

The Malaysian *Nasi Lemak* Story as Reviewed Online: A Genre Perspective

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Abstract:

As a multiracial country, food is a significant component of Malaysian culture. Local cuisines serve to portray the different ethnicities which make up its population. Reflecting the nation's unique identity, Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF) has become internationally acclaimed due to the rise of the digital era. The Internet has enabled easy access to information on various local and international cuisines, ranging from personal food vlog channels to dedicated culinary expert websites. The quest and appreciation for famous cuisines and technological convenience give rise to a relatively prominent digital genre: online food reviews, a significant source of information for gastronomes worldwide. Thus, this paper explores online food reviews focusing on *Nasi Lemak*, a specific MHF Malay cuisine and Malaysia's national dish. Employing a genre perspective, I investigate the roles of text and visuals in these reviews to make sense of the form, function, and meaning of this digital genre. This paper establishes the interdependence and integration between the textual and visual modes to decipher the online representation of *Nasi Lemak* in a Malaysian context and the digital space. The online *Nasi Lemak* review as a genre illustrates the significance of its multimodal nature in describing the *Nasi Lemak* story, simultaneously offering potential early insights into the sociocultural nuances surrounding this MHF.

Keywords: genre analysis, online review, multimodal, visual analysis, Malaysian Food Heritage, *Nasi Lemak*

As a multiracial nation, Malaysia's diversity is reflected in its population, belief, culture, and heritage. The dynamic interaction between different ethnic groups in Malaysia has also led to its association as a food paradise (Raji et al. 221), suggesting the prominence of its gastronomical heritage in shaping the diversity synonymous with the Malaysian identity and culture. Lee acknowledges this notion when examining the influence of different modernisation tropes on Malaysian food cultures and identity, where he describes food cultures as 1) readily available representations of traditional communities and 2) "arenas" for establishing and expressing new societal identities and meanings (2017: 139).

The integral role of the Malaysian food culture as part of the nation's identity is also evident through the use of Malaysian Heritage Food (MHF) as a promotional strategy to encourage tourism (Omar et al.; Ahmar bin Mohd Sanip and Mustapha). Omar et al. define MHF as “typical local culinary, embedded with cultural values that represent the social community lifestyles” (2020: 269). The authors further propose that the MHF be understood as a “cultural gastronomy” embodying past customs yet remains a shared practice among Malaysians today (Omar et al. 2020: 270).

Representing the taste of the three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese, and Indian) in Malaysia, the MHF is then one of the most straightforward entry points to discovering the unique Malaysian culture and identity. For both the local society and the global community, this culinary discovery is enhanced increasingly by the Internet and digital affordances. Hence, one's first encounter with the MHF's blend of savoury, sweet and spicy can commence digitally by watching personal *Youtube* food channels or browsing through professional culinary web spaces.

In this article, I explore the digital space of online food reviews that focuses on a popular MHF, *Nasi Lemak*, to understand how online food reviews are being constructed and interpreted in the Malaysian digital context. More specifically, I consider online food reviews as a genre to uncover the role of texts and visuals in realising their generic construction and interpretation. By making sense of online food reviews through a genre perspective, I ultimately attempt to provide early insights into the online textual and visual representation of *Nasi Lemak*, thereby also shedding light on the possible Malaysian sociocultural nuances associated with this particular MHF. I commence by briefly establishing the concept of genre and the operationalisation of my investigation in the following section.

The Genre Perspective

While the term “genre” is common in the literary field, I employ a linguistic lens in defining and operationalising the notion of genre to achieve the aims I have outlined earlier. From a linguistic point of view, the development of genre as a concept can be attributed to three major schools of thought, namely, 1) the Systemic-Functional Linguistics (SFL), 2) the English of Specific Purposes (ESP), and 3) the New Rhetoric Studies (NRS) (Hyon; Bawarshi and Reiff; Tardy and Swales). Each school of thought focuses on different aspects that shape a genre. The difference between these three systems is perhaps most observable in how each system approaches a genre – from a micro or a macro perspective. While the micro-end of the spectrum emphasises the examination and classification of text structure, viewing genre from the macro-end centres on exploring sociocultural and contextual elements. The focus of different linguistic genre traditions depends on their inclination toward either end of the spectrum. This inclination influences a researcher’s view in defining, explaining, and consolidating the term “genre”.

I assume a median position when it comes to this genre-approach spectrum, arguing for the need to identify textual patterns and account for contextual elements. By incorporating knowledge involving both ends of the spectrum when analysing a genre, we can obtain a more comprehensive and robust understanding of a genre. This line of argument begs the question: what can knowledge of a particular genre offer us? To address this question, I turn to scholarly definitions of genre and establish what genre entails in the context of this article.

Drawing on Bakhtinian dialogism¹, Bazerman provides the following definition of genre:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to to create intelligible

communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar (1997:1)

Bazerman acknowledges that while recognisable structure or form appears to be a defining trait, genre also serves as avenues for meaning-making and ways of getting things done (Strauss and Feiz 52; Paltridge and Hyland 62). Genre is a metaphorical frame that constantly influences sociocultural practices and, in turn, is shaped by these contextual elements (Swales 61; Bazerman 1). Similarly, Strauss and Feiz describe genre as a frame that displays subtle discursive patterns within a particular context to achieve specific communicative purposes (2013: 52). Based on these definitions then, genre makes apparent the relationship between text and context, demonstrating the connection between language and society in terms of form, function, and meaning (purpose). In other words, analysing the textual structure of a genre allows for the exploration of its context, i.e., social practices, enabling a better understanding of a particular culture and, to a certain degree, the world in which the genre exists.

It is through this intrinsic interdependence between text and context that I establish the definition of genre in this article: genre is a textual representation of how and why we do things in the real world, a meeting ground between language and society. I consider written text (and visuals) as an instantiation of language and sociocultural nuances as a representation of culture in my exploration of online *Nasi Lemak* reviews as a genre. By making sense of the textual (and visual) form, function, and meaning of this analysed genre, I also hope to gain an understanding of the social and cultural practices that shape and are being shaped by these textual and visual elements.

Although there are investigations of online food reviews (Lim et al.) and online restaurant reviews (Vásquez and Chik), these studies do not involve conceptualising online reviews as a genre. Lim et al. analyse the influence of online food reviews on behavioural intention, grounding their analysis on a quantitative stance. Vásquez and Chik's work is

perhaps more aligned with the current study, where the authors demonstrate how online restaurant reviews serve as a tool for amateurs to leverage their position and identity. Both studies appear to focus on uncovering some dimension of power in online reviews, which is in contrast with the intention of this paper: to examine the reciprocal link between text and context rigorously. On that note, this article would serve as a strong starting point in exploring power dynamics if the present research scope is extended.

A recent study employing genre analysis as a framework to unpack online structure and meaning was conducted by Sun et al. The authors compared the textual aspects of Weibo and Twitter posts by Chinese and American banks to investigate the establishment of corporate identity in the two different cultural contexts. When textual structures are examined as corporate identity construction strategies, they found marked differences that can be attributed to either Asian or Western culture. While their study does not emphasise the influence of context (different cultures), the text-context relationship is evident in their findings and can be further explored. Since the current paper focuses on the MHF, *Nasi Lemak*, I posit that my contextual findings primarily pertain to Malaysian practices and cultures.

Dubbed Malaysia's national dish, the *Nasi Lemak* dish is also internationally acclaimed, demonstrating a fusion of taste (savoury, sweet and spicy) and texture (fluffy rice, crunchy fried condiments, smooth spicy paste) in a single serving. Google celebrated this Malaysian dish by featuring *Nasi Lemak* as a Google Doodle in January 2019 (Doyle 1). The literal English translation of this Malay MHF is 'fat/rich (*lemak*) rice (*nasi*)', possibly attributed to the way rice is prepared in this dish: with rich coconut cream/milk (*santan*). This rice preparation is typically accompanied by deep-fried anchovies, fried peanuts, cucumber slices, wedges of hardboiled egg and a spicy, fragrant chilli condiment known as *sambal* to complete the basic version of this dish. The *Nasi Lemak* can also be extended by adding side dishes such as chicken/ beef curry and chicken/beef *rendang* (rich 'dry' curry stew). The popularity of this

dish is also witnessed in Singapore, Malaysia's neighbouring country, where it is widely consumed.

In order to operationalise my investigation, I utilise online *Nasi Lemak* reviews from the Malaysian food website *FriedChillies.com*. As a longstanding digital media food platform, the brand name, *FriedChillies*, was established in 1998 and dubbed Malaysia's first homegrown food channel. At the time of data collection, the platform has recently been awarded the *Food HEROES* title by *Time Out KL* and is the organiser for the overwhelmingly successful "I Eat *Nasi Lemak*" event (Ahmad). Their website hosts a variety of food-related content, from recipes to reviews. The 16 *Nasi Lemak* reviews selected from the website for analysis consist of at least 400 words. These reviews typically describe the *Nasi Lemak* dish available at a specific outlet with multiple interactive features, i.e., hyperlinks etc. Compositionally, the website layout can be divided into two main sections: 1) the more extensive right section containing the main review and 2) the left section where most interactive features are clustered. For this study, I focus on the texts and visuals in the main review (right section), as illustrated in Figure 1. Like most typical websites, users must scroll down the webpage to access the complete story or browse through the main review.

The screenshot shows a website interface for FriedChillies.com. The main content area features a review for 'Nasi Lemak Bumbung'. A black box highlights the main review text and a photograph of the dish. An arrow points from a separate text box on the left towards this highlighted area. The review text includes a description of the alleyway, the specialty of fried chicken with a golden crust, and a detailed description of the dish's ingredients and preparation. The website header includes navigation links like 'Food Channel', 'Burgers', 'Nasi Lemak', 'Food Trucks', and 'Blog'. The footer contains social media links and contact information for the restaurant.

Text and visual in the main review considered for analysis.

Figure 1: Analytical unit of the study – the text and visuals in the ‘main’ review

I pay specific attention to rhetorical textual units, linguistic features, and visuals in the reviews to establish the textual (and visual) structure alongside its potential function and meaning. While consolidating these three components of the genre, I also attempt to decipher the underlying meanings that they hold, i.e., what they tell us about the representation of *Nasi Lemak* as well as the society and culture it exists within. In doing so, I outline possible preliminary insights into Malaysian practices and culture surrounding this MHF and in general.

Describing the ‘Best’ *Nasi Lemak* Textually

Before discussing the text structure, I provide the definition of the term ‘review’ to establish the function or purpose of online *Nasi Lemak* reviews as a genre. According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘review’ is “a report that gives someone’s opinion about the quality of a book, performance or product etc.” (*Definition of ‘Review’*). Bhatia classifies reviews in the same category as reports which are “essentially and traditionally non-promotional in intent” (2004: 91). I consider the purpose of online *Nasi Lemak* reviews as

information-giving. More specifically, these online *Nasi Lemak* reviews fulfil the function of supplying relevant product information to consumers. This purpose or function is evident in the elaborate descriptions of the different components of *Nasi Lemak* and the various side dishes that serve as extensions of this dish, e.g., fried chicken, *rendang* etc. There are also nuanced textual accounts of those who enjoy *Nasi Lemak* (customers/consumers) and those who supply the dish (vendors), as well as descriptions of the place/location where the respective *Nasi Lemak* are being sold.

Feel, Taste and Smell the *Nasi Lemak*

When reviewing this MHF dish, the authors almost always focus on the rice and the *sambal*, suggesting that these two components are the main aspects of what makes a *Nasi Lemak* 'good' or 'best'. A well-prepared *Nasi Lemak* rice is usually "light", "fluffy", and "crumbly" with "a smidgen of coconut flavour" and "cooked with pandan and ginger". On the other hand, an up-to-standard *sambal* appears to be "balanced" – combining "sweet" and "spicy" apart from a "jammy" or "chunky" texture from the onions, an essential ingredient.

The descriptions of the rice and *sambal* in *Nasi Lemak* further dictate three significant culinary aspects when evaluating this dish: 1) texture, 2) flavour and 3) scent. While I acknowledge the notion of personal taste preferences, these recurring descriptions of *Nasi Lemak* arguably demonstrate the standard tastebuds of Malaysians when it comes to 'proper' *Nasi Lemak*. Apart from being fluffy and crumbly (texture), the rice in a *Nasi Lemak* should contain a hint of fat from the coconut milk (flavour) and the fragrance of pandan and ginger (scent). The *sambal* should be chunky (texture), not too sweet or spicy (flavour), with a whiff of fried onions (scent). At times, the author explains these three distinct aspects as part of the preparation procedure as a strategy to enhance the audience's sensory experience as a whole. A demonstration of this strategy is illustrated in the following excerpt from Review 15:

The sambal here is well rounded, not too sweet and not too spicy, as Goldilocks would say, the sambal is just right. It's chunky with a deep crimson colour. Dried chillies, onions and garlic are blended and then cooked slowly for two and a half hours, allowing the aromatics to simmer and release their natural sweetness.

Based on these patterns of description, we observe how the authors/reviewers wield decision-making authority in evaluating the *Nasi Lemak* dish, i.e., prioritising the rice and the *sambal* over the rest of the condiments. This subtle authority simultaneously enables the conception of the benchmark or evaluation criteria for this MHF/ national dish. Here, it is worth noting that the authors/reviewers are Malaysian food writers and, the website, the award-winning *FriedChillies.com* website is the first Malaysian homegrown food channel. We can assume that the Malaysian background and professional objectives of the authors as writers would prompt the production of content (reviews) that cater to their Malaysian audience. In addition to Bell's proposal on audience design, the centrality of the audience, in this case, is also further enhanced by the digital environment where user-centredness is significant. Given these contextual factors, we can render the earlier textual evidence (descriptions of rice and sambal) as containing traces of Malaysian stances and preferences concerning a 'good' *Nasi Lemak*.

***Nasi Lemak* Accompaniments: Side Dishes (*Lauk*), People, and Place**

Upon providing details of the *Nasi Lemak* dish itself, these reviews typically include an elaboration on the *lauk* or side dishes served with this MHF. As mentioned earlier in the article, these side dishes can extend the basic version of this MHF. My textual analysis shows that the authors are in favour of this notion of *Nasi Lemak* extension or enhancement. An excerpt from Review 2 exemplifies this occasion of occurrence:

Raise the bar by adding some *lauk*. The *lauk* selection pretty much caters to all variations of the *Nasi Lemak* pairing. On this particular visit, I went for a sampling of the sambal kerang (RM4.50) (*clam sambal*), sambal sotong (RM4.50) (*squid sambal*), beef rendang (RM 5) and a generous piece of fried chicken (RM4.50).

The phrases “raise the bar” and “Nasi Lemak pairing” indicate the function of these side dishes: an extra complement that enhances the Nasi Lemak dish and, thereby, the entire eating experience.

Instead of focusing on the texture, flavour and scent observed in the depiction of rice and sambal, the *lauk* or side dishes are described in these reviews through a brief explanation of how they are prepared. In Review 10, the popular side dish of fried chicken is described as having “crispy” and “golden brown” skin – a product of being “well-seasoned with curry powder, lemongrass, fennel, marinated for a day and then dredged in cornflour before frying to help bind all the wonderful spices together”. Another example I have selected involving the preparation procedure is found in Review 1, where the well-liked beef dish, *Daging Bantai Jer*, is portrayed as beef slices that are “boiled, then pounded and cooked with shallots, garlic and onions.” This side dish is also prepared with “no lemongrass [...] added in the recipe. Soy sauce is used to sweeten and brown the meat” where its “gravy has a thick consistency quite similar to *rendang*”.

Across the reviews, the variations in side dishes are highlighted and further elaborated, as seen in the excerpts I have provided. While the *Nasi Lemak* dish remains the focus of the review, as evident in the title (inclusion of the word *Nasi Lemak*) and paragraph structures (review descriptions of the *Nasi Lemak* come before the side dishes), the side dishes are represented as an addition to the *Nasi Lemak*, complementing the MHF and to a certain extent, “perfecting” the dish or “sealing the deal”.

Apart from the descriptions of side dishes or *lauk*, the *Nasi Lemak* reviews also contain salient accounts describing the vendors and the establishments offering the MHF dish. These accounts usually include a brief history of the establishments, a mention of their exact geographical location, and a description of the vendors'/owners' background. I use an excerpt from Review 12 to illustrate this occurrence:

Sometimes greatness is borne out of a touch of bad luck. You know what I'm talking about: that silver lining behind the cloud that bears fruit in a way one would never have imagined. That's certainly the story that En. Ali and Pn. Wasnita told us when we stopped by his *Nasi Lemak* stall in Penang. About ten years back, En. Ali was working in a factory when things got a bit, well, bad. So he and his wife decided to supplement their income by selling nasi lemak. "I had an Indonesian friend who taught me how to prepare a good nasi lemak," said the soft-spoken En. Ali. "So me and my wife decided to sell *Nasi Lemak* to make ends meet." And man, how those ends have met. Now the husband and wife duo are selling *Nasi Lemak* full time. Ask any Penang-ite about *Nasi Lemak* Lebu Pantai and they would know which you're talking about.

Similar to the other 15 reviews, this account of the people and place selling the *Nasi Lemak* dish is positioned as the introductory paragraph of the reviews, making it the first paragraph of the *Nasi Lemak* story. Here, the audience/readers are offered details of how a *Nasi Lemak* business comes to fruition due to the vendors' difficult life circumstances. Weaved into this description that seemingly tells of En. Ali and Pn. Wasnita's background is also the geographical location of the establishment, Lebu Pantai.

Another review, Review 13 (*Nasi Lemak Kukus Fauzey*), features a lengthier and thus more detailed account of the conception of Chef Fauzey's (vendor/ owner) *Nasi Lemak*. In addition to the fact that the vendor/owner was a former chef at 5-star hotels for ten years and his numerous attempts to perfect the dish, readers are also made aware of the inspiration behind the *Nasi Lemak*— a 'bus guy' instead of an "Indonesian friend" as in the case of En. Ali in Review 12.

The "people" factor or human sentiment is further reflected through the use of Malay address terms such as "Kak" (older sister), "Encik" (Mr.) and "Puan." (Madam). These address terms suggest the relationship between the vendor and the customers supersedes the transactional dimension to indicate cultural values. While customers remain prioritised, these address terms signal deference, acknowledging the seniority of the vendors/owners in terms of age and expertise – a common Malaysian practice.

There were also mentions of the diverse consumers of the *Nasi Lemak* dish in these reviews. The *Nasi Lemak* in Review 12 has been served to an international audience where “2000 packets of *Nasi Lemak*” were ordered for “Korean and Japanese Visitors”. Similarly, Review 10 featuring *Nasi Lemak* in Bangsar has “garnered regular customers from all over Malaysia, Singapore and even Indonesia”. The consumers of *Nasi Lemak* consist of not only local and international audiences but also royalty, as stated in Review 11, where the “Sultan (king) of Kedah used to send his workers (servants? Staff?) to buy it for him as it is very nearby Istana Anak Bukit, the state palace”.

The deliberate association of the *Nasi Lemak* dish to the people and place in these reviews suggests that both aspects are crucial in narrating the *Nasi Lemak* story online. Instead of outlining the vendor/owner and the location, we are provided with concise yet significant information on both aspects to contextualise the specific *Nasi Lemak* dish, i.e., what inspired the creation of the *Nasi Lemak*, how long has it been since the specific *Nasi Lemak* was created etc. In this sense, reviewing the ‘best’ *Nasi Lemak* is not limited to evaluating the taste and flavour of rice and sambal. The people and the place that contribute to the history and creation of the particular *Nasi Lemak* variation appear to be necessary components to describe or explain the quality of a quintessential *Nasi Lemak*. From another viewpoint, we can also argue that these *Nasi Lemak* narratives also involve the story of Malaysians from all walks of life and the different places/states in Malaysia.

These textual observations illustrate how the MHF, *Nasi Lemak*, is being presented online in a Malaysian context. With the rice and the sambal as crucial components of the dish, its creation is often related to the humble beginnings (roadside stalls and ventures) of enduring Malaysians. It is enjoyed by a wide range of people – local and international, peasants and royals alike. I now turn to the visual representation of this MHF dish in the reviews.

Representing the ‘Best’ *Nasi Lemak* Visually

In this section, I extend my textual analysis to include visuals in my exploration of the construction of *Nasi Lemak* reviews as a genre and simultaneously the digital representation of the dish itself. The decision to account for visuals echoes Björkqvall’s call to recognise the interdependence between the role of text, visuals and layout in a genre (2018:63). I begin by mapping out the visual layout of these reviews to identify how visuals are being organised. Figure 2 below illustrates the typical organisation and positions of the visuals that occur in these reviews:

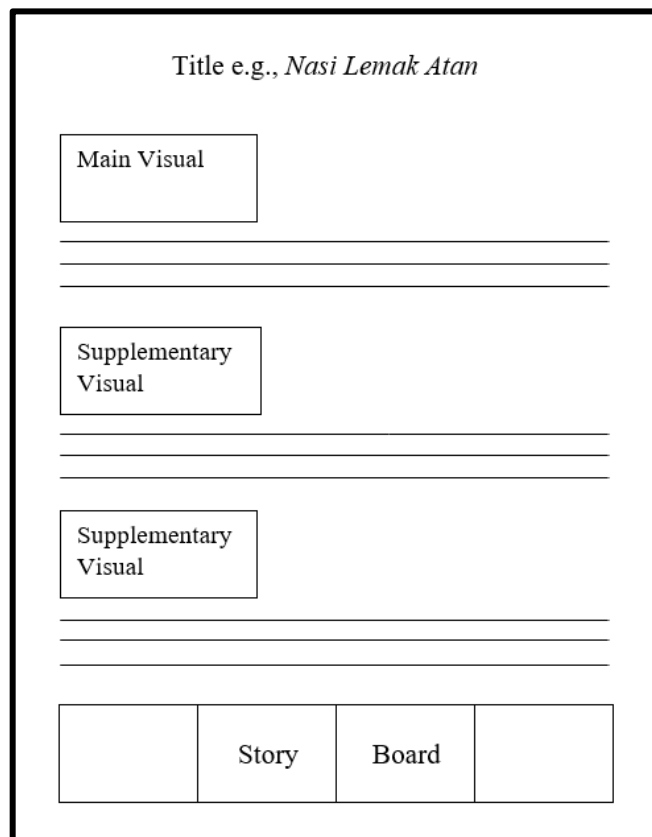


Figure 2: Visual Layout/Organisation of Online Nasi Lemak Reviews

As seen in Figure 2, I identify three types of visuals that occur in all 16 *Nasi Lemak* reviews, namely, 1) the Main Visual, 2) the Supplementary Visuals, and 3) the Story Board. The Main Visuals are located on the top of the webpage after the review’s title and before the text. I consider the following images that occur as Supplementary Visuals. These visuals occur in the

middle of the review, usually after two paragraphs depending on the textual length of the reviews. A sequence of visuals/photographs known as the Story Board is found at the end of every review, after the final paragraph of text. I discuss the role of each visual type separately in the following subsections, drawing on the earlier textual insights in an attempt to establish the text-visual synergy of this genre.

Main Visuals: *Nasi Lemak* Feature

The Main Visual is the first visual the audience would encounter when they visit the webpage of the review. Due to its position in the visual layout, the Main Visuals seemingly function to capture the audience's attention with the vividness and size of these visuals (approximately 50% of the review webpage), encouraging them to browse through or read the review. The Main Visual can be said to share this function with the title of the reviews: a single line of text displayed in bright red colour and a larger font size compared to the rest of the text in the review. Occupying the top half of the review page, both the title and the Main Visual play an essential role as the first impression to the audience, influencing the audience's decision to read or browse the rest of the article. Taken together, they seemingly make a pitch to draw readers to the review and encourage them to read further.

Out of the 16 reviews, 12 showcased *Nasi Lemak* as their Main Visual. As for the other four reviews, three Main Visuals (Review 3, 7 and 10) feature the variety in the side dish (*lauk*) spread, whilst the other main image (Review 6) is a shot of the queue number card at the stall. When the Main Visual contains *Nasi Lemak*, this MHF dish is almost always presented in a close-up manner. We can then perceive that the visual of *Nasi Lemak*, instead of any other elements, is deliberately and perhaps strategically chosen to grace the top half of the page layout before any text.

While this placement is unsurprising since these reviews are supposed to feature the *Nasi Lemak*, it allows us to observe yet another function of the text-visual relationship in the review. The Main Visual, especially the close-up shots of *Nasi Lemak*, provides readers with a glimpse of what the review is about: *Nasi Lemak*. The title of the review also performs this function through a standard sentence structure combining the phrase “Nasi Lemak” and the name the MHF dish is known as, e.g., *Nasi Lemak V3 Corner*, *Nasi Lemak Marvellous*, *Nasi Lemak Royale Kedah* etc. Even if a reader overlooks the title in the first place, the saliency of the Main Visual and its layout position directly below the title can serve as yet another avenue/mode to summarise the main content of the review (Figure 3).

Home • Where To Eat • Malay • Nasi Lemak V3 Corner

Nasi Lemak V3 Corner



Go off the beaten path, they say, and you'll find treasures

Home • Where To Eat • Malay • Nasi Lemak Ceria

Nasi Lemak Ceria



The quintessential Malaysian breakfast covers a large area,

Home • Where To Eat • Nasi Lemak Royale Kedah

Nasi Lemak Royale Kedah



When is a nasi lemak not a nasi lemak? When it's yellow,

Figure 3: Examples of Title and Main Visual taken from Review 4 (*Nasi Lemak V3 Corner*), Review 8 (*Nasi Lemak Ceria*) and Review 11 (*Nasi Lemak Royale Kedah*)

Here, we see both the title and the Main Visual work together to establish the content of the review for the readers. They contextualise the central information of the reviews by highlighting and prioritising the *Nasi Lemak* dish. The readers know what to expect from the review content by simply glancing at the title and the Main Visual. It is important to note that the individual role of text and visuals remain unique despite their intrinsic interdependence. What the textual mode can accomplish cannot be achieved by the visual mode in the exact manner and vice versa (Lemke 15). Reading a title such as “*Nasi Lemak Ceria*” can conjure up different mental images of *Nasi Lemak* variations, i.e., wrapped in banana leaf vs served on a plate, sambal served separately vs sambal served mixed on top of the rice. Likewise, viewing a *Nasi Lemak* Main Visual devoid of text may prompt readers to think of which place offers this specific *Nasi Lemak* in the case of reviews. Therefore, I argue that the role of text and visuals is mutual and complementary rather than hierarchal (text is more important or vice versa) in *Nasi Lemak* reviews.

Supplementary Visuals: *Nasi Lemak* Accompaniments

I consider the other visuals within the review as Supplementary Visuals as they extend the information provided by the Main Visual. They provide extra information or details in relation to the *Nasi Lemak* featured in the Main Visual. Most reviews contain two to three images of Supplementary Visuals, while others have up to four visuals. Aligning with the textual units discussed earlier, the Supplementary Visuals depict three specific components that contribute to the representation of *Nasi Lemak* in online reviews: side dishes (*lauk*), people, and place. This alignment offers layout evidence of the connection between the text (body of the review) and the visuals in the *Nasi Lemak* reviews.

Supplementary Visuals containing side dishes are shots of specific *lauk* (Figure 4) or the entire array of side dish selections (Figure 5) available to consumers. Like the Main Visual

of *Nasi Lemak*, these visuals are vivid close-up shots with strong colour modulation and differentiation, seemingly fulfilling the function of offering the readers as many details as possible. These shots enable readers to discover other exciting dishes they can pair with their *Nasi Lemak*. In some sense, Supplementary Visuals featuring side dishes serve as a recommendation to the readers should they wish to extend the basic *Nasi Lemak* dish or even prompt users to make the extension.



Figure 4: Up-close shot of side dishes or lauk taken from Review 1 (*Nasi Lemak Marvellous*)



Figure 5: An array of side dishes (*lauk*) selection taken from Review 10 (*Nasi Lemak Famous*) and Review 14 (*Nasi Lemak Alor Corner*) (left to right)

When Supplementary Visuals comprise people and places, they entail shots of vendors/owners, customers, and the outlet itself (Figure 6). Images featuring customers depict customer lines, whilst vendors/ owners are head-shot portrayals where the vendors are photographed smiling amicably at the readers. The latter visuals create a friendly atmosphere and radiate warmth, appealing to readers at a more personal level and demanding interaction with the viewers (Ledin and Machin 84).



Figure 6: Vendors of *Nasi Lemak Ali* (Review 12), customers at *Nasi Lemak Tanglin* (Review 9) and the outlet for *Nasi Lemak Kak Maimon* (Review 15) (clockwise from top left)

The representation of visual elements we observe in the Supplementary Visuals aligns with my earlier observation of textual chunks or rhetorical units that describe the three aspects accompanying the evaluative description of the *Nasi Lemak* itself. A glance at the layout arrangement of the text and visual in this review shows that the Supplementary Visual occurs alongside the descriptions of the side dishes, people, and place – often after the text descriptions. This text-visual structure hints at how these Supplementary Visuals work in tandem with the paragraphs of text containing the description of the three aspects to create the narrative of a *Nasi Lemak* review.

Akin to the relationship between the title and the Main Visual, the textual paragraphs and the Supplementary Visuals complement each other and contextualise the *Nasi Lemak* dish for the readers. Both components allow readers to immerse themselves in the closest possible manner to the real-world experience of ‘encountering’ the nasi lemak, enabling the readers to relate and even subtly convincing them to pay a visit and taste the nasi lemak. The fulfilment

of this function via the text-visual relationship strengthens the contention that the *Nasi Lemak* review as an online genre does not solely consist of the visual representation of the *Nasi Lemak* itself. Instead, the *Nasi Lemak* story can only be deemed somewhat ‘complete’ when this MHF dish’s extensions are accounted for, including the side dishes (*lauk*), people and place. Thus far, these visual instantiations of these three *Nasi Lemak* aspects warrant my earlier textual observation concerning how the *Nasi Lemak* is being represented digitally in the Malaysian context: a humble, well-loved Malay heritage dish. I reserve the discussion regarding this potential *Nasi Lemak* status after elaborating on the final visual type, the Story Board, in the following sub-section.

Story Board: The All-inclusive Nasi Lemak Tale

As another form of visual found in the *Nasi Lemak* reviews, the Story Board is observed to occur in 13 out of 16 reviews in my dataset. Positioned at the end of the review, the Story Board consists of a collection of visuals where it usually includes the Main Visual, all the Supplementary Visuals and often additional images for readers to view. These extra images can depict *Nasi Lemak*, side dishes, owners/vendors, customers, outlets and other food or beverage served. The sequence and occurrence of the images in a Story Board do not appear to have a set structure and vary from one review to another, i.e., the Main Visual or *Nasi Lemak* depiction does not always occur first.

The structure of the Story Board comprises a large-sized image and a row of thumbnails under this image (Figure 7). Generally, readers view the photographs in the Story Board by scrolling through the thumbnails where the visuals will be enlarged. Alternatively, readers can also click on the larger visual view of the next/another image. These images are horizontally sequenced, allowing readers to navigate to the left or the right when clicked upon. This

experience gives the readers a sense of flipping through an actual book when browsing through the image collection.

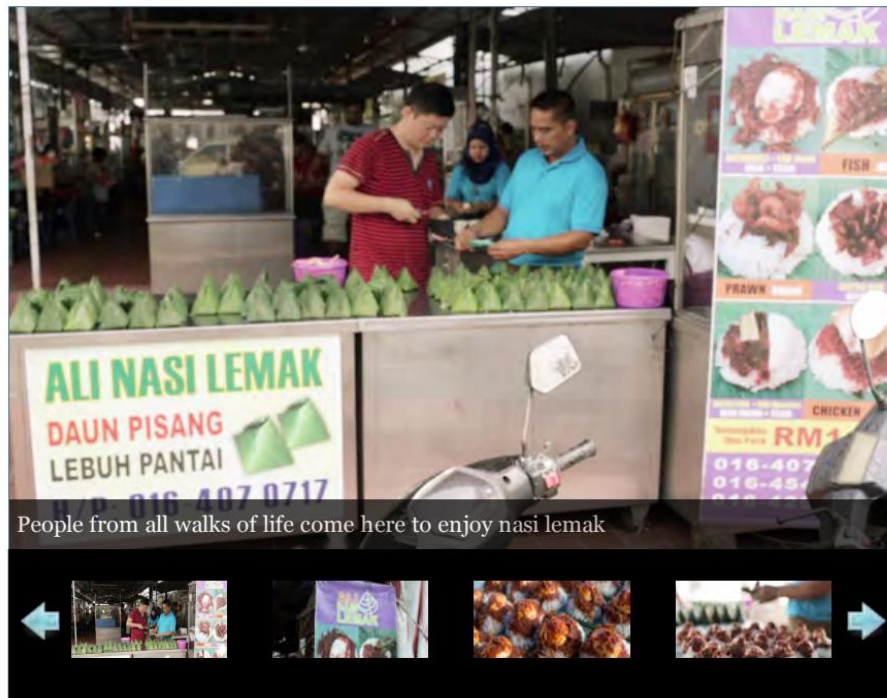


Figure 7: The most extended Story Board collection from Review 12 (Nasi Lemak Ali) with 13 images

Relevant short captions also accompany the individual images in the Story Board to provide ample explanation concerning the image. Interestingly, the captions are not direct descriptions or labels of the photos but include conversational, witty remarks and extensive use of adjectives to engage with the readers. For example, the third image in the Review 12's Story Board features a close-up shot of fried chicken with a question-form caption: "Ayam goreng (fried chicken) anyone?". This type of direct engagement is also observed again in the caption of the thirteenth image displaying an image of a side dish, *paru goreng* (fried offal). In this example, the caption, "Come early for the *paru goreng*!" occurs in the directive form instead of question but functions to invite/ engage with the readers all the same. In the tenth visual showcasing the outlet, we can observe what I consider a seemingly extravagant use of adjectives: "A humble place selling awesome *nasi lemak*". While the adjectives "humble" and

“awesome” appear to describe the place and the *Nasi Lemak*, I posit that they also perform an interpersonal function of persuading the audience in this case. The term “awesome” is also utilised more often in spoken discourse, signalling engagement with the audience.

This caption feature enables us to recognise the occurrence of text-visual relationships where no visual or text appears to occur in isolation in these reviews, further consolidating the integrated role of both modes. In terms of functionality, I contend that the Story Board serve as a comprehensive summary of a *Nasi Lemak* review. Its strategic placement at the end of the review further emphasises this summarising quality it possesses. I further argue that the Story Board can act as the review itself since it is capable of narrating the entire *Nasi Lemak* story in a series of visuals and captions. It combines different essential components of a *Nasi Lemak* review, unlike a single image of the Main Visual or Supplementary Visual that informs us of either the featured *Nasi Lemak* or its accompaniments. The conversational style in which the captions are written also makes for engaging storytelling. Hence, I view the Story Board as a developed narrative structure of the *Nasi Lemak* story, thereby giving rise to a unique genre of its own. I likened the Story Board to a digital short story in this sense. From the readers’ perspective, the combination of images and captions in the Story Board is beneficial for readers who require quick details about the review. It offers concrete, sufficient at-a-glance information for readers who do not have the time to read the full *Nasi Lemak* review or those who favour a higher visual-to-text ratio in their reading materials.

The Malaysian *Nasi Lemak* Story: As Reviewed Online

In this concluding section, I consolidate the textual and visual findings to make sense of how the *Nasi Lemak* story is being told digitally in the online *Nasi Lemak* review as a genre. Drawing on the form and functions of the *Nasi Lemak* review, I then address the potential meaning, i.e., what the form and functions tell us about the Malaysian *Nasi Lemak* by outlining

Malaysian sociocultural nuances that emerge in these digital reviews. By accounting for form, function and meaning, I hope to simultaneously offer early insights into the online multimodal representation of the MHF dish, *Nasi Lemak*.

As evident in my discussion of text and visuals, treating these online *Nasi Lemak* reviews as a genre enables us to identify the overall content structure (form) and what they do (function). Although I use text as a starting point, it is apparent from my visual exploration that the separate role of text and visual is interdependent in these reviews. While they can be treated as separated units for analytical purposes, both components are required and work together to create genre meaning as a whole. This integrated interdependence between text and visual is even more prominent in online genres, where digital affordances make the use of different modes convenient. The presence of the Story Board as a unique genre of its own also somewhat illuminates the complex hybridity of genres in the digital space. In this aspect, the initial view on the information-giving purpose of the review can also be challenged as evaluative and narrative facets are also present in this digital genre, as discussed previously.

The text-visual synergy of the *Nasi Lemak* reviews reveals that while the MHF dish remains central in the genre, the *Nasi Lemak* story also involves *Nasi Lemak* “pairings” consisting of the literal cuisine pairing of side dishes (*lauk*), the people, and the place. When it comes to the basic *Nasi Lemak* dish itself, two components appear to be significant in vying for the best *Nasi Lemak* title: the rice and the sambal. The Malaysian *Nasi Lemak* is considered good when the rice is fluffy, crumbly with the right amount of coconut flavour, and has the fragrance of pandan and ginger. On the other hand, the sambal should have a balanced taste of sweet and spicy to make for a good *Nasi Lemak* dish. The emphasis of these criteria in both text and image relating to *Nasi Lemak* indexes the general Malaysian taste preferences and thereby gives a glimpse of Malaysian culture.

As mentioned earlier, the *Nasi Lemak* is positioned as a humble and well-loved Malay Heritage dish in these reviews. The portrayal of *Nasi Lemak* as the Main Visual often involves the rice dish served on a banana leaf, plastic sheet layered with newspaper, or on a simple plastic plate. Despite its status as a national dish, this MHF dish is not presented as lavish or fancy. The humbleness of this dish is reinforced through the representation of the people and the places. More often than not, the *Nasi Lemak* dish is inspired by the hardships faced by the vendors/owners who, albeit now being owners of successful *Nasi Lemak* businesses, are photographed and described as simple, approachable, and enduring personas. In the same way, the images and textual elaboration of the outlet/ place selling the *Nasi Lemak* highlight these roadside stalls and modest shops as a positive quality. To some degree, these observations point toward the shared values of the Malay culture, which include humility and amicability (Abdul Ghani 247)

The latter aspect of the online representation of *Nasi Lemak* as a well-loved Malay Heritage dish is realised in both text and images. In addition to text chunks describing customers ranging from international visitors and local professionals to royalty, the visuals also showcase customers from different ethnic groups. This display provides a glimpse of Malaysia's diversity and indirectly affirms the status of the *Nasi Lemak* as a national dish and MHF.

This notion of diversity is also realised in the portrayal of the dish as a Malay MHF heritage. The Malay heritage of the *Nasi Lemak* dish is implied in the representation of the vendors/owners' racial origin visually. The vendors/owners can be identified from these images as belonging to the Malay heritage. As mentioned earlier, the use of the Malay language address term and the translation for side dishes, e.g., "ayam goreng" instead of fried chicken, strengthens the Malay roots in which the *Nasi Lemak* dish is being represented.

I contend that the indexicality of the Malay heritage in the *Nasi Lemak* representation also projects nuances of the broader Malaysian culture of diversity. For one, the relatively robust Malay heritage of the *Nasi Lemak* dish does not appear to deter its consumption by Malaysians belonging to other ethnic groups. It is enjoyed by a diverse audience, as evident in the earlier discussion, somewhat reflecting the general acceptance and embracement of diversity in the Malaysian society. Incorporating the Malay language in English-language reviews also signals that these terms are commonly used among Malaysians, not just those who identify as Malay. Furthermore, the address term “Kak”, which refers to an older sister, is a strong statement of the Malaysian culture. This term is used as a common honorific for females apart from showing sibling relations in Malaysia. In the case of these digital reviews, the use of “Kak” is unmistakably to convey respect as the possibility of sharing family ties with the vendors/owners is low. The familial sentiment of the address term can also point towards the collectivist nature of the Malaysian society (Sumaco et al. 93). Given that the Malay language is Malaysia’s official and national language, its inclusion in these reviews gives a sense of Malaysian authenticity. At the same time, these multimodal instantiations also suggest that *Nasi Lemak* is indeed Malaysian.

On the whole, making sense of the online *Nasi Lemak* review as a genre of online review demonstrates how the Malaysian *Nasi Lemak* narrative is being crafted multimodally and offers glimpses of the Malaysian society and culture in which it exists and belongs. As a genre, its multimodal instantiations point towards the recognition of a united diversity as part of the Malaysian sociocultural representation in the *Nasi Lemak* dish.

By establishing the multimodal structure of these reviews, this paper highlights the mutual role of text and visuals in determining the overall form, function, and meaning of the *Nasi Lemak* story. While the interdependence between these two modes is recognised in many

contexts, the digital space parlays the need to examine the multimodal dimension, given its prominent involvement in meaning-making. This article offers early evidence that the genre framework is a potential research lens to achieve this feat. At a broader societal level, the exploration of generic meaning and identity enables us to capture glimpses of sociocultural practices and values reflected in genres. At the same time, these generic (multimodal) instantiations or “ways of being” point toward the ideological nuances that shape the society's narrative and, ultimately, the stories we live by.

Notes

ⁱ This term refers to “a philosophy of language and a social theory that was developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). Life is dialogic and a shared event; living is participating in dialogue. Meaning comes about through dialogue at whatever level that dialogue takes place. Nothing can exist without meaning; everything has meaning”. (‘Bakhtinian Dialogism’ 73)

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