



RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIGITAL SOFT POWER OF MALAYSIA IN ASEAN: THE #VISITMALAYSIA2026 INSTAGRAM CAMPAIGN

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Abstract: *This study explores how Malaysia applies digital soft power within the ASEAN region through used the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign on Instagram. Using a qualitative descriptive and content analysis, this research treats 12 Instagram posts @tourismmalaysia as the unit of analysis, integrating text (captions) and non textual (visual) elements. The analysis followed systematic stages: data immersion, open coding of visuals and captions, thematic categorization, engagement metric analysis and synthesis. Findings reveal three dominant themes: cultural heritage diversity, tourism economy and regional connectivity, and environmental tourism. Engagement data show that modern tourism attractions (e.g., Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck) generate the highest visibility, while cultural content (e.g. Deepavali Festival and Sri Maha Mariamman Temple) achieves strong interactive engagement, reinforcing Malaysia's multicultural identity. Nature-based content further strengthens Malaysia's sustainable diplomacy narrative. Overall, the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign demonstrates how Instagram functions as a digital soft power tool, amplifying Malaysia's cultural appeal, economic positioning and environmental values across ASEAN.*

Keywords: *Digital Soft Power, Digital Diplomacy, Instagram, Tourism Promotion, Malaysia*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana Malaysia menerapkan Soft Power Digital di kawasan ASEAN melalui kampanye #VisitMalaysia2026 di Instagram. Dengan menggunakan analisis deskriptif kualitatif dan analisis konten, penelitian ini menetapkan 12 unggahan Instagram @tourismmalaysia sebagai unit penelitian yang mencakup elemen teks (*caption*) dan non teks (*visual*). Analisis ini dilakukan melalui tahapan-tahapan sistematis, yaitu imersi data dan pengodean awal, kategorisasi tematik, analisis metrik keterlibatan dan sintesis. Temuan menunjukkan tiga tema: keragaman warisan budaya, ekonomi pariwisata dan konektivitas regional serta pariwisata lingkungan yang berkelanjutan. Data *engagement* menunjukkan bahwa atraksi modern (Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck) menghasilkan visibilitas tertinggi, sementara konten budaya (Festival Deepavali dan Kuil Sri Maha Mariamman) mencapai keterlibatan interaktif yang kuat serta memperkuat identitas multicultural Malaysia. Konten berbasis alam lebih lanjut memperkuat narasi diplomasi berkelanjutan Malaysia. Secara keseluruhan, kampanye #VisitMalaysia2026 menunjukkan bagaimana Instagram berfungsi sebagai alat Soft Power Digital untuk memperkuat daya tarik budaya, posisi ekonomi serta nilai-nilai lingkungan Malaysia di seluruh ASEAN.

Kata Kunci: Soft Power Digital, Diplomasi Digital, Instagram, Promosi Wisata, Malaysia.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital globalization, nation-states are increasingly leveraging social media to project their regional economic and cultural influence. This evolution has transformed digital platforms into strategic instruments for shaping perceptions and influencing audiences across borders (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Southeast Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has become a dynamic arena for member countries to articulate their cultural identities and economic aspirations through digital diplomacy (Rif'an, 2024). The main theoretical foundation of this phenomenon is Digital Soft Power, an evolution of Joseph Nye's framework (2004), which posits that a country's influence stems from its ability to attract sympathy and persuade through culture and political values rather than military or economic coercion. In the contemporary context, this power is mediated by a country's ability to manage digital narratives to create appeal in the midst of the global "marketplace of ideas" (Hussin, 2018).

The Malaysian government is using social media smartly as part of its digital diplomacy plans to increase the country's image or reputation and visibility. According to Tourism Malaysia (2024), the Visit Malaysia 2026 plan focuses on three main areas: cultural heritage, sustainability and digital innovation. The campaign targets 45 to 47 million international visitors by 2026, which is expected to bring in around RM147 billion in tourism income—showing how important tourism is to Malaysia's economy (Business Today, 2025). This quantitative goal reflects not only the economic agenda but also a developing national strategy to combine heritage, culture and tourism promotion through digital platforms (Tourism Malaysia, 2024). This approach shows that Malaysia understands how communication technology especially media social can help promote culture, national identity and support economic ties with neighboring regions.

Malaysia's success in promoting tourism is closely linked to how it shows itself as a country with many different cultures. The government has always focused on diversity, using slogans like "Malaysia, Truly Asia" to represent this. This idea still works well today because social media platforms like Instagram let people share stories that highlight Malaysia's variety. ASEAN Secretariat (2024) says that exchanging cultures and visiting heritage sites are important for bringing ASEAN countries closer together. Malaysia's #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign takes this idea further by using the internet to show appreciation for shared history across borders and it also shows how Malaysia leads in cultural tourism within ASEAN.

Instagram serves as a particularly powerful medium for digital diplomacy due to its visual immediacy, participatory culture and algorithmic reach (Møller et al., 2024). Visual posts and hashtags such as #VisitMalaysia2026 invite both domestic and regional audiences to engage with curated narratives of Malaysia's landscapes, traditions and modern attractions. Widiastuti (2020) highlight that social media has a significant role in creating emotional experiences about the tourist attractions they visit and showed the effectiveness of the Melaka tourism communication strategy launched by the government (Malaysia).

Communications perspective, Malaysia uses both symbolic and economic ways to do digital diplomacy. Symbolically the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign shows off Malaysia's culture—like historic places, food, festival, etc. —as examples of harmony and inclusivity. Economically, this campaign links these cultural aspects to tourism, making Malaysia a strong choice for travelers, investors and regional partnerships. So digital platforms are not just used for marketing but also as tools for cultural diplomacy (Subagyo, 2019) that show Malaysia's bigger goals in the ASEAN region.

Moreover, ASEAN's dedication to working together regionally creates a good environment for Malaysia's digital projects. The ASEAN digital masterplan 2025 focuses on teamwork in digital

connections, creative industries and innovation across borders (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024). Malaysia's hashtag #VisitMalaysia2026 fits with these goals by using digital stories to attract visitors and support ASEAN's shared identity as a connected and diverse community. This effort shows how digital media especially social media can help build both cultural and economic links within the region.

This research is important because it fills a big gap in studies about communication digital, especially digital soft power through hashtag on Instagram in ASEAN. Most of the existing research hasn't connected digital soft power, tourism diplomacy and regional integration through real-world examples. Even though soft power has been a popular topic since Nye's work in 2004, how it shows up soft power through social media in Southeast Asia hasn't been studied much. Earlier studies by Hussin (2018) about Gastronomy, Tourism and Soft Power of Malaysia highlight that Malaysia has efficiently used the soft power approach and maximally received benefits from it without the use of coercive powers. And then study by Alyakhri & Al-Btoos (2025) show that digital platforms amplify soft power strategies and shift the landscape of international engagement. And then study by Sari & Selma (2024) about tourism diplomacy as Soft Power. Another research that discusses social media plays a significant role in the effectiveness of Melaka's tourism communication energy. Many research that discuss about soft power and tourism through social media to share their culture, tourism, economy diplomacy but they didn't look at specific platforms and specific campaigns (hashtag). That's why looking at Malaysia's #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign is useful, it shows how digital media especially Instagram can be used for both cultural and economic diplomacy and has soft power through social media especially Instagram. This study looks at how Malaysia uses the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign on Instagram to show its digital soft power.

2 | RESEARCH METHODS

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis as the main technique (Krippendorff, 2018). The unit of analysis for this study is the individual Instagram post. Each unit is treated as a composite of three elements: the visual media (image or video), the textual component (captions and hashtags), and the metadata (engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and views). The data were collected from the official Instagram account @tourismmalaysia, specifically filtering for posts tagged with #VisitMalaysia2026. While the campaign launched on January 6, 2025, the sampling frame was purposively narrowed to the period between September 27, 2025 (the date of the official launch ceremony) and October 27, 2025. This yielded a total of 12 posts for intensive analysis. The analysis followed a systematic five-step procedure based on the framework by Schreier (2012).

First, data immersion and preparation: The 12 posts were archived and transcribed. Visual elements were described in detail (denotative meanings), and captions were recorded to ensure a holistic view of each unit of analysis. Second, open coding and dimension building: Each post was initially coded based on its primary message and visual focus. Engagement metrics (likes, comments, reposts, and views) were integrated at this stage to determine the "weight" or reach of specific messages (Lindgren, 2021). Third, thematic categorization: using an iterative process, initial codes were grouped into broader themes. Drawing on the digital diplomacy framework, the researchers identified three dominant themes: Cultural Heritage and Diversity; Tourism Economy and Regional Connectivity; Environmental and Sustainable Tourism. Fourth, engagement metrics analysis. Once the themes were established, the researchers integrated quantitative data (engagement metrics) to measure the effectiveness of each theme. This stage aimed to determine

which themes were most effective in building digital soft power based on audience interactions (e.g., shares to measure organic message dissemination, or comments to measure two-way engagement). The last, final synthesis, the final stage involves interpreting the findings by linking them to the theories of Digital Soft Power (Joseph Nye) and Cultural Globalization (Arjun Appadurai). The researcher explains how visual narratives (such as the Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck) and collective digital audience interactions shape Malaysia's national image within the ASEAN region.

3 | RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study identified three main forms of Malaysia's digital soft power through #VisitMalaysia2026 on Instagram, namely Cultural Heritage and Diversity, Tourism Economy and Regional Connectivity, and the final is Environmental and Sustainable Tourism. These themes reflect how Malaysia constructs and communicates its national image through cultural representation, economic narratives and sustainable values aligned with ASEAN's shared development goals.

Table 1. Thematic Coding Matrix and Qualitative Evidence

Theme	Sample Unit of Analysis	Textual Evidence (Captions/Hashtags)	Visual Evidence (Signifiers)	Soft Power Narrative
Cultural Heritage & Diversity	Deepavali Festival; Sri Maha Mariamman Temple	"Deepavali vibes all over Kuala Lumpur"; #VisitMalaysia2026	Oil lamps (<i>diyas</i>), colorful Dravidian temple carvings, traditional rituals.	Constructs an image of Multicultural Inclusivity and religious harmony.
Tourism Economy & Regional Connectivity	Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck; Islands & Beaches	"KL skyline"; "Well connected globally"; "Easy to reach"	Modern urban architecture, panoramic city lights, luxury beach resorts.	Highlights Modernity and Infrastructure, positioning Malaysia as a regional hub.
Environmental & Sustainable Tourism	Jelawang Waterfall; Gaharu Tea Valley	"Eco-tourism spots"; "Nature conservation"; "Green Growth Strategy"	Lush forest trails, waterfalls, agro-heritage tea plantations.	Promotes Green Diplomacy and commitment to ecological stewardship.

Source: the author's research data, 2025

To provide a comprehensive understanding of how the soft power narrative is constructed through the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign, this study conducted a systematic coding process on 12 selected units of analysis. This process integrates textual elements derived from captions and

hashtags, as well as non-textual or visual elements represented through cultural symbols, architecture, and natural landscapes. The results of this categorization process are summarized in Table 1 (Thematic Coding Matrix), which presents qualitative evidence for each identified main theme. This table not only demonstrates the interconnection between written messages and visual representations but also explains the logic behind the construction of Malaysia's national image as a multicultural, modern, and sustainable nation within the ASEAN region.

Cultural Heritage Diversity

Looking at Instagram posts with the hashtag #VisitMalaysia2026, it's clear that sharing stories about Malaysia's cultural heritage and diversity is a key part of Malaysia's digital soft power strategy. This strategy aligns with Nye's (2004) concept of attraction, where a nation's cultural assets are leveraged to build a positive reputation without coercion. The content show how Malaysia has many different ethnic groups and cultures, especially through pictures of festivals, religious landmarks and historical sites and art performances that combine tradition with modernity. Four recurring cultural signifiers: Deepavali Festival, the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple, Taming Si Tower and Encore Melaka.



Figure 1 Deepavali Festival

(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

This post has 408 likes, 18 comment, 22 repost, 167 shared and 14,2k views. The Deepavali celebration in October 2025 is the largest religious festival for Hindu around the world, one of which is celebrated in Malaysia. During Deepavali celebration in Malaysia, Hindu homes glow with oil lamps and candles to symbolise victory over darkness. These images help build Malaysia's soft power by showing how the country supports cultural diversity and acceptance, values that are important in the ASEAN region, where many countries have different culture. Adding captions that say "Deepavali vibes all over Kuala Lumpur" further aligns Malaysia's digital communication with ASEAN's vision of intercultural understanding.

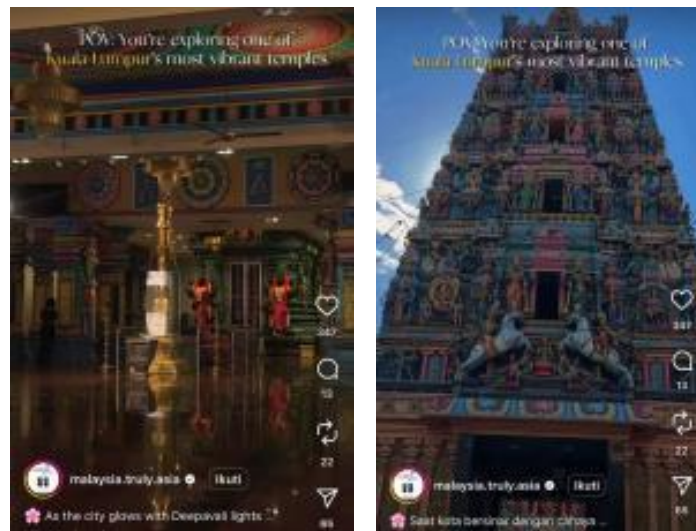


Figure 2 Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Sri Maha Mariamman Temple is one of Kuala Lumpur's oldest and most famous Hindu temples. Content of the temple's detailed Dravidian style, colorful carvings and religious ceremonies are not just eye-catching for people around the world, but also show Malaysia's strong spiritual history. By sharing this landmark on digital platform especially Instagram, Malaysia presents itself as a country that values and preserves its cultural traditions and reinforcing concept of soft power through attraction. This content has 317 likes, 13 comment, 22 repost, 65 shared and 11,1k views.



Figure 3 Taming Sari Tower
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Taming Sari Tower serves as a digital symbol that connects Malaysia's history with its modern identity. Looking at posts with the hashtag #VisitMalaysia2026, we see that Taming Sari Tower is not only presented as a tourist attraction, but also as a cultural symbol that show the nation's historical pride and innovation. The name "Taming Sari" comes from a legendary keris owned by Hang Tuah, a famous Malay warrior known for his bravery and representing the values of the Malay culture. By using this historic symbol for a modern observation tower, Malaysia shows how it keeps its traditions alive while moving forward which is a key part of digital soft power strategy. This content has 231 likes, 7 comment, 7 repost, 64 shared and 10,2k views.

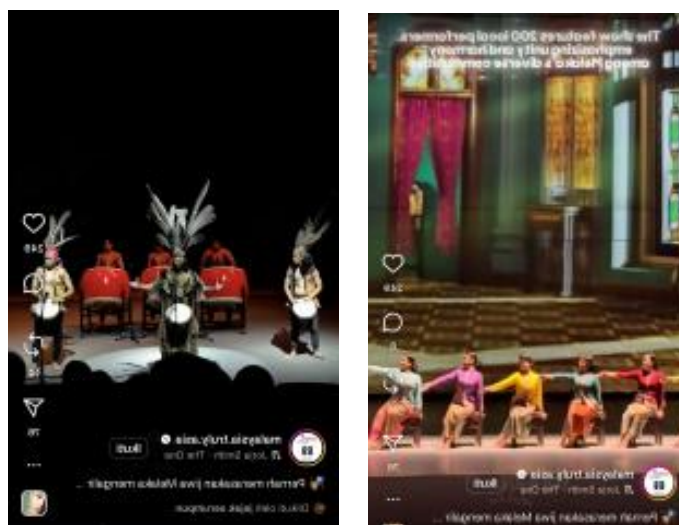


Figure 4 Encore Melaka

(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

The Encore Melaka cultural theater show is different because how Malaysia mixes old traditions with new ideas. Instagram posts show the 360-degree stage, the cool video projections and stories about Melaka's cultures from the past. These things show how Malaysian culture is growing and changing. The performance merges Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian narrative that reflecting Melaka's historical role as a transnational hub and an early example of ASEAN-like connectivity. These kinds of cultural shows are smart ways to build a country's digital nation branding, presenting Malaysia as both historically grounded and technologically progressive. The way Encore Melaka is shown in #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign shows Malaysia wants to be a top place for cultural innovation, creative diplomacy and communication in Southeast Asia.

For instance, the Deepavali Festival post (Picture 1), which garnered 14.2k views and 22 reposts, illustrates how Malaysia supports cultural acceptance—a value crucial for ASEAN's intercultural understanding. Similarly, the Sri Maha Mariamman Temple (Picture 2) reinforces soft power through attraction by showcasing Malaysia's ability to preserve its spiritual history. Taming Sari Tower (Picture 3) and Encore Melaka (Picture 4) further synthesize tradition with modernity, presenting Malaysia as both historically grounded and technologically progressive. These cultural signifiers serve as smart tools for digital nation branding, positioning Malaysia as a leader in cultural innovation and creative diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Tourism Economy and Regional Connectivity

Malaysia's use of digital media especially social media, Instagram in its economic diplomacy highlight how tourism and regional connections are important. Many Instagram posts how show beautiful places like Entopia in Penang, and then beach recreation like Kok & Chenang Beach in Lengkawi, Redang Island in Terengganu, Sibul Island in Johor and Lankayan Island in Sabah. And then the tallest waterfall in Malaysia, Jelawang Waterfall. Recreation nature in Perak and then there is also Pusat Sains Negara Kuala Lumpur that can learn about anything in there. Catch KL skyline to Tuah 1895 viewing desk to see city light in Kuala Lumpur. And savour the kampung coffee experience in Chalet Kebuh Kopi Sik at Kedah.



Figure 5 Entopia

(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

This content has 10,4k views, 205 likes, 6 comment, 7 repost and 229 shared. Entopia in Penang show how the country integrate nature, science and education into its tourism branding. Entopia has a butterfly park and shows about the environment. Entopia highlight learning about nature and family-friendly travel, attracting both local visitors and people from other ASEAN countries who want to enjoy nature. Malaysia's eco-tourism attractions enhance its reputation as an environmentally conscious and economically sustainable travel destination, that's key components of digital soft power in the tourism economy.



Figure 6 Pusat Sains

(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Almost the same with Entopia, Pusat Sains Negara Kuala Lumpur as an educational site that merges learning, technology and family recreation. This inclusion demonstrates Malaysia's effort to expand its tourism narrative beyond leisure toward intellectual and cultural development, there by appealing to urban and ASEAN-based youth audiences. This content has 75 likes, 3 comment, 4 repost, 14 shared and 6048 views.

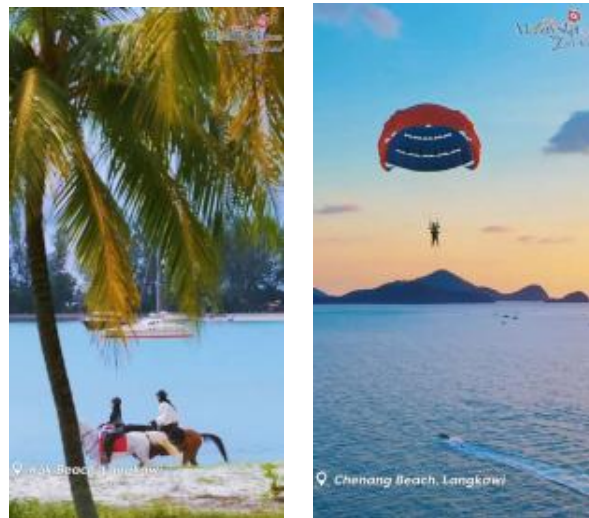


Figure 7 Kok Beach & Chenang Beach, Langkawi
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

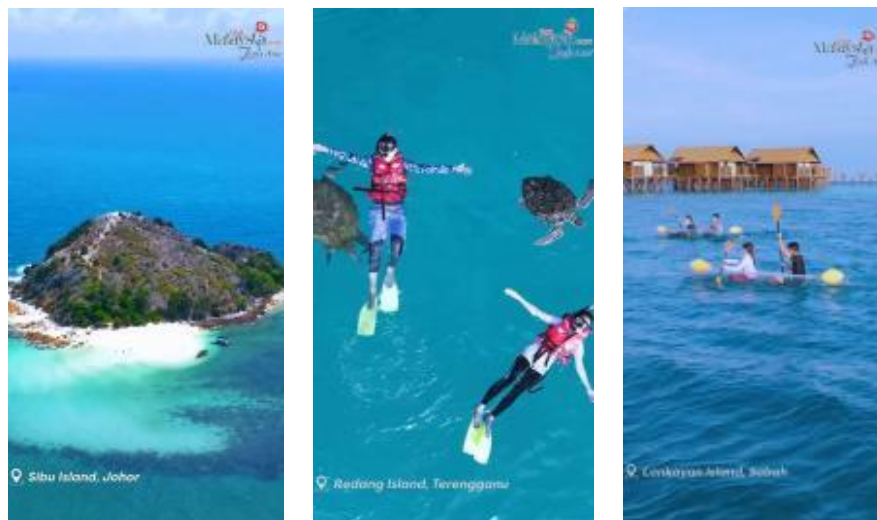


Figure 8 Sibul Island in Johor, Redang Island in Terengganu & Lankayan Island in Sabah
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

The campaign use #VisitMalaysia2026 show Malaysia’s coastal areas, such as Kok & Chenang Beach in Langkawi, Redang Island in Terengganu, Sibul Island in Johor and Lankayan Island in Sabah. This post focus on beaches also supports economy part of Malaysia tourism. By showing these islands as easy to reach and well connected globally, Malaysia encourages travel within ASEAN and positions itself as a key link for tourists coming from around the world. This content has 16,4k views, 404 likes, 17 comment, 18 repost, and 237 shared.



Figure 9 Chalet Kebuh Kopi Sik in Kedah
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Through this kampung coffee, visitors can experience picking coffee cherries and brewing coffee directly in the plantation. These experiences are examples of Malaysia's tourism diplomacy—positioning the country as a place where modernity blends with the charm of local culture, a combination that strengthens its digital branding. This content has 67 likes, 9 comment, 9 repost, 22 shared and 4640 views.



Figure 10 Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Posts about Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck offering panoramic views of Kuala Lumpur's city light and skyline. This content has 930 likes, 6 comment, 16 repost, 579 shared and 25,4k views. The portrayal of these locations constructs an integrated narrative of Malaysia as a vibrant, interconnected tourism hub that embodies both cultural richness and economic vitality.

Environmental and Sustainable Tourism

In this theme highlight how Malaysia's digital soft power strategy ecological awareness with national branding through the #VisitMalaysia2026 Instagram campaign. Posts under this theme emphasize nature conservation, eco-tourism and rural revitalization, reinforcing Malaysia's image as

an environmentally responsible nation within ASEAN. By visually showcasing its natural assets—ranging from waterfalls and forest trails to agro-tourism sites—Malaysia positions itself as a key actor in promoting sustainable tourism and green diplomacy in Southeast Asia.



Figure 11 Jelawang & Susung Waterfall
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

One of the standout places in the featured destinations is Jelawang Waterfall in Kelantan, which is considered one of Malaysia’s top eco—tourism spots. It’s also the tallest waterfall in the country and video of it on Instagram show both is beautiful looks and its importance to the environment. Similarly, Susung Waterfall in Sarawak exemplifies the integration of local culture and environmental awareness in Malaysia’s digital tourism promotion. These digital narratives construct Malaysia’s commitment to environmental preservation while simultaneously inviting ASEAN travelers to experience nature sustainably. eco-tourism branding strengthens a nation’s green soft power, allowing countries to influence regional attitudes toward environmental stewardship through attraction rather than regulation. This content has 12,7k views, 381 likes, 6 comment, 17 repost and 107 shared.



Figure 12 Gaharu Tea Valley and Nature Hoping Destinations in Perak
(Source: Instagram.com/tourismmalaysia, 2026)

Meanwhile Gaharu Tea Valley and Nature Hoping in Perak including forest reserves and eco-trails, represent Malaysia’s strategic attempt to decentralize tourism beyond major urban hubs.

Gaharu Tea Valley content has 10,9k views 166 likes, 20 comment, 4 repost, and 44 shared. And Nature Hoping Destinations in Perak has 10,1k views, 213 likes, 3 comment, 8 repost and 53 shared. The Gaharu Tea Valley shows how farming and sustainability come together in Malaysia’s tourism plans. This area is both a place for tourists to visit and an agro-heritage site, which helps Malaysia connect green business ideas with its national tourism stories. These portrayals align with Malaysia’s 2030 Green Growth Strategy, which promotes sustainable tourism as a tool for regional cooperation and economic resilience (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, 2023). Digital narratives like this strengthen Malaysia’s soft power of sustainability by promoting collective responsibility among ASEAN audiences toward ecological protection. Overall, the Environmental and Sustainable Tourism theme demonstrates Malaysia’s evolving approach to digital diplomacy through nature-based storytelling. By promoting destinations such as Jelawang Waterfall, Susung Waterfall, Perak Nature Trails, and Gaharu Tea Valley, Malaysia communicates its dual identity as an eco-conscious and culturally rich nation.

Discussion

After identifying the main themes through qualitative coding, the next stage of analysis involves triangulating the data with audience engagement metrics on the Instagram platform. This step is crucial for evaluating how each unit of analysis contributes to Malaysia’s digital presence expansion.

Table 2. Summary of Multimodal Evidence and Engagement Metrics

Post Subject	Primary Theme	Textual/Non-Textual Nature	Views	Likes	Shares	Key Engagement Finding
Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck	Economy	Visual (Modern Skyline)	25,400	930	579	Highest visibility and reach; effective for "presence expansion."
Deepavali Festival	Culture	Textual/Visual (Harmony)	14,200	408	167	Highest organic spread (Reposts); resonates with identity.
Gaharu Tea Valley	Environment	Textual/Visual (Sustainability)	10,900	166	44	Highest social interaction (Comments); sparks discussion.
Islands & Beaches	Economy	Visual (Nature/Leisure)	16,400	404	237	High attraction for regional travelers.

Source: the author’s research data, 2025

Table 2 (Summary of Metrics and Multimodal Evidence) presents a tabulation of engagement data covering the number of views, likes, comments, and content shares (shares/reposts) for each category. This table provides strong evidence of how content characteristics—both textual and visual—influence ASEAN audiences’ behavior in interacting with Malaysia’s soft power narratives, while clarifying the role of each post as a measurable instrument of digital diplomacy.

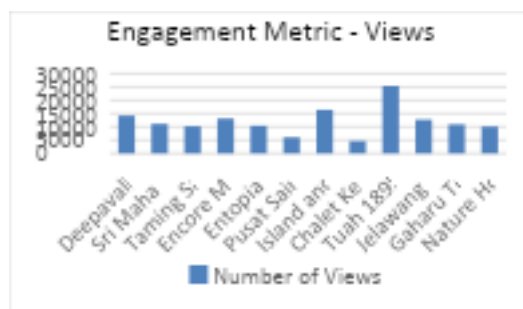


Figure 13 Engagement Metrics – Views
(Source: Research Data, 2025)

From those graphic shows that content Tuah 1896 view deck has the highest views and engagement rate. And then followed by Islands and Beaches content and Deepavali Festival with Jelawang & Susung Waterfall. From the perspective of Engagement Metrics Number of Views shows that content focusing tourism economy and regional connectivity especially The Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck and Islands & Beaches, contributed the highest number of views, proving that modern panoramic visuals and iconic natural destinations are most effective elements in attracting audiences. Meanwhile, cultural heritage content such as Deepavali Festival also plays a role in strengthening Malaysia’s image as a harmonious multiethnic country. The number of views shows that the values of inclusivity and cultural diversity have a strong resonance with audienc that an important element of soft power identity building.

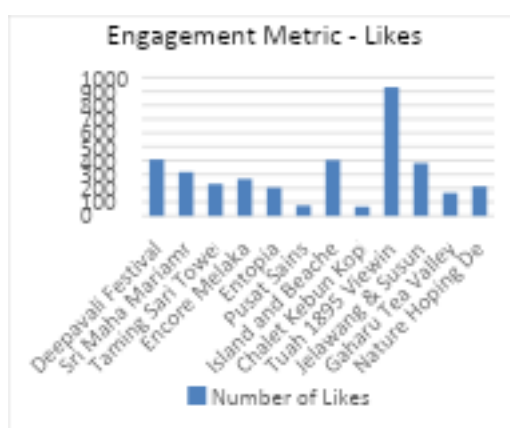


Figure 14 Engagement Metrics – Likes
(Source: Research Data, 2025)

Similar with the engagement metric in terms of audience views, Tuah 1895 viewing deck’s content has a high number of likes with 930 likes. Followed by Deepavali Festival’s content that has 408 likes. From that we can see that Tuah 1895 Viewing Deck content can be digital soft power

same with research analysis that conducted by Yunita & Killian (2024), it was found that likes support soft power through “presence expansion” and reputation. And the likes figure expands the algorithmic reach, the more likes, the greater the chance of content appearing on the explore page, non followers FYP, cross-country recommendations, thus strengthening its reach, a form of digital soft power.

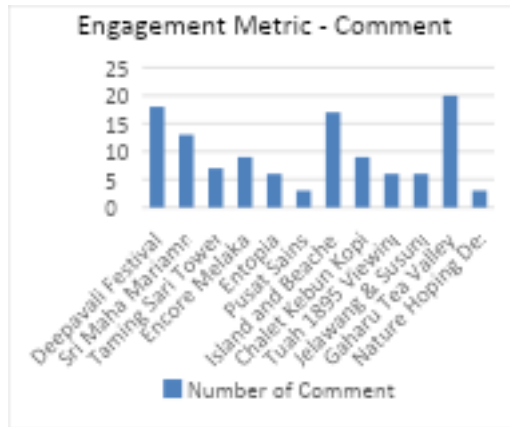


Figure 15 Engagement Metrics – Comment
(Source: Research Data, 2025)

Different from engagement metrics number of views and likes, the highest engagement metrics for comment goes to Gaharu Tea Valley’s content with 20 comments and then Deepavali Festival with 18 comments. Destinations with the most comments indicate high level of interest and discussion. The reinforces Malaysia’s digital position as a country that offers unique experiences, sparking social interactions that strengthen soft power. And once again, Deepavali Festival’s content received high ratings, indicating that it not only attracted attention but also promoted Malaysia’s cultural narrative and uniqueness, which resonated with ASEN audiences, reinforcing its friendly and multicultural image. Based on research, comments on Instagram posts can be considered part of public engagement that strengthens soft power through two-way interaction (Hikmawan et al., 2024)

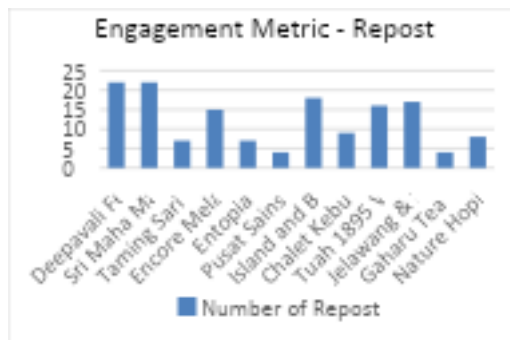


Figure 16 Engagement Metrics – Repost
(Source: Research Data, 2025)

Reposts are a strong indicator of organic message spread, signifying that the content is considered valuable and worth sharing again by the audience in their account. Studies in social media communication show that reposts are used intentionally to propagate messages that are perceived as important or aligned with one’s identity (Ramdhani & Ahmad T., 2024). From that graph show that Deepavali Festival content and Sri Maha Mariamman Temple content had the highest

number of reposts compared to the other content with 22 reposted. This shows that cultural and religious content successfully triggers interest in organic sharing and can strengthen Malaysia’s image as a religious and multicultural country in ASEAN. This contributes significantly to expanding Malaysia’s digital soft power by conveying a strong and convincing narrative.

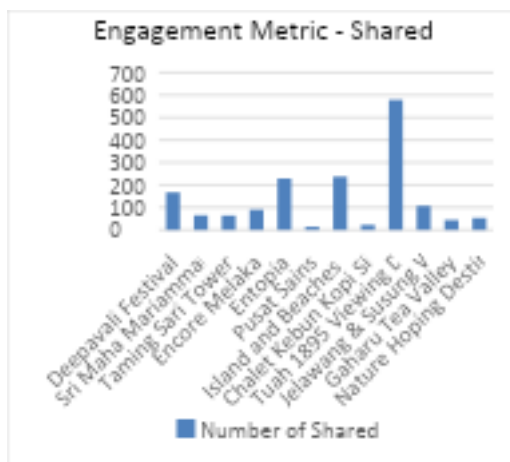


Figure 17 Engagement Metrics – Shared
(Source: Research Data, 2025)

This graph shows the number of shares of several pieces of content on Instagram Tourism Malaysia that use #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign. Buah 1895 viewing deck content had the highest number of shares with 579 shares. And then followed by Islands and Beaches content with 237 shares. From that numbers shows how often users share the content on their networks, which means that the content is considered important, interesting or worth spreading. This is in agreement with Nye’s (2004) theory of soft power and Appadurai’s (1996) theory of cultural dimensions of globalization which explain that sharing is one of the main ways in which this process takes place, spreading the cultural images and narratives that shape a country’s soft power.

So, from all of the engagement metric, shows that Buah 1895 Viewing Deck had the highest engagement across the entire dataset. The high view count and share rate indicate that tourism economics and regional connectivity content has the greatest amplifying effect in influencing travel preferences and shaping tourist perceptions. Then the second highest was recorded at the Deepavali Festival and Sri Maha Mariamman Temple content. Content such as the Deepavali Festival and Sri Maha Mariamman Temple showcase the richness of Malaysia’s multiethnic traditions and culture. The high level of interaction, especially likes, comment, and repost, indicates that audiences are not only interested in destinations but also in a strong and inclusive cultural identity. Visual representations highlighting Hindu celebrations and temple architecture serve as cultural diplomacy that reinforces Malaysia’s image as a country of harmony and diversity.

4 | CONCLUSION

This study shows that Malaysia uses digital platforms, especially Instagram with the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign and hashtag for all content on Instagram Tourism Malaysia as a way and instrument of digital soft power. From the engagement patterns in all three categories (cultural heritage & diversity, tourism economy & regional connectivity and environmental & sustainable tourism) demonstrate a comprehensive digital soft power strategy. Malaysia not only promotes its

destinations, but also builds a national image that includes cultural diversity, the strength of its tourism economy, and a commitment to sustainability (three elements that are highly relevant in the context of ASEAN digital diplomacy). Content using the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign showed high average audience engagement (ex: 12k-27k views per content), supporting the claim that the #VisitMalaysia2026 campaign utilizes Instagram as digital soft power through organic reactions.

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