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## **Malaysia's National Day Stamps 2002-2018: A Visual Analysis and Interpretation**

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**Abstract:** Postage stamps serve as essential representations of the state, acting as miniature ambassadors that embody a nation's identity, values, and socio-political evolution. In Malaysia, National Day-themed stamps commemorate Malaysia's Independence Day, showcasing rich visual narratives of its cultural, social, and political identity since 1957. This research conducts a visual analysis of Malaysia's National Day stamps issued from 2002 to 2018. This research aims to explore how these stamps contribute to the formation of national identity. Employing a semiotic framework, the research examines how these stamps act as visual symbols, influencing and reflecting collective memories and national narratives. The analysis focuses on 31 selected stamps from seven distinct National Day-themed stamps, obtained from philatelic collections. This research addresses a gap in the visual examination of these stamps' contribution to nation-building discourse by identifying symbols, design elements, and thematic patterns within the chosen artefacts. The findings reveal that 15 categories of visual elements were identified and analysed. The aim is to elucidate their intended messages, underlying meanings, and their contribution to the visual constructions of nationhood. This research underscores the significance of these stamps as potent cultural artefacts that actively participate in the ongoing formation of Malaysia's national identity, communicate national values and aspirations to domestic and international audiences, and thus contribute to visual communication and cultural studies.

Keywords: National Day, Visual Analysis, Visual Communication, Stamps, Semiotic,

### **Introduction**

Stamps, as official representations of the states, function as miniature ambassadors and windows into a nation's identity. They provide insightful observations about the changing values, goals, and social-political landscape of a country, rich with visual narratives that reflect cultural values and historical milestones. In Malaysia, National Day stamps specifically commemorate Malaysian Independence Day, celebrated annually on 31<sup>st</sup> August, consistently displaying the nation's cultural, social, and political identity since 1957.

This research embarks on an exploration into the formation of Malaysian national identity through a detailed visual analysis of National Day-themed stamps released in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, specifically from 2002 until 2018. A systematic investigation chronicles the graphic design trends within 16 years, detailing the evolutionary phases. The result provides a structured framework for understanding design changes over time (Khan, 2020). Using a semiotic framework, this research examines how these stamps serve as powerful visual symbols for the nation, actively influencing and reflecting collective memories and national narratives. The research comprehensively analyses 31 stamps derived from seven distinct National Day themes, carefully obtained from diverse philatelic collections, providing a robust dataset for scrutiny.

While existing scholarship acknowledges the general significance of stamps for symbolising national identity, there is a clear deficiency in a specific visual examination of Malaysia's National Day stamps and their particular impact on the ongoing discourse of nation-building. This paper aims to fill a significant gap by thoroughly analysing the visual elements of these stamps and evaluating how they both construct and affirm a conception of Malaysia's national identity. The research objectives are to uncover key symbols, design elements, underlying symbolism, and thematic patterns within the chosen stamps and to elucidate their intended messages and more profound meaning, thereby comprehending their significant contribution to the visual formation of nationhood. To achieve these objectives, an extensive analysis of National Day-themed stamps was conducted to explore the subsequent research question: What kind of visual elements and interpretations are depicted on the stamp design? These stamps transcend their functional purpose, acting as compelling casual narratives that effectively communicate national values and aspirations to both domestic audiences and the international community. The research also contributes meaningfully to the broader field of visual culture studies by highlighting the often-overlooked role of such seemingly mundane objects in shaping collective identity and promoting national unity.

This work substantially enhances the fields of visual culture, design history, and Malaysian studies. This research enhances comprehension of how postal stamps, despite their seemingly insignificant size, serve as tools for expressing national identity and experience.

### **National Day**

National Day, also known as Independence Day or *Hari Kemerdekaan*, marks a significant moment in Malaysian history: the declaration of independence from British colonial rule on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1957. This date represents the culmination of a lengthy struggle for self-determination and the establishment of the independent Federation of Malaya, which later evolved into Malaysia. Each year, the nation commemorates this day with widespread celebrations, including parades and patriotic displays, providing an opportunity for reflection on the country's journey, its rich multicultural identity, and its steadfast commitment to unity and progress. It is a day of profound national significance, embodying Malaysia's sovereignty and its ongoing pursuit of national cohesion and development.

### **Visual Analysis**

Visual analysis is an essential tool for understanding the underlying themes and messages within a work of art. By meticulously examining elements such as colour, composition, and texture, one can discover more insightful meanings and appreciate the artist's intentions. This process enhances our appreciation of the artwork and allows us to engage more profoundly with the cultural and historical context in which it was created. For many decades, content analysis of visual images has been one of the most frequently referenced form of evidence in media studies (Bell, 2004). These insights deepen our comprehension of artistic intent and contribute to the development of more effective visual communications.

Visual communication has become a fundamental component of contemporary society, serving as a powerful medium for conveying messages and narratives while shaping how individuals perceive and interpret their surroundings through daily interactions (Günay, 2021; Mohd Pirdaus Mat Husain et al., 2024). This assertion is supported by Wei et al. (2024), who state that the interpretation of visual materials through both denotative and connotative dimensions is central to understanding cultural narratives in design. As noted, through denotative features such as iconic landmarks and representations of diverse cultural practices, visual artefacts can serve as tangible symbols of historical significance and cultural richness. These elements not only offer information about a region's heritage but also evoke emotional resonance and foster social cohesion within the community. Similarly, Malaysia's National Day stamps from 2002 to 2018 exemplify how visual design operates on both denotative and connotative levels.

## Literature Review

Postage stamps, far from being mere instruments of the postal service, function as powerful cultural artefacts and “paper ambassadors” that both reflect and shape a nation’s identity, values, and sociopolitical landscape (Loh, 2014). As argued by Khan (2020), postage stamps have been “largely overlooked” despite their role in reflecting a country’s evolving visual culture. These miniature designs act as visual conduits, disseminating messages both domestically and internationally (Baines, 2023). Each stamp is meticulously crafted to project the country’s image, encapsulate its heritage, and communicate evolving national narratives and aspirations (Loh, 2014). In the Malaysian context, this role aligns with broader visual communication practices, where texts and visuals serve as the primary means of conveying messages to the public. As highlighted by Neesa Aameera et al. (2016), Malaysia’s advertising media commonly integrates such visual-textual strategies to inform and engage audiences without an overreliance on digital technology. In the same way, the National Day stamps illustrate the enduring relevance of visual design as a medium that unites tradition and modernity while preserving the essence of national identity amid today’s media-driven environment. As “visual nationalism” pieces, stamps reveal what a state deems important for present and future generations to understand about its territory, people, identity, and memory (Brunn, 2023). Commemorative stamps serve as historical records by marking significant national events, milestones, and occasions. They offer historians insight into a country’s motivations for commemoration and remembrance. Unlike regular postage stamps, commemorative stamps specifically honour an event, location, or individual. Commemorative stamps, in particular, serve as “sites of memory” (*lieux de memoire*), recording national events and milestones and actively shaping collective memory (Loh, 2014).

A significant area of academic inquiry focuses on the visual analysis of stamp designs, often employing semiotic frameworks to deconstruct their embedded meanings. Scholars recognise that images on stamps are not simply superficial; they carry more profound meanings and processes (Spocter, 2023). Semiotic analysis allows for the exploration of how visual elements, including colours, images, symbols, and even the precise issuance date, communicate a state’s vision and dominant ideologies to both domestic and international audiences (Świątek, 2023; Brunn, 2023). Stamps are understood as “tiny transmitters” of these ideologies, chosen selectively and rigorously by state government (Świątek, 2023). They are instrumental in creating a “mood” and promoting a sense of belonging to one nation (Frewer, 2004).

The role of stamps in nation-building and fostering a collective identity is widely acknowledged. They exemplify “banal nationalism”, subtly integrating nationalist messages and fostering solidarity through everyday engagement (Raento, 2009; Spocter, 2023). Stamps contribute to the construction of an “imagined community”, where the routine practice of using stamps and observing their images reinforces association with the state and a sense of national unity (Spocter, 2023). The careful consideration given to the content of a single stamp issue or a set of stamps underscores their significant role in informing and educating citizens about their country, its history, and its place in the world (Brunn, 2023). This purpose includes displaying national achievements, heroes, and famous places, reminding citizens of what they should know and be proud of concerning their country (Raento, 2009).

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative visual analysis approach to investigate the design and visual representations of Malaysia’s National Day stamp issued from 2002 to 2018. The research investigates how visual elements of these stamps reflect Malaysia’s national identity, culture, and historical narratives. This methodology is structured to systematically analyse how these philatelic artefacts both contribute to and reflect collective memories and national narratives within the Malaysian context. This section describes specific phases of a framework for analysing research processes, as proposed by Elo et al. (2014).

Table 1. Research Framework

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>PHASE 1 : DATA COLLECTION</b>           | <p>A comprehensive collection of Malaysia's National Day stamps, issued from 2002 to 2018, was compiled. Primary sources for this collection include philatelic catalogues and reputable online stamp databases like myfdc.me, colnect.com and stampdata.com. Additionally, blogs like Stamps a La Carte and the private collections of stamp collectors were consulted. The selection criteria specifically targeted stamps that celebrate Malaysia's National Day, ensuring direct relevance to the research objectives. The collection was cross-checked with the Pos Malaysia philately unit (Raento, 2009). A maximum-resolution digital image of each stamp was obtained to enable detailed visual analysis. The analysis focused on identifying and analysing the design elements used in these stamps. This investigation involved the selection of 31 stamps from seven themes, including miniature sheets.</p> <p><b>Selection Criteria</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Stamps must be officially released by Pos Malaysia for National Day and issued from 2002 to 2018.</li> <li>ii. Both commemorative and special edition National Day-themed stamps were included.</li> <li>iii. Stamps with clear and legible design features were prioritised.</li> </ol>  |
| <b>PHASE 2 : VISUAL ANALYSIS PROCEDURE</b> | <p>Each stamp was examined using a visual content analysis. This approach aligns with existing studies on the analysis of symbols and meanings in Malaysian stamps (Karimon et al., 2023). The following aspects were considered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Imagery: Visual motifs and symbols depicted on the stamps (e.g., national symbols like the hibiscus, national flag, significant landmarks, or historical figures) (Kay, 2020).</li> <li>ii. Colour palettes: The dominant colours used and their potential cultural or national significance within Malaysia.</li> <li>iii. Typography: Fonts, text placement and any textual components, such as slogans or years.</li> <li>iv. Symbols and motifs: Recurring symbols, emblems, or motifs that carry cultural or national resonance in Malaysia (Karimon et al., 2023).</li> </ol> <p><b>Data Analysis</b></p> <p>The selected 31 stamps were identified and grouped. Recurring motifs, symbols, and design trends were identified and categorised, with descriptive classifications added and adjusted to achieve a near-universal classification (Gilbreath, 2023). The resulting data was charted and examined as drawn by Gilbreath (2023). Where relevant, the historical and social context of each year's National Day was considered to inform interpretation. The visual data was subjected to thematic analysis. Comparative analysis across different years was conducted to trace changes in visual representation, symbolic focus, and design trends over time.</p> |
| <b>PHASE 3: FINDING</b>                    | <p>The concluding element of this investigation entails interpreting the results obtained from the prior analytical stages. This interpretation synthesises all collected information, encompassing insights derived from the analysis of the stamps' visual elements and context. This phase seeks to examine the visuals depicted on the stamps and their connection to Malaysian national identity, based on the primary research topics.</p>  |

This analysis employs a systematic, semiotic methodology to analyse visual components on Malaysian National Day stamps. The process encompasses data collection, visual identification, classification, coding, and symbol analysis, which reveals how these visual elements convey meanings related to the national celebration. The research offers important observations about the visual depictions of the stamps while recognising the subjective nature of semiotic interpretation and the possibility of more theme exploration.

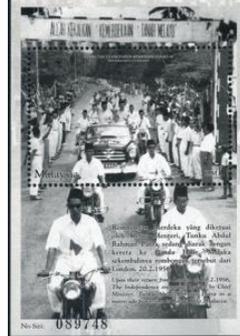
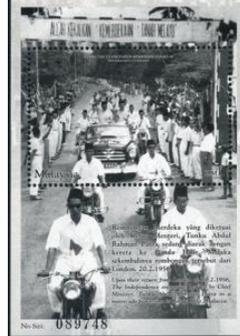


Figure 1. Merdeka Day-themed stamp design components  
 Source: colnect.com, 2009, 2018

**The Findings**

This analysis concentrates on the postage stamps released in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly those from 2002 to 2018, which span seven themes and comprise a total of 31 designs. The analysis has considered important factors such as themes, visual narratives, semiotic elements, and interpretations depicted in each stamp design. Table 2 presents the visual analysis of these stamps. The visual elements were identified and grouped into categories. The stamps in the categories were examined individually and in various combinations to identify patterns or main themes (Gilbreath, 2023). Table 3 showed 15 categories, and Figure 2 reviewed trends.

Table 2. Malaysia’s National Day-themed stamps issued from 2002 until 2018

| Theme 1<br>24.08.2002  | Theme 2<br>19.08.2003  | Theme 3<br>31.08.2007   |
|--|--|---|
| <br>1.1 | <br>2.1 | <br>3.1   |
| <br>1.2 | <br>2.2 | <br>3.2   |
| <br>1.3 | <br>2.3 | <br>3.3   |
| <br>1.4 | <br>2.4 | <br>3.4   |
|  |  | <br>3.5   |
|  |  | <br>3.6  |
|  |  | <br>3.7  |
|  |  | <br>3.8  |
|  |  | <br>3.9  |
|  |  | <br>3.10 |



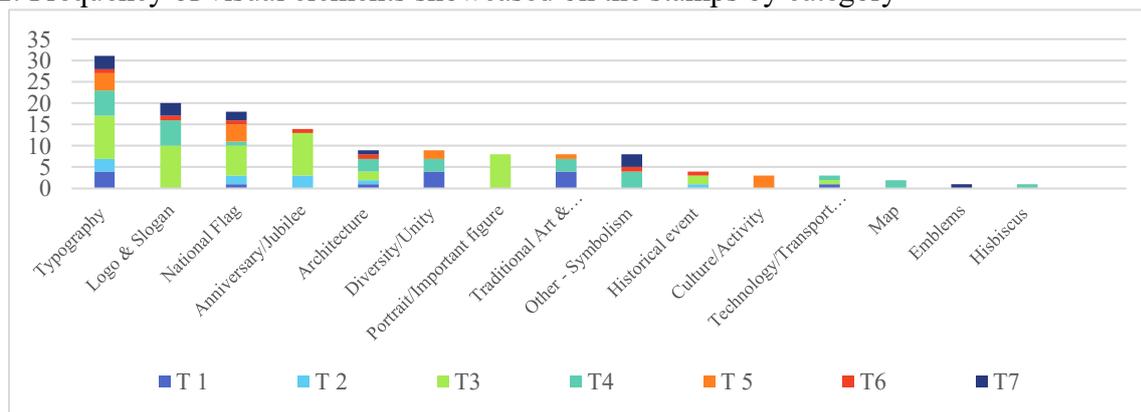
Source: myfdc.me, colnect.com, stampdata.com

Table 3. Visual elements used identified in the selected stamps

Reference: T. = Theme

| No. | Category   | T.1 | T.2 | T.3 | T.4 | T.5 | T.6 | T.7 | Total |
|-----|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| 1.  | Anniversary/Jubilee                                    |     | 3   | 10  |     |     | 1   |     | 14    |
| 2.  | Architecture   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 3   |     | 1   | 1   | 9     |
| 3.  | Culture/Activity (Sports/Communal work)                |     |     |     |     | 3   |     |     | 3     |
| 4.  | Diversity/Unity (People)                               | 4   |     |     | 3   | 2   |     |     | 9     |
| 5.  | Emblems  |     |     |     |     |     |     | 1   | 1     |
| 6.  | National Flag  | 1   | 2   | 7   | 1   | 4   | 1   | 2   | 18    |
| 7.  | Hibiscus (National flower)                             |     |     |     | 1   |     |     |     | 1     |
| 8.  | Historical event                                       |     | 1   | 2   |     |     | 1   |     | 4     |
| 9.  | Logo and Slogan  |     |     | 10  | 6   |     | 1   | 3   | 20    |
| 10. | Map  |     |     |     | 2   |     |     |     | 2     |
| 11. | Other - Symbolism (pictograms)                         |     |     |     | 4   |     | 1   | 3   | 8     |
| 12. | Portrait/Important figure                              |     |     | 8   |     |     |     |     | 8     |
| 13. | Technology/Transportation                              | 1   |     | 1   | 1   |     |     |     | 3     |
| 14. | Traditional Art and Culture (Costume/Dance/Music/Game) | 4   |     |     | 3   | 1   |     |     | 8     |
| 15. | Typography (Title/Caption)                             | 4   | 3   | 10  | 6   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 31    |

Figure 2. Frequency of visual elements showcased on the stamps by category



## Discussion

Since 1957, Pos Malaysia has issued 12 National Day-themed stamps (until this date) to commemorate the independence day and a significant historical milestone for Malaysia, with a total of 43 distinctive designs that celebrate historical events and symbols of the country. The collection includes the very first stamp design commemorating Independence Day on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 1957, followed by the 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Independence a year later and the 10<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversaries of Independence in 1967 and 1982. In 1991, Pos Malaysia issued a special series of stamps featuring Malaysia's past prime ministers to coincide with the celebration of Independence Day. However, since then, Pos Malaysia has abstained from issuing National Day-themed stamps until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the release of the first issue of *Perpaduan Malaysia* (Malaysian Unity), dated 24<sup>th</sup> August 2002, in conjunction with the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence; the latest issue to date was in 2018 with the theme "*Sayangi Malaysiaku*". Therefore, this research defines its scope to encompass the National Day-themed postage stamp issued from 2002 until 2018. The analysis of 31 stamps spanning seven themes resulted in the establishment of 15 categories of visual features.

These groups are classified based on the literal visuals featured on the stamps and interpreted figuratively. The identified categories are "Anniversary" (commemorative aspect), "Architecture" (this includes monuments), "Culture/Activity" (by means of sports and communal works), "Diversity/Unity" (portrays the united multicultural people of Malaysia), "Emblems", "National Flag", "Hibiscus" (the national flower), "Historical Event", "Logo and Slogan" (the current year of Merdeka Day theme), "Map", "Portrait of important figure", "Technology/Transportation", "Traditional Art and Culture" (this includes traditional costumes, dance, musical instruments and games) and finally "Typography" (that consists of text and captions, excluding the name of the country, year of issue and denomination). The most prominent representations were identified and analysed.

The analysis of Table 3 and Figure 2 indicates the existence of 15 symbolic categories across seven of Malaysia's National Day-themed stamp series. The three primary categories identified are "Typography", "Logo and Slogan", and "National Flag". "Typography" is extensive, appearing on each stamp and serving as a prominent tool for visual storytelling. The "Typography" category encompasses text, including the caption of each stamp, the title of the theme, and the slogan. Examples of titles are Theme 2 with "*Sambutan Ulangtahun Kemerdekaan Ke-46* (46<sup>th</sup> Independent Celebration)" from 2003, Theme 3 with "*Sambutan Jubli Emas Kemerdekaan Malaysia 1957-2007* (Golden Jubilee Celebration of Independence Day of Malaysia)", Theme 4 featuring the National Day slogan from the year 2009, Theme 6 with "*Sambutan Ulang Tahun Kemerdekaan ke-57, 1957-2014* (57<sup>th</sup> Independence Celebration 1957-2014)", and Theme 7 with "*Sambutan Hari Kebangsaan 2018* (National Day Celebration 2018)". However, this category does not include text that features the name of the country, denomination, or year of issue, as these elements are standard features of Malaysia's stamp design layout appearing on every stamp to indicate the origin, year of issuance, and value.

The "Logo and Slogan" theme is the second most prevalent, appearing up to 20 times. It originated in the Theme 3 issue, where the National Day celebration theme and logo were depicted on the stamp to mark 50 years of Independence Day, accompanied by the slogan "*Malaysiaku Gemilang*" (My Glorious Malaysia). This element continued in the Theme 4 issue, featuring the 1 Malaysia logo and the slogan "*Rakyat Didahulukan, Pencapaian Diutamakan*" (People First, Performance Now). It was then followed by Theme 6, which included the slogan "*Di Sini Lahirnya sebuah Cinta*" (Malaysia..Here a Love Was Born), and Theme 7, which presented the phrase "*Sayangi Malaysiaku*" (Love My Malaysia). These slogans were often stylised to enhance their visual and emotional impacts. However, this component was absent from the stamps in Theme 5.

The category with the third highest incidence was the "National Flag", which appeared 18 times. The Malaysian national flag, formally known as *Jalur Gemilang* or the Stripes of Glory, carries profound meaning and recalls important historic moments for the people of Malaysia as the crucial symbol of national identity (Syed Mohamad Albukhary, 2012). Each stamp featured the *Jalur Gemilang* either as the central element or

positioned in the background. These stamps celebrate the flag's significance by incorporating the national flag to evoke a sense of pride and unity among the Malaysian populace.

The "Anniversary" category ranked fourth, with 14 occurrences. Themes 2, 3, and 6 commemorate the 46<sup>th</sup> (2003), 50<sup>th</sup> (2007), and 57<sup>th</sup> (2014) anniversaries of Independence Day. Theme 3 features a gold-stamped logo, symbolising the "Gold Jubilee" celebration of Independence Day. "Architecture" and "Diversity" shared the same ranking, each with 9 appearances. The themes that showcase "Architecture" (including buildings and monuments) foreground Malaysia's architectural achievements, ranging from colonial-era landmarks to modernist symbols, as seen in Themes 1, 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7. In Theme 1, architectural elements are portrayed only in the miniature sheet (1.4) but outside of the stamp area (perforated area). This theme includes illustrations of the Petronas Twin Towers, Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), Perdana Putra, and Penang Bridge. Stamp 2.1 features the Sultan Abdul Samad Building in Theme 2. Theme 3 showcases the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, along with the National Monument and the House of Parliament (3.1). Additionally, the Petronas Twin Towers, Perdana Putra, and Penang Bridge appear again in the stamp (3.2), this time alongside Kuala Lumpur Tower (KL Tower), which is placed in the middle of the Petronas Twin Towers. Theme 4 portrays architectural elements with an image of Kuala Lumpur's city skyscrapers in stamp 4.4 and miniature sheet (4.6). In stamp 4.5, the House of Parliament appears once more, representing aspects of the National Principle known as "*Keluhuran Perlembagaan*" (Sovereignty of the Constitution). Theme 6 depicts only the upper part of the National Monument. In theme 7, on stamp 7.2, the Petronas Twin Towers, KL Tower, and Perdana Putra reappear alongside the Sabah State Administrative Centre and Sarawak Legislative Assembly. The "Diversity" theme illustrates the multicultural population of Malaysia, reflecting the nation's esteemed mixed community while emphasising unity within society. Stamps in this category depict interlinked hands, human chains, or stylised crowds composed of multiracial figures in traditional attire, as evident in Themes 1, 4, and 5. The element of diversity can also be highlighted in stamp 4.3, which portrays Malaysians from various sectors of society, levels of education, and ages, featuring illustrations that represent a doctor, a police officer, an engineer, a military member, a postman, a graduate student, and a schoolchild.

The "Portrait", "Traditional Art and Culture", and "Other" categories each ranked equally, with eight appearances. Theme 3 exclusively features the "Portrait" category, showcasing figures significant to Malaysia's Independence Day. Notable figures include the Father of Independence, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who appears four times; Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn, who appear twice; as well as Tun Tan Cheng Lock and Tun V.T. Sambanthan. Additional portraits of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi are included in the miniature sheet (3.5) but are positioned outside the perforated area, alongside Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak, and Tun Hussein Onn. All portrait illustrations are rendered in warm and reddish-brown (sepia), believed to evoke the essence of monochrome photographs that convey a sense of the classic and historic. "Traditional Art and Culture" includes the portrayal of traditional costumes, dances, musical instruments, and games. These depictions affirm cultural richness while projecting harmony. Such elements are evident in Themes 1, 4 and 5. The variations in traditional costumes and musical instruments contribute to the concept of ethnic diversity and authenticity, highlighting the uniqueness of the multicultural community that shapes Malaysia's identity. Theme 1 shows different ethnic groups in Malaysia wearing traditional clothes and playing traditional instruments (1.1, 1.3 and 1.4). It also shows the traditional games of *congkak* (1.2) and tug of war (1.4). Similar elements of diversity, featuring traditional costumes that signify ethnicity, can be found in Theme 4 (4.2, 4.5, and 4.6) and Theme 5, which further includes a traditional dance (5.3). The "Other" category appears in Themes 4, 6, and 7. This category comprises elements that extend beyond the main context and necessitate additional analysis, such as symbolism conveyed through pictograms and icons that reflect implicit meanings. For example, Theme 4 includes symbols like the heart shape in 4.2, the red arrow showing upward in the background and the lightbulb in 4.3. In 4.4, elements such as a portable computer, satellite, satellite receiver, and microscope symbolise science and technology, along with illustrations of a man in a suit representing a businessman and a scientist. In the stamp 4.5, the symbols depicted represent four of five *Rukun Negara* (National Principles), including individuals in subtle gestures like 'praying' that representing Belief in God, the headdress of Yang Di-Pertuan Agong (representing 'Loyalty

to the King and Nation'), a mallet (Rule of Law), and two individuals in traditional attire greeting with a gesture (right hand on the left chest) representing 'Good Behaviour and Morality' (Pos Malaysia, 2009). In Theme 6, the symbol of holding hands is featured, while Theme 7 presents the shape of individuals lifting hands, which could signify happiness or joy on both stamps 7.1 and 7.2. Stamp 7.3 displays a perforation in the shape of a heart.

The "Historical" category provides valuable insights, albeit it is relatively rare. This category has been recorded four times and is present in Themes 2, 3 and 6. In Theme 2, the historical elements are showcased in the miniature sheet (2.3), which features a photograph of the Independence entourage led by Chief Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra during a motorcade procession to Banda Hilir Malacca (Pos Malaysia, 2003). Theme 3 showcases Tunku Abdul Rahman's chanting "*Merdeka*" gesture (3.1) and signing the Declaration of Independence (3.3) (Pos Malaysia, 2007). Both illustrations are also coloured in sepia, which is associated with the historical event. In Theme 6, the historical component is represented as part of the stamp's background, illustrated by a newspaper cutting believed to have been published on the day of independence, prominently displaying the word "*MERDEKA!*" The "Culture/Activity" and "Technology/Transport" categories were each recorded with three occurrences. The "Culture/Activity" category includes aspects of the contemporary culture, activities, and lifestyle of the Malaysian people, such as sports and communal work. This theme is exemplified in Theme 5, especially in stamp 5.1 (reading), stamp 5.2 (sports reflecting an active lifestyle), and stamp 5.4 (communal work). The "Technology/Transport" category highlights Malaysia's achievements in modern science and technology. The miniature sheet (1.4) in Theme 1 features the Proton, a domestically manufactured car, alongside the Express Rail Link (ERL), a modern train service. Theme 3 (3.2) also showcases the domestically produced car, while Theme 4 (4.4) illustrates science and technology.

The categories "Map", "Emblem", and "Hibiscus" recorded the fewest occurrences, with "Map" appearing twice, while both "Emblem" and "Hibiscus" appeared only once. The presentation of Malaysian maps visually underscores the concept of national territories and cohesion between West Malaysia and East Malaysia. The "Map" was featured twice in Theme 4, primarily in stamp 4.1 and also in stamp 4.4, where the Malaysian map is integrated within a pixelated world map and highlighted in red. Generally, the map serves as the background for the design. The term "Emblem" appeared exclusively in Theme 7, particularly in the miniature sheet (7.3), although the composition lies outside of the perforation area. The emblems include the National Coat of Arms alongside 13 state emblems (listed in clockwise order: Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, Sabah, Sarawak, Selangor, and Terengganu). The "Hibiscus", specifically the subspecies *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, is known as *Bunga Raya* and was designated as the National Flower in 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1960 by the first Prime Minister (Cheah, 2018). It appeared in stamp 4.5 in Theme 4 as a background for the design.

In summary, the stamps issued by Pos Malaysia transcend ordinary iconography, embracing a more refined and inclusive representation of the nation's diverse heritage and aspirations. The consistent use of the National Day logo and slogan emphasises the government's progressive goals for the nation, while the repeated displays of symbols, such as the *Jalur Gemilang*, and the increasing emphasis on architectural icons, historical figures, and science and technology aspects illustrate a dynamic shift towards more narrative-driven representations through the years. Along with depictions of diverse ethnicities, traditional costumes, and cultural practices, they point out the importance of unity and inclusivity in shaping Malaysia's identity. This aspect illustrates the stamps' fundamental role in promoting national identity (Karimon et al., 2023).

This perspective aligns with scholarly views that regard stamps as "paper ambassadors" and effective tools for nation-building, reflecting national culture and ideology through their meticulous design (Loh, 2014). The findings reveal a notable shift in design focus: from early commemorative motifs to contemporary themes that emphasise multiculturalism, technological advancement, and shared aspirations. It also showcases distinct graphic trends and attributes these developments to technological advancements and the emergence of new forms and styles in the design world, as highlighted by Khan (2020). This evolution signifies not only changing

artistic preferences but also a broader societal commitment to celebrating Malaysia's heritage while envisioning its future. Such trends align with the broader objectives outlined in the National Culture Policy (DAKEN 2021), particularly in fostering social cohesion, cultural preservation, and inclusive development through visual storytelling. Visual narratives in stamps have a major impact on developing national identities and are vital in projecting a country's image (Karimon et al., 2023; Kay, 2020).

## Conclusion

This research offers a comprehensive analysis of Malaysia's National Day-themed stamps, illuminating their profound roles as cultural artefacts and potent vehicles for visual communication. By employing a qualitative semiotic framework in conjunction with quantitative assessment, the study systematically examined 31 National Day stamp designs issued by Pos Malaysia across seven themes from 2002 to 2018. The primary research objectives are to identify key visual elements, decode their symbolic meanings, and assess their contribution to the ongoing constructions of Malaysian national identity.

Key findings reveal that these stamps consistently employ the repertoire of national symbols, unifying logos, slogans, and carefully curated imagery, all of which serve to reinforce and disseminate collective values, historical milestones, and aspirations of unity. The evidence points to a significant shift in design emphasis over time, from commemorative motifs and historical references to themes that highlight multiculturalism, technological progress, and contemporary relevance. The categories of typography, logo and slogan, and the national flag emerged as dominant elements, reflecting deliberate strategies to foster a shared sense of belonging and pride among citizens. These findings not only underscore the stamps' function as "paper ambassadors" but also highlight their strategic significance in nation-building, supporting the broader discourse on visual nationalism and the construction of imagined communities. By meticulously cataloguing and interpreting the visual motifs and trends, this study demonstrates how postage stamps transcend their utilitarian origins to become influential instruments in shaping public consciousness. The stamps help to strengthen shared stories and improve Malaysia's image locally and globally. The findings also showcase a significant evolution in design emphasis. This transition indicates a shift in artistic preferences, reflects and shapes the nation's socio-political and cultural narratives, honours Malaysia's legacy, and anticipates its future.

The main contributions of this research are threefold. First, it clarifies how everyday objects, specifically commemorative stamps, can serve as sophisticated tools for the expression and propagation of national identity. Second, it provides important guidance for future stamp design: embracing narrative richness, contemporary relevance, and culturally resonant themes can amplify the impact of these miniature canvases as tools for nation-building and international representation. Finally, it lays important groundwork for the academic recognition of stamp design as a vital subfield within graphic design and visual culture studies, advocating for its further exploration in scholarly discourse.

Looking ahead, future research could expand upon these insights by conducting comparative analyses of stamp iconography across different countries, particularly within Southeast Asia, which commemorates the same events, to elucidate broader sociocultural dynamics as conveyed through philatelic art. Additionally, subsequent studies could focus on the interplay between stamp design, societal values, and cultural performance, or explore the impact of digital media on the evolving role of stamps in contemporary nation-building.

Ultimately, Malaysia's National Day stamps do more than mark historical milestones; they actively engage in shaping public consciousness and reinforcing shared values. By documenting and visualising the nation's journey, these stamps demonstrate the enduring importance of visual communication in fostering national unity and supporting Malaysia's cultural aspirations in the global community over time. This research contributes to the wider field of visual culture studies by highlighting the role of seemingly ordinary objects in shaping collective identities and promoting national unity.

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