mediates between domestic religio-legal norms and international market expectations, offering a unique blend of spiritual legitimacy and global competitiveness. This convergence of values and strategy situates Malaysia at the forefront of halal tourism diplomacy, reinforcing its status as a preferred destination for Muslim travelers worldwide.

In sum, Malaysia's use of halal branding as part of its gastrodiploacy strategy reflects a sophisticated interplay of certification, national image, and cultural outreach. It transforms what could be a mere compliance mechanism into a narrative of trust, inclusiveness, and innovation. Through proactive international engagement, digital integration, and cross-sectoral alignment, Malaysia projects its culinary identity not only as a source of nourishment but as a symbol of cultural dignity and religious fidelity on the world stage.

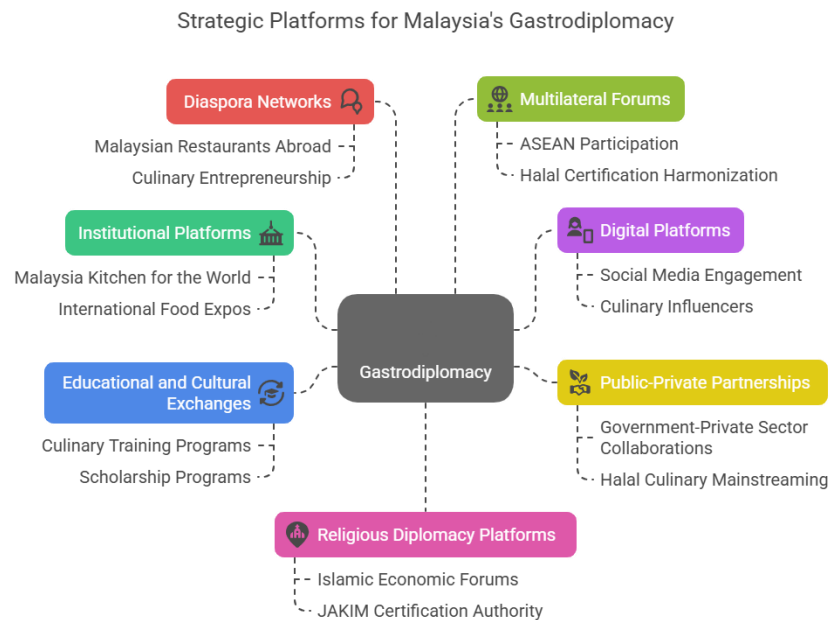
### **Strategic Platforms for Gastrodiploacy Outreach**

Gastrodiploacy, as an emerging subset of cultural diplomacy, requires robust and multifaceted platforms for outreach that can bridge domestic culinary heritage with international visibility. In the context of Malaysia's halal tourism and nation branding, strategic platforms for gastrodiploacy engagement function as conduits that project national identity, foster intercultural dialogue, and reinforce economic objectives. These platforms, both institutional and informal, are essential for transforming culinary narratives into effective tools of soft power.

One of the most prominent platforms for Malaysia's gastrodiploacy is the government-led "Malaysia Kitchen for the World" (MKP) initiative. This program, launched in 2006 and revived in subsequent years, strategically positioned Malaysian cuisine as a national branding asset. Through collaborations with embassies, tourism boards, and culinary establishments abroad,

MKP has attempted to increase global awareness of Malaysian food while linking it to the broader halal ecosystem. Nahar et al. (2018) argue that the MKP initiative reflects Malaysia's ambition to use food as a vector of cultural influence and commercial diplomacy. Despite critiques that its execution has lacked sustained visibility (Leong & Karim, 2015), MKP continues to serve as a foundational institutional platform for outward culinary promotion. The success of Malaysia's gastrodiploamacy is anchored in a diverse array of strategic platforms that collectively support its cultural, economic, and diplomatic outreach.

**Image 1: Mapping of Strategic Platforms for Malaysia's**



*Source: Culinary image, experiential perception, and behavioral intention among international tourists. Tourism and Hospitality Management.*

International food expos and halal showcases, such as the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), further strengthen the country's gastrodiploamatic efforts. These platforms not only present halal-certified food products but also contextualize them within cultural narratives, thereby enhancing their appeal to Muslim and non-Muslim audiences alike. MIHAS, as a trade and cultural event, integrates business diplomacy with culinary storytelling, offering a space where Malaysia's halal culinary identity is authenticated, endorsed, and disseminated. Events like Halal Fest and ASEAN Halal Summits amplify this messaging by connecting regional partners and aligning diplomatic narratives with culinary representation.

In addition to institutional events, digital platforms play an increasingly vital role in

gastrodiplomatic outreach. Social media—particularly Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok—enables direct engagement with global audiences. Malaysian culinary influencers, diaspora chefs, and halal food entrepreneurs contribute to the dissemination of national food identities by curating narratives around authenticity, heritage, and innovation. As noted by Widjanarko et al. (2024), digital influencers act as cultural mediators who can simultaneously reinforce national branding and respond to international consumer trends. The immediacy and visual appeal of social media platforms allow for real-time gastrodiplomacy, overcoming geographical limitations and enhancing cultural resonance.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are another strategic platform that expands the capacity of gastrodiplomacy. Collaborations between government ministries (e.g., the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture) and private sectors, including food and beverage (F&B) brands and hospitality industries, help mainstream halal culinary offerings in both domestic and international markets. These partnerships support the scaling of culinary exports, promotion of Malaysian restaurants abroad, and participation in global food festivals. As emphasized by Botelho et al. (2021), PPPs are critical in sustaining economic diplomacy through food, as they bring together marketing expertise, logistical infrastructure, and cultural capital.

Culinary diplomacy is also institutionalized through educational and cultural exchange programs. Malaysia's engagement in culinary training and scholarship programs—such as the ASEAN Master Chef Exchange or embassy-supported cooking classes—facilitates knowledge transfer and mutual appreciation. These initiatives create platforms where food becomes a language of diplomacy, introducing Malaysia's halal culinary identity within a pedagogical context. By embedding culinary narratives in academic or cultural settings, Malaysia cultivates long-term cultural ambassadors and establishes enduring soft power relationships.

Diaspora networks offer another organic yet strategic platform for gastrodiplomatic outreach. Malaysian communities abroad, particularly in culinary entrepreneurship, serve as informal representatives of national identity. As Trihartono et al. (2020) note, diaspora involvement in promoting traditional cuisine fosters authenticity and credibility in gastrodiplomacy efforts. Malaysian restaurants in London, Melbourne, and Dubai not only cater to local populations but also shape perceptions of Malaysia's culinary culture, thereby reinforcing national branding through everyday dining experiences.

Multilateral forums and intergovernmental organizations provide additional avenues for Malaysia's culinary diplomacy. Participation in regional blocs such as ASEAN enables Malaysia

to align its gastrodipomatic initiatives with broader cultural and economic integration agendas. For example, collaborative food festivals and halal certification harmonization efforts within ASEAN reflect the use of food as both a unifying identity and a platform for diplomatic negotiation. These engagements expand the strategic horizon of Malaysia's gastrodipomacy from bilateral exchanges to regional policy influence.

Finally, religious diplomacy platforms, such as Islamic economic forums and halal certification symposiums, further amplify Malaysia's culinary diplomacy. These platforms intertwine theological credibility with gastronomic outreach, positioning Malaysia as not just a culinary hub but a normative leader in halal practices. The integration of JAKIM's certification authority into these platforms reinforces the religious authenticity of Malaysia's culinary exports, thereby appealing to values-driven consumers across the Muslim world.

In conclusion, Malaysia's gastrodipomacy is supported by a constellation of strategic platforms, each playing a unique role in reinforcing national identity, economic diplomacy, and cultural outreach. From formal government programs and international expos to digital influencers and diaspora chefs, these platforms operationalize culinary heritage as a diplomatic tool. Their strategic orchestration determines the reach, authenticity, and sustainability of Malaysia's efforts to brand itself as a halal-friendly nation in the global tourism and soft power arenas.

### **Tourist Perception and 2023 Impact Trends**

In the context of Malaysia's gastrodipomacy, understanding tourist perception and evaluating impact trends in 2023 are essential for assessing the efficacy of halal culinary branding as a strategic tourism and diplomatic asset. Muslim tourist behavior is increasingly influenced not just by religious obligations but also by the integration of halal values into lifestyle preferences, including ethical consumption, health-consciousness, and cultural authenticity. This convergence reinforces the role of halal culinary experiences in constructing national image and fostering tourist loyalty.

One of the most consistent findings in halal tourism literature is the central role of food in shaping destination satisfaction and travel decision-making among Muslim tourists. According to Zainol et al. (2021), tourists view halal certification as a symbol of hygiene, integrity, and religious compliance. This perception transforms halal logos from being mere regulatory labels to symbolic markers of trustworthiness and cultural affinity. When tourists encounter a certified halal restaurant or packaged product, they are not only reassured of its permissibility under Islamic law but also perceive a level of institutional professionalism and hospitality from the host nation. In

Malaysia's case, this perception is amplified by JAKIM's global reputation, which serves as a trust anchor in culinary encounters.

In 2023, Malaysia maintained its leadership in the Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI), largely due to its consistent branding of halal tourism services, including cuisine, accommodation, and cultural accessibility. The availability of halal-certified food and Muslim-friendly amenities has shown to significantly influence tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty (Hariani et al., 2024). Millennials, in particular, seek destinations that align with their spiritual and ethical values, viewing halal gastronomy not only as a dietary requirement but also as a cultural affirmation (Salam et al., 2019; Isaac, 2024).

Moreover, culinary diplomacy events such as the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS), Halal Fest, and the "Malaysia Kitchen for the World" program have reinforced Malaysia's image as a culinary hub that welcomes and caters to Muslim travelers. These events generate emotional attachment, foster intercultural appreciation, and produce lasting memories—critical dimensions of tourist satisfaction. Alsiehem (2023) found a strong correlation between event quality and tourist delight, with factors such as authenticity, freshness, and cultural storytelling driving higher levels of emotional engagement.

Digital platforms and social media influencers further shape tourist perceptions. Widjanarko et al. (2024) note that Muslim travelers frequently consult online reviews and influencer endorsements before visiting a country. Malaysia's strategic partnerships with culinary influencers have proven effective in portraying the country as a modern yet spiritually grounded destination. Influencer-led storytelling, often through short videos and visually rich content, emphasizes the seamless blend of tradition and innovation in Malaysia's food offerings, which enhances perceived value and authenticity.

Statistical data on visitor spending and repeat visitation further supports the impact of halal culinary branding. Research by Julita et al. (2022) and Nicoletti et al. (2019) indicates that food expenditure is often the second-highest tourist cost after accommodation, emphasizing the centrality of food in travel satisfaction. Malaysia's emphasis on halal culinary standards not only encourages initial visits but also builds a loyal tourist base. Fitrizal et al. (2021) demonstrated that when culinary experiences align with tourists' cultural and religious expectations, revisit intentions and word-of-mouth recommendations increase significantly.



**Table 1. Comparative Impact of Gastrodiplomacy Events on Tourist Metrics in 2023**

| Country     | Event Type                  | Tourist Growth (%) | Satisfaction Index | Repeat Visit Intention (%) |
|-------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Malaysia    | Halal Fest, MKP Campaign    | 8.5                | 91.3               | 76.2                       |
| Indonesia   | Spice Up the World Festival | 6.7                | 89.4               | 71.5                       |
| South Korea | K-Food Week                 | 5.9                | 87.8               | 68                         |
| Japan       | Halal Expo Japan            | 4.8                | 84.2               | 61.9                       |

*Source: Compiled from Alsiehemy (2023); Hariani et al. (2024); Julita et al. (2022); Nicoletti et al. (2019); Fitrizal et al. (2021); Widjanarko et al. (2024); Qoir (2024).*

In addition to economic data, tourist-generated content (TGC) serves as a valuable metric for gauging perception trends. Online reviews, social media posts, and food blogs increasingly highlight Malaysia's food authenticity, halal transparency, and hospitality. These organic forms of promotion act as digital testimonials, reinforcing the effectiveness of Malaysia's culinary diplomacy and halal branding. Countries with high levels of TGC engagement tend to perform better in destination trust indices, confirming the role of bottom-up promotion in gastrodiplomacy.

Malaysia's leadership in halal culinary tourism has also stimulated intra-regional competition, especially from other ASEAN and OIC countries. In 2023, Indonesia and Brunei increased their investment in halal infrastructure and marketing, aiming to emulate Malaysia's success. This competition fosters innovation and benchmarking, encouraging Malaysia to continuously refine its halal culinary narrative and maintain leadership in a dynamic global tourism environment.

In conclusion, the year 2023 illustrates the multidimensional impact of halal culinary branding on tourist perception and destination performance. From certification trust and influencer engagement to event-based experiences and digital narratives, Malaysia's gastrodiplomacy strategy has effectively enhanced its international image and sustained its competitiveness in the halal tourism sector. Continuous adaptation, technological integration, and cultural sensitivity remain essential to reinforcing this trajectory in the years ahead.

## **DISCUSSION**

The integration of Islamic values into national tourism policy represents a pivotal transformation in the way Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia navigate the global tourism landscape. Rather than merely responding to religious compliance, the alignment of halal tourism with Islamic values signals a proactive, multidimensional strategy. Grounded in theological,

cultural, and economic imperatives, this transformation repositions halal tourism as both a socio-religious mandate and a policy innovation. Fatwas issued by Islamic institutions such as the DSN-MUI in Indonesia provide structured ethical guidelines that influence not only individual consumption but also institutional and national tourism strategies (Wardhani, 2023). Malaysia, through JAKIM and the Halal Development Corporation (HDC), exemplifies this approach by embedding Islamic values into a national framework for tourism development that is at once spiritually compliant, economically viable, and globally competitive.

Central to this strategy is halal culinary branding, which functions as a soft power instrument and a trust-building mechanism. In the international tourism market, trust is currency. Halal certification—particularly Malaysia’s JAKIM-backed regime—serves not merely as regulatory compliance but as a diplomatic symbol. When tourists recognize the halal logo on a restaurant, airline meal, or hotel service, they perceive institutional legitimacy and cultural hospitality. Studies by Hamidon (2016), Idris et al. (2022), and Razak et al. (2019) confirm that Malaysia's halal certification system is one of the most globally trusted, thanks to its integration of Quranic standards, fatwas, and scientific food safety protocols. This trust extends beyond Muslim travelers to health-conscious non-Muslim tourists who associate halal food with hygiene, ethical production, and safety.

By embedding this trust into culinary experiences, Malaysia transforms food into a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. Halal culinary branding becomes a narrative tool through which the country communicates its identity, values, and modernity. As Nye (2008) articulates, soft power is not about force but about attraction. Malaysia’s culinary identity—infused with Islamic principles, multiculturalism, and hospitality—embodies this soft power. The synergy between cultural authenticity and international marketing in programs such as Malaysia Kitchen for the World (MKP) highlights how food can be both a product and a message. It conveys national values while engaging international audiences in emotionally resonant, culturally immersive experiences.

This gastrodiploacy operates simultaneously on three fronts: cultural, economic, and emotional. Culturally, it reaffirms Malaysia’s Islamic heritage and Southeast Asian pluralism. Economically, it positions Malaysia as a halal tourism hub with a competitive advantage in the global Muslim travel market, estimated to reach USD 300 billion by 2026. Emotionally, it strengthens tourist loyalty and satisfaction by aligning culinary services with travelers’ spiritual and ethical expectations. Events like Halal Fest, MIHAS, and various ASEAN culinary exchanges demonstrate how gastrodiploacy can forge intercultural connections, drive inbound tourism, and

enhance bilateral goodwill. These platforms become both stages for showcasing national identity and arenas for economic exchange.

Within this strategy, digital influencers and diaspora communities serve as powerful agents of identity diplomacy. Influencers amplify Malaysia's halal gastronomy narrative through visual storytelling, reviews, and lifestyle content. As observed by Widjanarko et al. (2024) and Li & Feng (2022), digital influencers shape consumer perception and trust, especially among Gen-Z and millennial Muslim travelers. Diaspora communities, on the other hand, act as cultural intermediaries, promoting Malaysian cuisine and halal identity in host countries. Trihartono et al. (2020) emphasized that diaspora-led gastrodiploamacy humanizes national branding and facilitates cultural intimacy, especially when official diplomacy encounters political friction. By engaging both groups, Malaysia creates a decentralized but cohesive network of culinary ambassadors who represent the nation's soft power ethos.

Nevertheless, as the halal tourism market expands, there is a critical need for inclusive communication and branding strategies. Misconceptions persist that halal tourism is exclusive or restrictive. To counter this, Malaysia's branding must emphasize inclusivity, quality, and ethical consumption—values that resonate with both Muslim and non-Muslim travelers. Campaigns should project halal tourism not merely as religiously compliant but as universally appealing due to its safety, hospitality, and authenticity. Influencer campaigns, cross-cultural events, and public-private partnerships should aim to normalize halal offerings in multicultural contexts. This inclusive approach not only widens the appeal but also deepens intercultural respect and engagement.

Strategic assessment tools like the C-PEST framework and Global Muslim Travel Index (GMTI) offer valuable benchmarks for evaluating national readiness and performance in halal tourism. The C-PEST model (Culture-Political-Economic-Social-Technology) helps policymakers identify internal capacities and external opportunities. It supports evidence-based planning by assessing market demands, religious infrastructure, digital integration, and geopolitical considerations (Othman & Jamal, 2017). GMTI, in turn, ranks destinations based on Muslim traveler experiences, providing comparative insights that inform both branding and service improvements. Malaysia's consistent top ranking in GMTI demonstrates its institutional coherence and customer-centric design, but also underscores the need for continuous innovation to retain this position amid rising competition from Indonesia, Turkey, and non-Muslim countries like Japan and South Korea.

The economic and sustainability implications of halal culinary branding are equally significant. Halal tourism contributes to GDP, local employment, and SME growth in hospitality, agriculture, and logistics sectors. Julita et al. (2022) and Mahfud et al. (2018) found that culinary tourism stimulates domestic supply chains and encourages entrepreneurship, especially among women and youth. Moreover, halal gastronomy supports sustainable tourism practices by emphasizing local sourcing, waste minimization, and cultural preservation. Concepts like "halalan tayyiban" inherently promote environmental stewardship and social equity, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, sustaining a credible halal brand requires vigilant regulatory oversight and continuous stakeholder education. The risk of "halal-washing," where brands superficially adopt halal markers without meaningful compliance, threatens consumer trust. Malaysia must therefore invest in certification audits, consumer awareness campaigns, and international accreditation collaborations. As the global halal economy becomes increasingly lucrative, maintaining ethical integrity is paramount.

In conclusion, Malaysia's experience illustrates that integrating Islamic values into tourism policy and branding creates a robust model for ethical, inclusive, and competitive destination development. Halal culinary branding, as both a soft power and trust-building tool, reinforces Malaysia's global image and economic resilience. Gastrodiploacy, when strategically employed through cultural narratives, digital media, and diaspora networks, becomes an engine for emotional connection and international cooperation. The key to sustaining this momentum lies in inclusive communication, strategic measurement tools like C-PEST and GMTI, and a steadfast commitment to halal integrity. As global travel normalizes post-pandemic, Malaysia's model offers a replicable, adaptable framework for nations seeking to align faith, culture, and development in a globalized world.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that halal culinary branding and gastrodiploacy serve as strategic tools for enhancing Malaysia's soft power, international image, and tourism competitiveness. By integrating Islamic principles into tourism policy, supported by robust certification systems and institutional frameworks, Malaysia positions itself as a global leader in halal tourism. The findings highlight the significance of halal certification in building trust, the role of culinary diplomacy in cultural representation, and the economic potential of leveraging halal gastronomy in nation

branding. The study contributes to the evolving discourse on Islamic tourism by offering a multidisciplinary framework that links religious values, marketing, and international relations. Future research should explore empirical evaluations of tourist responses to gastrodipomatic initiatives and assess long-term branding outcomes across diverse geopolitical contexts.

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