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ENHANCING CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM THROUGH INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE: A CASE STUDY OF MASJID JAMEK SULTAN ABDUL SAMAD KUALA LUMPUR

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Abstract

Cultural and religious tourism significantly contributes to global tourism, fostering economic growth, cultural understanding, and heritage preservation. Religious sites, such as Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad in Kuala Lumpur, attract Muslim pilgrims and culturally curious visitors. This study examines how interpretive signage can enhance the visitor experience at the mosque, with a focus on cultural and religious aspects. The research assesses how interpretive tools influence visitors' knowledge and engagement through quantitative methods, including surveys and on-site observations. The findings reveal that the mosque still predominantly uses physical exhibition panels, with limited adoption of digital media. Many visitors, particularly non-Muslims, lack awareness of Islamic culture, mosque architecture, and the historical significance of the area. Challenges such as time constraints, language barriers, and inadequate signage placement contribute to underutilising existing interpretive tools. Moreover, the content lacks emphasis on the mosque's construction history and architectural significance. Clear, multilingual, and contextually rich signage enhances visitors' understanding and appreciation. Digital and interactive tools further engage younger audiences, offering a more immersive experience that aligns with the increasing role of technology in tourism. By integrating religious, cultural, and historical information into a cohesive narrative, interpretive signage educates and fosters emotional connections to the site. The study concludes with recommendations to expand digital platforms, increase multilingual inclusivity, and enhance visitor interaction through technological solutions to improve the tourist experience and align with smart tourism needs.

Keywords: Cultural and Religious Tourism, Interpretation tools, Digital interpretation, Cross-cultural.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural and religious tourism plays a vital role in fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding (Cohen, 2011). In Malaysia, Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad Kuala Lumpur (MJSASKL), one of the country's oldest mosques, stands as a significant symbol of Islamic architecture and cultural heritage. This historic landmark attracts visitors interested in its aesthetic and spiritual dimensions. However, to fully appreciate the mosque's cultural and religious significance, effective interpretive signage is essential for communicating its rich history and context to a diverse audience.

This study investigates how interpretive signage can enhance the visitor experience at MJSASKL, with a particular focus on cultural and religious interpretation. Using a quantitative approach, it comprises visitor surveys and on-site observations. The research assesses the impact of signage on visitor knowledge, engagement, and satisfaction. Key concerns include the mosque's current signage, which provides limited content focused mainly on rules and instructions, lacking the depth needed to convey its historical and religious relevance (Timothy, 2011).

Language barriers further reduce the signage's effectiveness (McKercher & Lau, 2008). In the study area, Malay and English texts are used; however, they do not serve the growing number of international tourists adequately. The absence of modern features, such as QR codes, AR applications, and audio guides, also limits engagement, as today's tourists expect more interactive and immersive experiences (Montagano, 2023). These tools can bridge the gap between traditional methods and contemporary visitor expectations, creating more meaningful interactions. Key concepts in this study include "interpretive signage" (tools that enhance understanding at cultural and religious sites), "cultural tourism" (travel focused on experiencing heritage and traditions), and "visitor engagement" (the ways tourists interact with and learn at a destination).

Masjid Jamek is chosen as the case study due to its historical value and clear need for improved interpretive strategies. As an iconic cultural landmark, enhancing its signage could deepen tourist appreciation and promote respect for cultural and religious diversity. This study uniquely contributes to interpretive signage literature by situating its analysis within the context of Islamic religious tourism in Malaysia. A domain where cultural sensitivity, spiritual meaning, and heritage education converge. It extends existing scholars by integrating cultural and religious narratives into interpretive design, offering empirical insights into how interpretive signage can mediate cross-cultural understanding and inclusive visitor experiences.

In conclusion, this study explores how improving interpretive signage at MJSASKL can enhance visitor experience and cultural understanding. By addressing existing limitations and embracing innovative approaches, the research contributes to advancing cultural tourism and ensuring heritage sites effectively share their stories with global audiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines contemporary research on cultural and religious tourism, focusing on the role of interpretive signage in enhancing visitor understanding and engagement. It critically analyses current debates surrounding digital and interpretive technologies and situates this study within the broader international discourse on heritage interpretation and religious tourism.

Cultural and Religious Tourism

Cultural and religious tourism are increasingly recognised as interconnected sectors that shape how societies experience heritage and spirituality. Cultural tourism involves travel driven by an interest in art, architecture, festivals, and history (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002; Richards, 2018). Religious tourism, on the other hand, centres on visits to sacred spaces motivated by faith, devotion, or cultural curiosity (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). Both promote intercultural dialogue and heritage appreciation, forming a key part of global tourism. According to UNWTO (2022), nearly 40% of international travel is culturally motivated, highlighting the economic and educational potential of these forms of tourism.

Globally, sites such as Mecca, Vatican City, and Jerusalem attract millions of pilgrims annually, not only as centres of worship but also as heritage destinations contributing to education and mutual understanding (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In Malaysia, religious tourism is integral to the national tourism framework, particularly through Islamic architectural landmarks such as Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad Kuala Lumpur (MJSASKL). Yet, most Malaysian studies remain descriptive, focusing on infrastructure and visitor management rather than interpretive communication. This gap underscores the need to explore how interpretive tools can mediate learning and respect in religious contexts.

Interpretive Signage and Visitor Engagement

Interpretive signage is a key element of heritage communication, linking tangible heritage with intangible meanings. Tilden's (1977) foundational principles define interpretation as a means of revealing deeper significance rather than merely providing information. A view extended by Moscardo (2022), who emphasises interpretation as an experience that fosters emotional connection and stewardship.

Recent studies suggest that interpretation effectiveness depends not only on content but also on design, inclusivity, and technological integration. Traditional static signage, though accessible, often lacks interactivity and depth. In contrast, interactive and digital signage incorporating QR codes, touchscreens, and AR applications to enhance immersion, accessibility, and learning (Liu, 2023). Case studies such as the Alhambra in Spain (Electra, 2016) and the Vatican Museums (Buggeln & France, 2018) demonstrate how digital interpretation can improve understanding of historical and religious contexts.

However, most international research prioritises technological innovation rather than contextual sensitivity. In religious settings, interpretation must navigate ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. For instance, an approach that succeeds in European museums may not be appropriate in Islamic sacred spaces, where visual and behavioural norms shape visitor experiences. This highlights the need for culturally adaptive interpretive strategies that combine educational and spiritual awareness for an area still underexplored in Southeast Asia.

Interpretation, Learning, and Experience

Interpretive signage plays a critical role in shaping visitor learning and satisfaction by turning passive observation into active engagement (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Nowacki, 2021). Theories of experiential and constructivist learning (Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1970) support this view, asserting that understanding deepens when visitors interact, reflect, and connect new knowledge to prior experiences.

Empirical findings show that visitors who engage with interpretive tools report stronger attachment to sites and higher satisfaction levels (Bai Fan et al., 2024). Yet, many heritage destinations still rely on monolingual, static, or poorly contextualised signage, leading to limited comprehension, particularly among international visitors (Timothy & Olsen, 2006). In religious environments, this lack of contextual interpretation can also lead to cultural misunderstanding or disengagement. Addressing these issues requires a more inclusive interpretive framework that integrates with linguistic accessibility, visual clarity, and spiritual respect.

Digital and Technological Innovations

Technological innovations are transforming heritage interpretation globally. The adoption of mobile apps, QR codes, and augmented reality (AR) enhances interactivity, allowing visitors to access layered narratives through visual and auditory media (Liu, 2023). AR and virtual reality applications have proven particularly effective in engaging younger audiences and diversifying learning

modes (Ying, 2020). These tools also address accessibility challenges by offering multilingual options and features for users with disabilities.

Smart tourism literature increasingly emphasises the convergence of interpretation, technology, and visitor experience (Asmadi et al., 2023). Yet, most of these studies are concentrated in Western or East Asian contexts, focusing on secular heritage sites rather than religious settings. The lack of empirical research addressing digital interpretation in Islamic tourism environments, where spiritual sensitivity and cultural ethics must guide technological adoption, constitutes a major research gap

Positioning the Current Study

The reviewed literature demonstrates that while interpretive and digital technologies enhance engagement, their application in religious heritage contexts remains under-theorised and under-tested. Current international research rarely examines how interpretive signage can balance educational goals with spiritual respect. Furthermore, studies in Malaysia and the wider Southeast Asian region have yet to examine how interpretive tools can serve as mediators of intercultural understanding in Islamic tourism.

By addressing these gaps, this study extends international scholarship on digital and interpretive technologies by contextualising their application within Malaysia's religious tourism environment. It contributes new empirical insights into how interpretive signage (traditional and technology-assisted) can support inclusive, meaningful, and culturally sensitive visitor experiences. In doing so, it bridges the existing divide between global digital interpretation practices and the specific interpretive needs of Islamic cultural heritage sites.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach to evaluate the effectiveness of interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad in Kuala Lumpur, focusing on its influence on visitor engagement, satisfaction, and educational outcomes. The research also identifies areas for improvement to better communicate the mosque's cultural and religious significance.

A total of 380 visitor responses were collected, based on a calculated minimum sample size using a 95% confidence level from the 2023 visitor population of 75,456. Of these, 360 valid responses were analysed, while 20 were excluded due to incomplete data. The sample comprised both local and international tourists, selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in age, nationality, and familiarity with Islamic culture. Field observations were also conducted to assess the existing signage and identify issues related to engagement and clarity.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software, to examine visitor trends and perceptions.

Although this research was conducted as part of a practice-based research initiative rather than under a formal institutional ethics review, all ethical procedures were observed. Participants were verbally informed of the study's objectives, and consent was obtained prior to participation. The personal identifiers collected were used solely for research purposes and were kept strictly confidential. Respondents were assured anonymity in reporting and informed that participation was entirely voluntary.

While purposive sampling ensured diversity, it may introduce bias since participation depended on visitor availability and willingness. Possible nonresponse or demographic imbalance, particularly among international and older visitors, may also affect representativeness. These limitations were considered during analysis to minimise bias and enhance the reliability of findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad Interpretive Signage

Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad (MJSASKL), established in 1909, is one of Kuala Lumpur's oldest and most significant mosques, blending Moorish, Islamic, and local architectural styles. Situated in the city centre, it attracts a diverse range of visitors, including local worshippers, Muslim pilgrims, and international tourists, each with varying interests. Some seek spiritual connection, others admire its architectural beauty and cultural significance. As a major religious and cultural site, MJSASKL draws a growing number of annual visitors.

Currently, the mosque's interpretive signage offers limited historical context and explanations, suggesting the need for more engaging and informative materials. The existing signage includes permanent outdoor panels, temporary indoor exhibits, multimedia displays, and guided tours. The outdoor panels, part of the River of Life (ROL) project by Kuala Lumpur City Hall, highlight key historical and architectural themes and provide accessible content. Temporary indoor exhibits, found in areas like the management office and ablution spaces, offer insights into the mosque's history and construction. However, some are harder to access.

Multimedia displays provide immersive content, including videos and interactive elements, explaining Islam and the mosque's history. Guided tours are also available, offering in-depth information. Yet they may not always be accessible due to limited availability. Despite these efforts, the language used in signage could be improved for wider accessibility. Enhancing interpretive signage by integrating richer religious and cultural narratives, improving

language clarity, and increasing interactivity could greatly enhance the visitor experience. Such improvements would align with the mosque's goal of providing comprehensive and engaging educational experiences for a diverse audience.

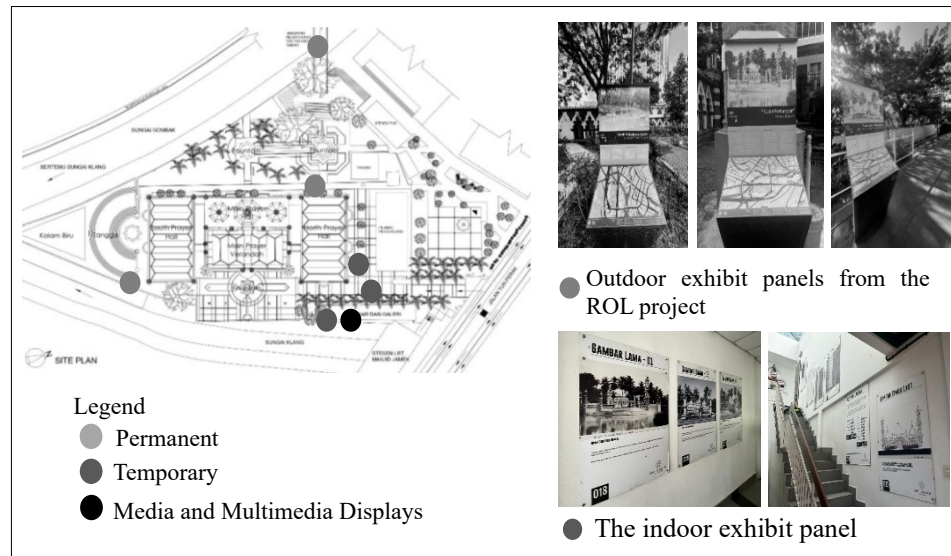


Figure 1: Existing Interpretive Signage Provided in Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad, Kuala Lumpur.

Interpretive Signage Tourist Experience

The study found that 59% of respondents did not engage with interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad, while only 42% did, indicating the need for improvements. Respondents preferred exhibition formats, with physical indoor panels being the most popular (42%). These static displays provide detailed and accessible information, supporting self-paced learning. Physical outdoor panels were preferred by 31%, offering essential information in entry points or open-air areas, ideal for tourists seeking a brief introduction. Only 27% engaged with video indoor exhibition panels, which provide immersive experiences but are limited by language barriers and equipment needs.

The findings suggest that physical signage remains the most effective, and a balanced approach combining traditional panels with multimedia content could enhance visitor engagement, accessibility, and the overall experience at cultural and religious heritage sites.

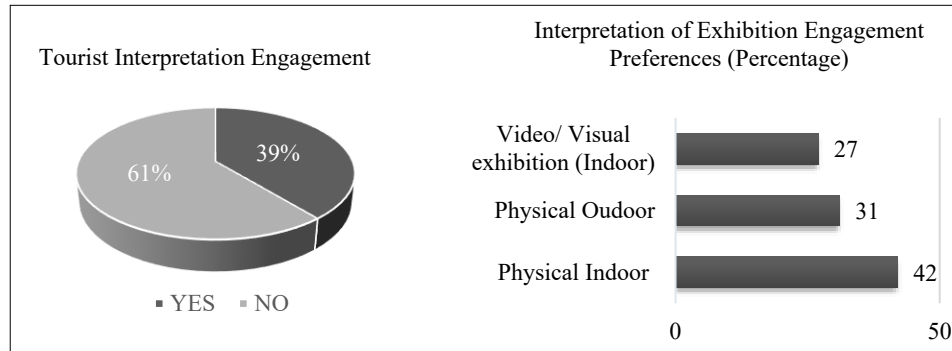


Figure 2: Percentage of Tourist Engagement and Preference of Interpretive Signage.



Figure 3: Interpretive Signage, Tourist Engagement and Indoor Exhibit Panels

Table 1: Crosstabulation Numbers of Respondent Signage Engagement Vs Knowledge Gain

		Knowledge Gain					Total
		No Knowledge	Much Less	Less	Much	Much More	
Engagement with signage	Yes	4	8	92	32	12	148
	No	156	52	0	4	0	212
Total		160	60	92	36	12	360

The analysis shows a clear link between visitor engagement with interpretive signage and knowledge gain. Most respondents who interacted with signage reported moderate knowledge improvement, while many who did not engage (160 visitors) gained no knowledge. This highlights the importance of effective signage in enhancing visitor understanding. The findings suggest that improving content, format, and accessibility could boost knowledge outcomes.

Chi-Square test results in Table 2 confirm a strong, statistically significant relationship between signage engagement and knowledge gain ($p < 0.001$), indicating a linear pattern (more engagement results in more learning). Although a warning about small expected counts was noted, it does not affect the overall validity of the results, reinforcing the crucial role of interpretive tools in cultural and religious tourism experiences.

Table 2: Chi-Square Tests - the relationship between respondent engagement and knowledge gain.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	300.566 ^a	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	377.980	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	242.675	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	360		

a. 1 cells (10.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.93.

Figure 4 above shows that the tourists gained the most knowledge from religious information (48%), reflecting the significance of religious practices, rituals, and beliefs at cultural and religious sites. This content enhances visitors' understanding of the site's deeper meaning, offering insights into spiritual practices and the site's role within the broader religious context. The second most common area of knowledge gained was building architecture (37%). Tourists engaged with the site's architectural features, appreciating its aesthetic value, cultural context, and symbolic design elements. This reflects the visitors' interest in the physical structure and its cultural and historical relevance. Site history had the least engagement (15%), possibly due to tourists focused more on the site's current religious significance and practices than on its past. Additionally, the availability of historical information in other sources may reduce interest in on-site historical content.

In conclusion, visitors prioritise religious and architectural knowledge when engaging with interpretive signage, while the historical context of the site is less emphasised. Future interpretive strategies could integrate historical content alongside religious and architectural information to enhance visitor experience and cater to diverse interests.

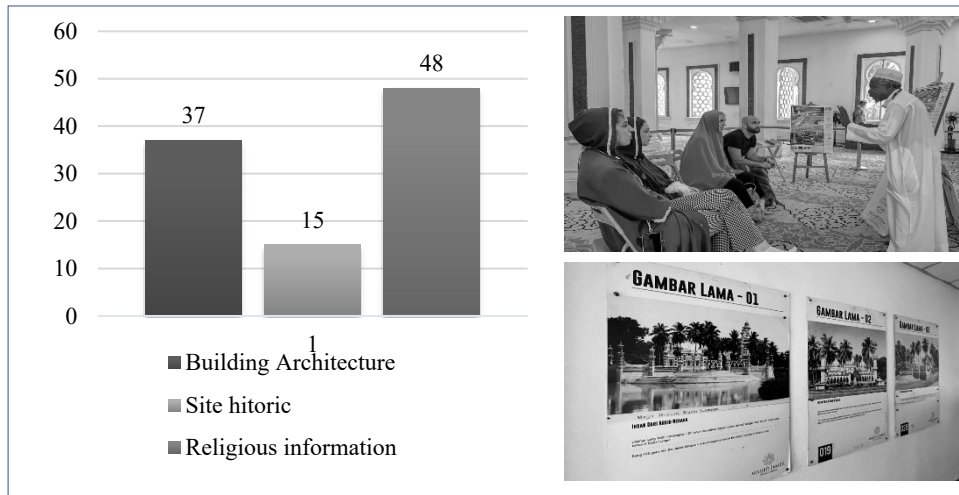


Figure 4: Percentage Distribution of Knowledge Gain from Tourist Engagement with Interpretive Signage

Figure 5 highlights several key challenges with the current interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad. The most significant issue, cited by 27% of respondents, is the lack of interactive media, indicating a need for more engaging digital or tactile elements to enhance visitor interaction and understanding.

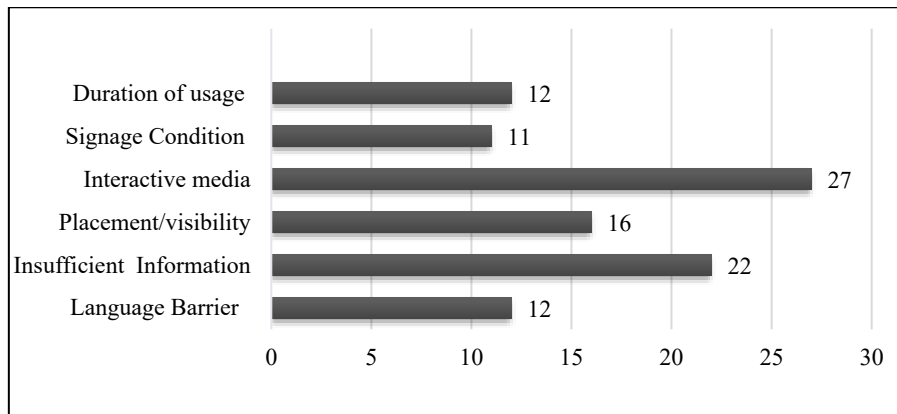


Figure 5: Challenges and Problems Among Visitors (in percentage)

Insufficient information (22%) also emerged as a major concern, suggesting the signage lacks adequate detail or context to support a deeper appreciation of the mosque's cultural and architectural significance. Poor

placement and visibility (16%) reduce the effectiveness of the signage, while the language barrier (12%) limits accessibility for non-Malay-speaking tourists due to a lack of multilingual options.

Additionally, 11% of respondents noted that the signage is in poor condition, which may affect readability and overall engagement. Another 12% pointed out limited usage time, indicating that visitors may not spend enough time interacting with the signage for meaningful learning. These findings emphasise the need to improve the signage's content, design, placement, language accessibility, and interactivity to better serve diverse visitors and enhance the educational value of the site.

Table 3: Crosstabulation of Respondent age Vs Future Preference

		Types of Panels			Total
		Physical Panel	Digital	Guided Tour	
Age	18-34	46	94	48	188
	35-54	36	70	50	156
	55-74	8	0	8	16
Total		90	164	106	360

The analysis of visitor preferences for future interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad reveals diverse expectations across age groups. Younger visitors (18–34) favour digital and interactive signage, while middle-aged individuals (35–54) prefer a blend of digital tools and guided tours. Elderly visitors (55–74) prefer traditional physical signage and guided experiences, indicating a need for clear, accessible interpretation methods. These findings suggest that a multi-format strategy—incorporating digital displays, physical signage, and guided tours—is essential to cater to all age groups.

However, the statistical analysis shows a weak, non-significant correlation between age and signage preference ($r(360) = 0.037$, $p = 0.244$). It indicates that age is not a strong predictor of preference. Similarly, demographic factors like education also show little influence on visitor preferences. This suggests that psychological or experiential factors, such as cultural exposure or personal values, may play a more significant role in shaping how visitors engage with interpretive signage. Therefore, interpretive strategies should emphasise inclusivity, diversity of format, and deeper visitor engagement. Future research should explore these non-demographic factors to better understand how interpretive tools can enhance the cultural experience.

Table 4: Correlation between respondent age and Visitor future signage preference.

	Age	Signage Future Preference
Age	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.037
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	121.822
	Covariance	.339
	N	360
Signage Future Preference	Pearson Correlation	.037
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.244
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	5.644
	Covariance	.016
	N	360

Additionally, the study assessed visitor experiences with the current signage system. As shown in Table 5, satisfaction levels were mixed: only 7% of visitors reported being "Very Satisfied" and 28% "Satisfied," indicating that while the signage provides basic information, it lacks depth and emotional engagement. A further 21% expressed neutrality, highlighting the signage's limited impact in delivering an immersive or memorable experience. These findings point to the need for more engaging, informative, and context-rich signage to better connect visitors with the mosque's cultural and religious significance.

Table 5: Tourist Satisfaction Level in Interpretive Signage Experience

Satisfaction Level	Percentage
Very Unsatisfied	5
Unsatisfied	39
Natural	21
Satisfied	28
Very Satisfied	7

This neutrality signals an urgent need to reassess content relevance, design, and presentation to capture visitors' interest better and enhance their learning journey. The combined 44% dissatisfaction rate is more concerning, with 39% "Unsatisfied" and 5% "Very Unsatisfied," highlighting substantial shortcomings in the current system. Key issues include insufficiently detailed or poorly organised content, which fails to communicate the site's significance effectively. The lack of visually appealing, multilingual, and accessible formats alienates a diverse audience. Additionally, poorly positioned signage and limited integration of digital or interactive tools hinder visitors' ability to engage with the

material meaningfully. Addressing these deficiencies through modern, innovative solutions is crucial to improving visitor satisfaction and ensuring the interpretive signage fulfils its role in enhancing cultural and religious tourism at this iconic site.

DISCUSSION

This study highlights the significant role of interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad in enhancing visitor engagement, learning, and satisfaction. Despite the mosque's rich religious and architectural heritage, current interpretive tools such as outdoor exhibits, indoor panels, and multimedia displays are limited in scope, accessibility, and technological integration. As a result, 44% of visitors reported dissatisfaction, citing insufficient content, poor signage placement, and a lack of multilingual and interactive features.

Visitor preferences further emphasise the growing demand for digital experiences, with 51% favouring tools such as QR codes and mobile apps. This trend points to the need for more dynamic and user-friendly interpretive platforms. Meanwhile, traditional methods like guided tours and static panels, preferred by 21% and 28% respectively, still hold value and could be enhanced through digital integration. The study also notes a content imbalance, with current interpretation prioritising religious and architectural aspects over historical context. A more balanced narrative could better cater to diverse visitor interests. To improve overall satisfaction and engagement, the mosque should invest in multilingual support, interactive digital media, and comprehensive, inclusive content, positioning itself as a premier cultural and religious tourism site in Kuala Lumpur.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Revamping the interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad is crucial to improving visitor engagement, satisfaction, and learning. Enhancements should include multilingual content, improved placement, and the integration of digital tools such as interactive displays and mobile apps. The current signage lacks depth, accessibility, and technological features, limiting its effectiveness. Incorporating technologies such as augmented reality and virtual tours can offer more inclusive and meaningful experiences. Regular maintenance is also essential.

Future research should assess the long-term impact of digital tools and compare strategies across religious sites to develop best practices for interpreting cultural and religious tourism.

CONCLUSION

This study evaluates the interpretive signage at Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Samad and reveals significant gaps in meeting visitor expectations. Despite the mosque's historical and religious importance, the current signage lacks depth, multilingual inclusivity, and digital interactivity, limiting visitors' engagement, learning, and satisfaction. To address these challenges, a comprehensive enhancement strategy is required, focusing on clearer, more context-rich content, improved placement, and the integration of digital technologies such as mobile applications, QR codes, and interactive displays to create a more inclusive, accessible, and educational experience for diverse audiences.

Although purposive sampling was employed, ethical procedures were followed, and participants' confidentiality was maintained throughout the study to ensure data integrity and reliability. The findings demonstrate how interpretive signage can effectively bridge cultural understanding and spiritual respect, providing a meaningful communication platform for heritage education. By situating its analysis within Malaysia's Islamic tourism framework, this research contributes to global discourse on digital and interpretive technologies in heritage tourism. Its insights extend to other religious heritage sites worldwide, such as the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and the Vatican Museums, where faith, culture, and visitor experience intersect. The study also offers policy guidance, emphasising the need for culturally sensitive, multilingual, and technology-integrated interpretation strategies aligned with sustainable and inclusive tourism goals.

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