Bridging Horizons: Malaysian Perspectives on Opportunities and Barriers in Academic, Cultural, Sports, and Economic Cooperation with Iran

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Abstract

This study examines Malaysians' perceptions of Iran across higher education, culture, sports, tourism, and economic collaboration, integrating social constructivism, soft power diplomacy, and commitment-trust theory to explore opportunities and challenges in bilateral relations. Using survey data from a diverse Malaysian sample, findings reveal strong interest in cultural engagement, educational exchange, and sports collaboration, alongside positive perceptions of Iranian products and economic potential. Awareness gaps, ideological differences, and limited visibility, however, constrain deeper engagement. Younger and urban respondents showed greater openness, indicating demographic opportunities for targeted initiatives. The study highlights the need for strategic, phased interventions, including scholarships, cultural programs, sports exchanges, tourism promotion, and trust-based economic partnerships, to foster sustainable Malaysia–Iran relations. Policy recommendations emphasize leveraging shared Islamic and cultural heritage to strengthen mutual understanding, collaboration, and long-term socio-economic ties.

Keywords: cultural diplomacy; economic cooperation; higher education; Malaysia–Iran relations; perceptions; sports collaboration; tourism

1. Introduction

In today's world, marked by rapid globalization, regional cooperation, and shifting political alliances, strong partnerships between countries have become essential for national growth and international influence (Heitor, 2015). Malaysia and Iran, two major Muslim-majority nations in different strategic regions, have the potential to build a relationship that goes far beyond trade. Their cooperation can also include education, culture, and sports. Malaysia, located in Southeast Asia, is an important economic and transport hub in the ASEAN region, giving access to a market of over 650 million people (Ramli & Shakir, 2021). Iran, positioned at the crossroads of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, has some of the largest oil and gas reserves in the world, along with a strong manufacturing sector and a growing technology industry (Moed, 2016).

The two countries established formal diplomatic relations in 1966 and opened embassies in each other's capitals soon after (Razak, 2023). Since then, their partnership has grown through trade, cooperation in international organizations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and direct exchanges between their people (Khalid et al., 2023). Economic collaboration has included major deals, like the US$6 billion South Pars gas field project in 2007, and talks on a free trade agreement in 2017 (Mehan & Abdul Razak, 2022). Both sides have also explored using their own currencies for trade to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar (Falarti & Naqvi, 2024).

People-to-people connections have played a big role as well. By 2015, about 5,000 Iranian students were studying in Malaysian universities, and more than 100,000 Iranians were living in Malaysia (Kamal & Hossain, 2017). Many are entrepreneurs, professionals, and academics who contribute not only to the economy but also to Malaysia's cultural and social life (Farnia & Sattar, 2015). Academic exchanges, cultural festivals, sports events, and tourism—especially Iranian visitors drawn to Malaysia's multicultural environment—act as "soft power" channels that strengthen mutual understanding.

Still, the relationship faces challenges. Geopolitical issues, including U.S. sanctions on Iran, have complicated economic cooperation. Limited public awareness in Malaysia about Iran's culture and economic opportunities, as well as occasional media portrayals focusing mainly on politics, have sometimes slowed engagement (Eshaghi et al., 2016). On the other side, different economic goals, bureaucratic delays, and the need for stronger institutional trust can also limit progress (Vasudiven, 2021). Given these opportunities and challenges, this study examines Malaysian views of cooperation with Iran in education, culture, sports, and the economy. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to find practical ways to overcome barriers and strengthen ties in line with the strategic interests of both nations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Contemporary Foundations of Malaysia–Iran Relations

The connections between Persia and the Malay world go back centuries, long before the colonial era, and were built through maritime trade, religious scholarship, and cultural exchange. From the 14th century onwards, Persian merchants, scholars, and artisans were active in Southeast Asian ports, introducing goods, ideas, and artistic traditions (Guillot, 2020). The spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago was also influenced by Persian culture, especially through Sufi networks and the translation of literary works. This legacy is still visible today in the Malay language, with Persian-derived words such as *bandar* (port), *dewan* (council), and *shahbandar* (harbor master) still in everyday use (Riddell, 2018).

These centuries-old ties form a cultural foundation that modern diplomacy can build upon. Although today's Malaysia–Iran relations exist in a globalized political and economic environment, their shared Islamic heritage and history of cultural exchange create a basis for mutual understanding and symbolic solidarity. This is consistent with Social Constructivist ideas, which emphasize the role of shared identities and norms in shaping state behavior (Abu–Hussin et al., 2018).

One of the strongest and most consistent areas of cooperation has been education. Malaysia has positioned itself as an attractive hub for international students by offering affordable tuition, English-medium programs, and a multicultural environment (Graf, 2016). By 2013, Iranian students were among the top five foreign student groups in Malaysia, enriching the country's academic diversity and promoting intercultural learning (Asgari & Borzooei, 2014). These educational exchanges extend beyond formal degree programs. Joint research projects, academic conferences, and language courses have helped create personal and professional networks that last despite political tensions (Riazi et al., 2019). This reflects the concept of "science and technology diplomacy," where academic collaboration serves as a platform for building trust and reducing cultural misunderstandings (Berridge, 2022). Iran, in turn, has promoted its Persian language and literature abroad, often through cultural centers and partnerships with universities (Norouzi et al., 2023). These initiatives are part of Iran's broader soft power strategy, projecting an image rooted in cultural depth and intellectual tradition (Wastnidge, 2014).

On the economic side, Malaysia–Iran cooperation has traditionally focused on the energy sector, with Malaysian investments in Iranian oil and gas projects and Iranian imports of Malaysian palm oil and manufactured goods (Othman et al., 2022). Both countries have shown interest in expanding into other areas, such as halal products, tourism, and construction services. Sports cooperation—though still developing—also offers potential, especially through shared participation in tournaments and the exchange of coaching expertise. However, U.S. sanctions on Iran have complicated financial transactions, making trade and investment more difficult (Fiedler, 2023). Both countries have experimented with alternatives such as barter arrangements and local currency settlements, but these remain limited. For economic relations to grow, building trust, ensuring transparency, and strengthening institutional capacity are essential.

While previous studies have examined Malaysia's role as an education hub (Graf, 2016) and Iran's use of cultural diplomacy (Mozaffari & Akbar, 2023), few have looked at Malaysian perceptions of Iran across multiple areas—including education, culture, sports, and economics. Even fewer have used a combined theoretical approach that integrates Social Constructivism, Soft Power Diplomacy, and Commitment-Trust Theory to explain how cultural, social, and economic factors interact in shaping bilateral relations. This gap underlines the need for research that blends theory with policy insights to fully understand and strengthen Malaysia–Iran ties.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The integration of Social Constructivism, Soft Power Diplomacy, and the Commitment-Trust Theory provides a multidimensional framework capable of explaining not only why Malaysia–Iran relations develop but also how they are sustained over time. Each theory addresses a different but complementary layer of the bilateral relationship, allowing for a more holistic understanding that single-theory approaches cannot fully capture (Figure 1).

2.3 Social Constructivism

Social Constructivism, as articulated by Wendt (1999), emphasizes that the conduct of states in the international system is influenced not solely by tangible resources or military capabilities, but by shared ideas, established social norms, and constructed identities that shape perceptions and guide behavior. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant to Malaysia–Iran relations because it illuminates the role of cultural heritage, religious affinity, and historical narratives in shaping bilateral cooperation. Historically, the Malay world has been exposed to significant Persian influence, visible in linguistic borrowings such as *dewan* and *bandar*, architectural styles, literary traditions, and shared artistic motifs. These cultural imprints are not merely remnants of the past but constitute an enduring cognitive and normative framework that frames contemporary engagements between the two nations (Fozi, 2021). For instance, the centuries-old historical memory of maritime trade and scholarly exchanges between the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Malacca has cultivated a sense of mutual respect that serves as fertile ground for cooperation in education, culture, and even sports.

Moreover, the significant Iranian student population in Malaysian universities estimated at over 5,000 as of 2015 functions as a living bridge for cultural diplomacy, enabling direct interpersonal exchanges that can reshape perceptions and build grassroots goodwill. This aligns with the constructivist argument that people-to-people engagement can redefine political possibilities and reframe the boundaries of diplomatic discourse. Furthermore, Iran's "Look East" policy, which emphasizes identity-based partnerships with Asian nations, dovetails with Malaysia's own emphasis on inter-civilizational dialogue, reinforcing the idea that their bilateral relationship is anchored in shared identities rather than solely strategic or economic considerations. In sum, Social Constructivism helps explain why Malaysia–Iran cooperation emerges from a deep reservoir of shared cultural memory, and how that reservoir continues to nourish their academic, cultural, and diplomatic exchanges today.

2.4 Soft Power Diplomacy

Soft Power, as conceptualized by Nye (2008), refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or financial inducement. In the Malaysia–Iran context, soft power diplomacy operates through the projection of culture, values, and intellectual heritage to create positive perceptions and foster collaboration. Malaysia's soft power strategy is visible in its promotion of a moderate Islamic governance model, its thriving higher education sector, and its multicultural, multilingual society, all of which appeal to Iranian students and professionals seeking a stable, inclusive environment for academic and cultural pursuits. Malaysian universities such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and Universiti Malaya have attracted large cohorts of Iranian students, thereby embedding educational exchange within the broader fabric of bilateral relations (Graf, 2016).

On the Iranian side, soft power manifests in the country's millennia-old civilization, its contributions to art, literature, and philosophy, and its scientific achievements, which together create a distinctive national brand recognized globally (Wastnidge, 2014). Iran's cultural diplomacy is further advanced by institutions such as Al-Mustafa International University, which operates cultural and religious programs aimed at fostering mutual understanding in Malaysia and beyond. Joint cultural initiatives—including academic symposia, art exhibitions, Persian language programs, and tourism promotion—serve to humanize each nation's image, counteract negative stereotypes, and establish enduring cultural linkages. Such initiatives not only enhance mutual goodwill but also strengthen Malaysia and Iran's positions in the international arena by demonstrating that bilateral cooperation can flourish on the basis of mutual attraction rather than purely transactional exchanges. In this sense, Soft Power Diplomacy provides an essential explanatory tool for understanding how Malaysia and Iran actively cultivate favorable perceptions that facilitate collaboration across political, economic, and societal domains.

2.5 Commitment-Trust Theory

The Commitment-Trust Theory, introduced by Morgan and Hunt (1994), posits that trust and commitment are the twin pillars of any enduring relationship, whether in commercial contexts or international relations. Trust, in this framework, refers to the belief in the reliability, integrity, and goodwill of a partner, while commitment denotes the willingness to invest in and maintain the relationship over the long term. Within the Malaysia–Iran

context, these two elements are essential for ensuring that cooperation remains stable despite fluctuations in global politics or economic pressures. Academic partnerships such as student exchanges, joint research projects, and institutional collaborations serve as trust-building mechanisms by fostering direct, sustained engagement between individuals and institutions from both countries. Research in the Malaysian higher education sector has shown that trust significantly promotes knowledge sharing and cooperative behavior, a finding that can be readily extended to the dynamics of Malaysia–Iran academic relations (Mogensen, 2015).

Beyond the interpersonal level, institutional trust is cultivated through transparent policies, consistent diplomatic engagement, and formal agreements in areas such as technology transfer, tourism, and trade. For example, the 2008 Malaysia–Iran cooperation agreements and the 2007 US$6 billion South Pars gas field development deal signaled strong mutual commitment to long-term partnership despite external geopolitical constraints. Commitment also manifests in the willingness of both countries to continue cultural and sports exchanges even during periods of political tension, thereby reinforcing the predictability and resilience of the relationship. The theory thus offers a compelling explanation of how Malaysia and Iran sustain and deepen their cooperation: by embedding mutual trust in their interactions and demonstrating commitment through ongoing investment in shared projects, they create a bilateral relationship capable of withstanding external shocks and adapting to changing global conditions.
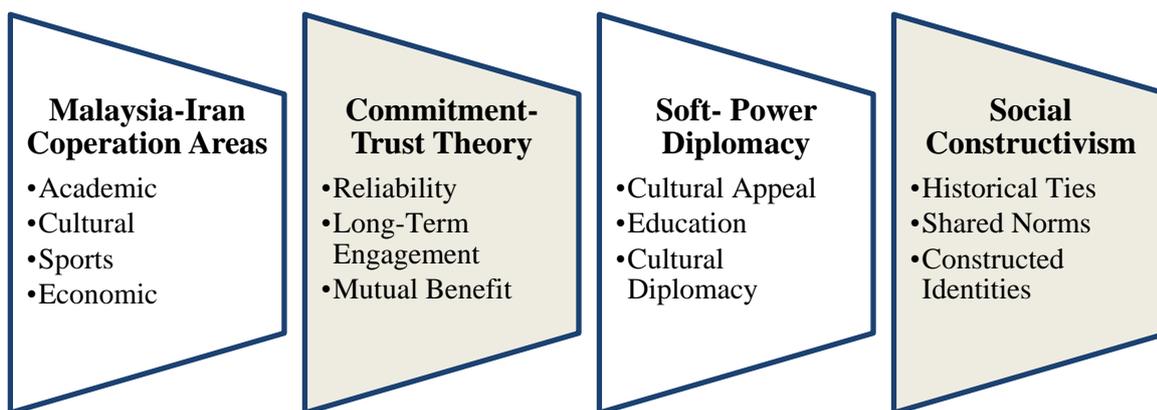

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

Malaysia-Iran Coperation Areas
- Academic
- Cultural
- Sports
- Economic

Commitment-Trust Theory
- Reliability
- Long-Term Engagement
- Mutual Benefit

Soft- Power Diplomacy
- Cultural Appeal
- Education
- Cultural Diplomacy

Social Constructivism
- Historical Ties
- Shared Norms
- Constructed Identities

3. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to explore the perceptions and attitudes of Malaysian participants toward bilateral cooperation with Iran. This approach enabled the systematic collection and analysis of data within a defined timeframe. Participants were Malaysian adults aged 18 and above, recruited through various online platforms. A total of 150 respondents took part in the study. Inclusion criteria required that participants had basic knowledge of Malaysia's foreign relations or had engaged in relevant cultural or academic exchanges.

Data collection followed a structured process. An online questionnaire was developed and distributed via Google Forms, accompanied by an informed consent statement outlining the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and the voluntary nature of participation. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete, and data were gathered over two months (March–April 2025). The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended items covering perceptions of Iran, willingness for cultural and academic exchange, views on economic cooperation, and perceived barriers. Items were adapted to fit the Malaysia–Iran context. The instrument underwent review by two subject-matter experts for face and content validity, and a pilot test with seven respondents ensured clarity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha values for the key scales ranged from .77 to .81. All procedures complied with relevant ethical guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. No identifying information was collected, ensuring anonymity. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics summarized demographic characteristics and survey responses. Inferential analyses, including ANOVA and regression, were conducted to examine relationships between variables.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

The sample included 150 Malaysian adults, reflecting the country's demographic diversity. Most respondents

were female (64.7%, n = 97), while 35.3% (n = 53) were male. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants identified as Bumiputera (90.7%), a constitutional category encompassing the Malay majority and other indigenous peoples. From this Bumiputera group, the vast majority specified their ethnicity as Malay (72.7% of the total sample), while other indigenous (non-Malay) Bumiputera groups constituted 18.0%. The remainder of the participants identified as Chinese (6.0%) and Indian (3.3%). Regarding age, nearly half of the participants were 19–29 years old (49.3%), with smaller proportions in the 30–39 (19.3%), 40–49 (16.7%), 50–59 (12.7%), and 60–69 (2.0%) age groups. Most respondents lived in urban areas (56.0%), while 24.7% resided in suburban areas and 19.3% in rural locations. Educationally, nearly half held a bachelor's degree (49.3%), 19.3% had completed secondary education, 15.3% held a master's degree, and 16.0% had a PhD. Regionally, 66.7% of participants were from West Malaysia and 33.3% from East Malaysia, ensuring representation from both urbanized and indigenous contexts.

4.2 Perceptions and Attitudes

The results displayed that respondent had the most positive perceptions of higher education opportunities in Iran (M = 3.92, *SD* = 0.68), followed by culture and traditions (M = 3.85, *SD* = 0.72), film and music (M = 3.78, *SD* = 0.75), tourism (M = 3.65, *SD* = 0.78), product value (M = 3.50, SD = 0.82), and economic collaboration (M = 3.45, *SD* = 0.80) (Table 1). When comparing regions, respondents from West Malaysia reported higher scores for culture (M = 3.98) and tourism (M = 3.72), while participants from East Malaysia scored higher on spirituality (M = 3.90).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Perceptions and Attitudes.

No.	Domain	Mean	SD
1	Higher Education	3.92	0.68
2	Culture and Traditions	3.85	0.72
3	Film and Music	3.78	0.75
4	Tourism	3.65	0.78
5	Product Value	3.50	0.82
6	Economy	3.45	0.80

The survey results also show that Malaysian participants generally have a positive view of higher education opportunities in Iran (Table 2). Interest in studying in Iran, particularly when scholarships are offered, is favorable, with over 45% expressing some level of interest, although nearly one-third remain neutral. Participants also perceive potential academic and cultural benefits positively, with more than half expecting enhancement from such experiences. However, the notable neutral responses suggest some uncertainty or limited knowledge about studying in Iran. Confidence in the quality of Iranian universities is moderately high, but with 43.3% neutral responses, indicating a gap in available information. Financial incentives are an important factor, as 72% of respondents rated scholarships and financial aid as important or very important. Awareness of these opportunities increases the likelihood of exploring them, highlighting the key role of financial support in decision-making. Finally, over half of the participants believe that studying in Iran would have a positive impact on their personal and professional growth, while about one-third remain neutral. These findings suggest potential for targeted outreach and trust-building to increase engagement.

Table 2. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions on Higher Education Opportunities in Iran.

Indicator	Very Positive (%)	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)	Very Negative (%)
Interest in studying in Iran if offered a scholarship	17.3	28.0	27.3	21.3	6.0
Perceived impact on academic & cultural experiences	16.7	36.7	31.3	12.0	3.3
Confidence in quality of Iranian universities	6.0	40.0	43.3	8.0	2.7
Importance of scholarships & financial aid	45.3	26.7	21.3	4.7	2.0
Likelihood of exploring opportunities if informed of scholarships	24.7	32.0	32.0	8.7	2.7
Perceived contribution to personal & professional growth	20.7	37.3	31.3	8.0	2.7

The survey results on Culture and Tradition indicate that Malaysian participants have a strong interest in learning about Iranian culture, with over 70% expressing moderate to high curiosity (Table 3). However, this enthusiasm contrasts with perceptions of Iranian cultural presence in Malaysia, as most respondents feel it is minimal or only somewhat visible, mainly through cultural events and educational programs. Despite this limited local presence, participants hold very positive views of Iran's global cultural contributions in literature, art, music, and philosophy, with about two-thirds rating them as moderately to extremely positive. Malaysian society is also seen as largely receptive to Iranian cultural influences, with 60% agreeing that such influence is welcomed. More than half of respondents indicated they are likely to participate in cultural exchange programs related to Iran. When compared to other world cultures, Iranian culture is most often rated as "average" in richness, diversity, and significance. This suggests that while Malaysian participants generally appreciate Iranian culture and are open to engagement, Iran's cultural uniqueness may not be fully recognized.

Table 3. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Iranian Culture and Traditions.

Indicator	Highest Positive Category (%)	Other Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)	No Opinion (%)
Interest in learning about Iranian culture, traditions, customs, and history	Extremely Interested (17.3)	Moderately Interested (27.3), Somewhat Interested (26.7)	—	Slightly Interested (16.7), Not Interested At All (10.0)	2.0
Perceived presence of Iranian culture in Malaysian society	Mostly Represented (15.3), Fully Represented (2.0)	Somewhat Represented (28.7)	—	Minimally Represented (33.3), Not Represented At All (14.0)	6.7
Positivity toward Iranian contributions to global literature, music, art, and philosophy	Extremely Positive (35.3)	Moderately Positive (31.3), Slightly Positive (11.3)	16.0	—	6.0
Perceptions of Malaysian openness to Iranian cultural influences	Strongly Agree (10.7)	Agree (49.3)	26.7	Disagree (9.3), Strongly Disagree (1.3)	2.7
Likelihood of participation in Iranian cultural exchange programs	Very Likely (18.7)	Likely (32.0), Somewhat Likely (36.0)	—	Unlikely (8.7), Very Unlikely (4.7)	—
Comparison of Iranian culture to others (richness, diversity, significance)	Superior (3.3), Above Average (18.7)	—	Average (63.3)	Below Average (5.3), Poor (2.7)	6.7

The survey findings on Film & Music show generally positive but cautious perceptions of Malaysia–Iran cinematic relations (Table 4). Familiarity with Iranian cinema is moderate, with just under 40% of respondents reporting some awareness, though most remain neutral. About one-third of participants see potential for collaboration in cinema, while over half remain uncertain. Awareness of existing cultural exchange programs is low, with the majority neutral and only 30% reporting familiarity, highlighting a communication gap. Encouragingly, more than half of respondents believe that deeper collaboration could produce unique and culturally enriching works. Nearly 60% agree that promoting each other's films would enhance cultural understanding. Interest in participating in collaborative projects is also promising, at nearly 39%, although the high proportion of neutral responses suggests that targeted engagement strategies and awareness campaigns could further boost support.

Table 4. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Film and Cinema Collaboration with Iran.

Indicator	Strongly Disagree / Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Combined Positive (%)
Familiarity with Iranian cinema and movies	28.0	33.3	—	—	38.7*
Potential for Malaysia–Iran collaboration in cinema	12.7	53.3	24.0	10.0	34.0
Awareness of film-related cultural exchange programs	16.0	54.0	14.7	15.3	30.0
Willingness to participate in/support film collaborations	14.7	46.7	24.7	14.0	38.7
Belief in potential for unique/culturally enriching works	6.0	39.3	41.3	13.3	54.6
Belief that promoting films would enhance cultural understanding	6.7	34.0	44.7	14.7	59.4

The survey findings on Sports indicate a strongly positive perception of Malaysia–Iran athletic collaboration (Table 5). The highest support is for joint participation in champion sports, which is seen as promoting cultural exchange by 72% of respondents. Similarly, 68.6% view partnerships as beneficial for gaining exposure to diverse training methods and cultural practices. Support is also strong for sharing training techniques (65.3%) and developing collaborative training programs between sports federations (65.3%). Even performance-focused measures, such as enhancing Malaysia's competitiveness in international events, receive majority agreement (54.6%). Disagreement is minimal (≤7.3%), but a notable portion of respondents remain neutral (26–38%), suggesting that some may need more concrete examples or evidence of benefits before fully committing to support. Overall, the results reflect broad confidence in the value of sports collaborations for both cultural and performance outcomes.

Table 5. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Sports Collaboration with Iran

Indicator	Strongly Disagree / Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Combined Positive (%)
Collaboration with Iranian athletes enhances Malaysia's international performance	7.3	38.0	43.3	11.3	54.6
Benefits from sharing training techniques in traditional/modern sports	4.7	30.0	49.3	16.0	65.3
Joint participation in champion sports promotes cultural exchange	2.0	26.0	52.7	19.3	72.0
Support for collaborative training programs between sports federations	2.0	32.7	50.0	15.3	65.3
Joint sports events foster camaraderie & teamwork	2.7	34.7	46.0	16.7	62.7
Partnerships provide exposure to new training methods & cultural practices	2.0	29.3	49.3	19.3	68.6

The survey findings on Tourism show that Malaysian participants have very high interest in visiting Iran, with 86.7% expressing willingness to travel there. This interest is mainly driven by Iran's rich cultural heritage and historical landmarks, which 66.7% of respondents consider either "very important" or "important" when choosing a destination (Table 6). Despite this enthusiasm, there is a noticeable awareness gap: 61.3% of respondents are only somewhat familiar or not familiar at all with Iran's tourist attractions. Similarly, perceptions of safety are mixed, with over half (52.7%) remaining neutral regarding Iran as a safe destination. Most respondents prefer organized tours, with 74.0% favoring travel agencies over independent travel. Seasonal preferences show that spring and autumn are the most popular travel periods, while summer is least favored. Awareness of Iran's unique four-season climate is moderate (56.0%), suggesting opportunities for targeted marketing. Overall, the results indicate strong tourism potential, but this is tempered by gaps in awareness and safety perceptions, highlighting the need for informational campaigns and trust-building strategies to encourage travel.

Table 6. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Tourism in Iran.

Indicator	Main Findings (%)
Interest in visiting Iran for tourism	Yes: 86.7 • No: 13.3
Familiarity with Iranian tourist attractions	Very familiar: 2.7 • Familiar: 12.0 • Somewhat familiar: 24.0 • Not very familiar: 44.0 • Not familiar at all: 17.3
Perceived safety of Iran as a tourist destination	Very safe: 4.0 • Safe: 31.3 • Neutral: 52.7 • Unsafe: 9.3 • Very unsafe: 2.7
Preferred method of travel to Iran	Using a travel agency: 74.0 • Independent travel: 26.0
Awareness of Iran's four simultaneous seasons	Yes: 56.0 • No: 44.0
Preferred season for visiting Iran	Spring: 42.0 • Autumn: 25.3 • Winter: 22.0 • Summer: 10.7
Likelihood of visiting due to cultural heritage & landmarks	Very likely: 24.0 • Likely: 42.7 • Neutral: 26.0 • Unlikely: 4.7 • Very unlikely: 2.7
Importance of cultural & historical attractions	Very important: 24.7 • Important: 40.7 • Neutral: 29.3 • Not important: 4.0 • Not important at all: 1.3

The survey findings on Iranian cuisine show that Malaysian respondents generally have low familiarity, with most reporting slight familiarity, no familiarity, or never having tried Iranian dishes (Table 7). Among the factors shaping perceptions, taste is the most important, while cultural associations, presentation, and ingredients play smaller roles. Awareness and representation of Iranian cuisine in Malaysian restaurants and food festivals are mostly seen as neutral or underrepresented, yet there is strong interest in exploring Iranian food further, including trying new dishes and learning cooking methods. This indicates a positive openness toward culinary engagement. Social media, online reviews, and personal recommendations are recognized as highly influential in shaping perceptions, suggesting that digital platforms could be effective in promoting Iranian cuisine. When compared with other international cuisines in Malaysia, most respondents consider Iranian food as similar, while smaller segments rate it as better or superior, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in positioning it as a distinctive culinary experience.

Table 7. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Iranian Cuisine.

Indicator	Main Findings (%)
Familiarity with Iranian cuisine	Extremely familiar: 2.7 • Very familiar: 3.3 • Moderately familiar: 18.0 • Slightly familiar: 28.7 • Not familiar at all: 28.7 • Never tried: 18.7
Factors influencing perception of Iranian food	Taste: 30.7 • Cultural associations: 17.3 • Presentation: 14.7 • Ingredients: 12.0 • Previous dining experience: 6.0 • None of the above: 19.3
Perceived representation in Malaysian restaurants & food festivals	Strongly agree: 6.0 • Agree: 24.0 • Neutral: 36.0 • Disagree: 16.7 • Strongly disagree: 5.3 • Not sure: 12.0
Interest in exploring Iranian cuisine	Definitely yes: 36.7 • Probably yes: 33.3 • Maybe: 24.0 • Probably not: 3.3 • Definitely not: 0.7 • Not sure: 2.0
Role of social media, online reviews, personal recommendations	Significant: 35.3 • Somewhat significant: 31.3 • Neutral: 24.0 • Somewhat insignificant: 4.7 • Insignificant: 2.7 • Not applicable: 2.0
Comparison with other international cuisines	Much worse: 2.7 • Inferior: 8.7 • Similar: 42.7 • Better: 13.3 • Superior: 4.0 • Positive general: 17.3

The survey findings indicate a mixed level of familiarity among Malaysian respondents regarding economic collaborations between Iran and Malaysia, with a substantial portion reporting little or no awareness (Table 7). Despite this, respondents hold predominantly positive perceptions of the benefits of these collaborations, particularly in trade expansion, economic growth, and job creation. Iranian products and businesses in Malaysia are viewed favorably in terms of quality, innovation, and economic contribution, reflecting strong confidence in their performance. There is robust support for initiatives promoting economic collaboration, including trade fairs

and investment forums. Respondents also recognize the critical role of cultural and diplomatic ties in facilitating economic partnerships, emphasizing that strong bilateral relationships extend beyond transactional interactions. Looking toward the future, there is a cautiously optimistic outlook regarding continued economic collaboration, though the notable neutral segment highlights awareness of geopolitical uncertainties and global economic dynamics.

Table 8. Summary of Malaysian Participants' Perceptions of Iran–Malaysia Economic Collaboration.

Indicator	Main Findings (%)
Familiarity with economic collaborations	Extremely familiar: 2.7 • Very familiar: 9.3 • Moderately familiar: 28.7 • Slightly familiar: 22.7 • Not familiar at all: 32.7 • No opinion: 4.0
Perceived benefits in trade, growth, job creation	Benefit significantly: 7.3 • Benefit to a large extent: 26.7 • Benefit moderately: 42.0 • Benefit slightly: 16.7 • Do not benefit: 1.3 • No opinion: 6.0
Perception of Iranian products and businesses	Extremely positive: 6.0 • Very positive: 28.7 • Moderately positive: 37.3 • Slightly positive: 18.7 • Negative: 2.0 • No opinion: 7.3
Support for initiatives promoting economic collaboration	Very likely: 14.0 • Likely: 48.0 • Neutral: 28.7 • Unlikely: 2.0 • Very unlikely: 4.7 • No opinion: 2.7
Perceived impact of cultural/diplomatic ties on economic collaboration	Extremely influential: 7.3 • Very influential: 35.3 • Moderately influential: 38.0 • Slightly influential: 9.3 • Not influential at all: 4.0 • No opinion: 6.0
Confidence in future economic collaboration prospects	Very confident: 7.3 • Confident: 40.0 • Neutral: 39.3 • Not confident: 6.7 • Very unconfident: 3.3 • No opinion: 3.3

Moreover, ANOVA results also revealed significant differences in perceptions based on age, ethnicity, and region. Regarding age, tourism ($F(4,145) = 4.12$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$) and cultural perceptions ($F(4,145) = 3.45$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$) varied significantly across age groups. Respondents aged 19–29 reported higher scores for both tourism (M = 3.95) and culture (M = 4.10) compared with older participants, particularly those aged 50–59 (M = 3.40; M = 3.70) and 60–69 (M = 3.20; M = 3.50), indicating stronger interest and engagement among younger Malaysians. Ethnicity also influenced perceptions, with significant differences observed for higher education ($F(3,146) = 5.67$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$) and economic perceptions ($F(3,146) = 3.89$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$). Malays scored highest in higher education (M = 4.00), surpassing Chinese (M = 3.30) and Indian respondents (M = 3.40). Conversely, Chinese respondents reported the most positive perceptions regarding economic collaboration (M = 3.80), followed by Malays (M = 3.40) and Bumiputera (M = 3.35), suggesting that both educational and economic attitudes are shaped by ethnic background. Differences based on region were also evident. East Malaysians reported higher scores for higher education opportunities (M = 3.90), whereas West Malaysians scored higher in tourism perceptions (M = 3.72). These findings highlight the influence of geographical context on attitudes toward education and tourism, emphasizing the importance of considering regional variations in understanding Malaysian perceptions of Iran.

4.3 Regression Analysis

The multiple regression analysis examined the predictors of tourism attitudes among Malaysian respondents, as summarized in Table 8. The overall model was significant ($R^2 = 0.22$, $F(9,140) = 4.65$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the included demographic variables explained 22% of the variance in tourism attitudes. Age emerged as a significant predictor, with younger respondents (19–29 years) reporting more positive tourism attitudes (β = -0.15, SE = 0.05, t = -3.00, p = 0.003), suggesting greater interest in tourism-related activities compared with older age groups. Gender also showed a significant effect, with females demonstrating higher tourism scores than males (β = 0.12, SE = 0.06, t = 2.00, p = 0.047). Other demographic factors, including ethnicity, education, and residential area, were not statistically significant predictors of tourism attitudes. However, region approached significance (β = -0.11, SE = 0.06, t = -1.97, p = 0.052), with East Malaysians showing slightly higher tourism scores compared with West Malaysians. Interaction terms between age and ethnicity (β = 0.06, SE = 0.04, t = 1.50, p = 0.130) and between region and ethnicity (*β* = 0.07, SE = 0.04, *t* = 1.72, *p* = 0.088) were not significant, indicating no combined effects of these factors on tourism attitudes.

Table 9. Regression Analysis Predicting Tourism Attitudes.

Predictor	β	SE	t	p
Age (19–29 ref.)	-0.15	0.05	-3.00	0.003**
Ethnicity (Malay ref.) – Chinese	-0.10	0.08	-1.25	0.210
– Indian	-0.08	0.10	-0.80	0.420
– Bumiputera	-0.05	0.07	-0.71	0.480
Gender (Male ref.)	0.12	0.06	2.00	0.047*
Education (Degree ref.)	-0.07	0.05	-1.40	0.160
Residential Area (Urban ref.)	0.10	0.06	1.67	0.097
Region (West ref.)	-0.11	0.06	-1.97	0.052†
Age ×Ethnicity	0.06	0.04	1.50	0.130
Region ×Ethnicity	0.07	0.04	1.72	0.088

5. Discussion and Implications

This discussion synthesizes survey findings on Malaysians' perceptions of Iran across higher education, culture, sports, tourism, and economy, integrating social constructivism, soft power diplomacy, and commitment-trust theory to highlight both opportunities and challenges in Malaysia–Iran relations. The analysis shows that shared cultural and Islamic heritage acts as a key enabler, while barriers such as ideological differences, limited awareness, and visibility gaps restrict engagement. Drawing on survey data, this section explores how these factors interact and provides policy implications, supported by recent diplomatic and economic developments as of mid-2025.

Higher education emerged as a cornerstone for long-term relationship-building. Many respondents expressed willingness to study in Iran if scholarship opportunities were available, especially at the postgraduate level (Tabrizi, 2021). From a social constructivist perspective, shared educational experiences can reshape mutual identities and build intercultural competencies, which are critical for diplomacy (Marginson, 2014). International students may act as norm entrepreneurs, promoting understanding and trust between societies (Arthur, 2017). Despite this potential, low outbound mobility from Malaysia to Iran persists due to costs, unclear recognition of qualifications, and limited visibility, consistent with global mobility constraints (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2011). Younger respondents showed greater openness, presenting a demographic opportunity (Deardorff, 2011). Policy implications include establishing joint scholarship programs in Iran's areas of strength, dual-degree initiatives, pre-departure orientations, and alumni ambassador programs to enhance cross-cultural engagement (Moshtari et al., 2023). Recent efforts, such as Malaysia's Foreign Minister visiting Iran in February 2025 to discuss trade and collaborations, could be extended to educational partnerships, building on significant trade volume in 2024 (Falarti, 2025). Initiatives like the collaboration with Iran's Zanjan province in education, announced in December 2024, offer a model for decentralized and mutually beneficial partnerships.

Cultural engagement provides an immediate and emotionally resonant avenue for strengthening relations. Despite low visibility of Iranian culture in Malaysia, interest remains high (Cull, 2008). Historical Persian–Malay links, including shared Sufi traditions, create affinity that soft power diplomacy can amplify through exhibitions, film, music, and digital platforms (Khosh Haikal Azad, 2018). Youth are particularly receptive, suggesting that initiatives such as film festivals, art exchanges, and cultural workshops could be effective (Wastnidge, 2014). Digital diplomacy can also mitigate regulatory constraints, particularly for Shia-related content (Grincheva, 2021). Policy strategies include establishing Iranian cultural centers in major cities, organizing "Iran Weeks" with workshops and performances, and leveraging social media campaigns. Reports in February 2024 emphasize the positive impact of cultural engagement, and diplomatic discussions in July 2025 could further prioritize cultural diplomacy to address visibility gaps (Bernama, 2025).

Sports provide an apolitical platform for collaboration, with strong support for joint events and training programs (Murray & Pigman, 2014). These initiatives create cooperative spaces free from ideological tensions, fostering trust consistent with commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Respondents favored exchanges in Iran's traditional sports, such as wrestling. Policy recommendations include joint training camps, friendly competitions, and sports tourism packages organized via travel agencies. Iran's pledge to strengthen ASEAN ties in March 2025 offers a supportive framework for sports diplomacy (Mehr News, 2025). Sports initiatives can serve as confidence-building measures, reinforcing trust before expanding into more complex sectors like education and trade.

Tourism translates curiosity into experiential engagement. Interest in Iran's cultural heritage is high, yet respondents noted gaps in familiarity and safety perceptions (Reisinger, 2015). Younger and urban participants were more receptive, suggesting targeted marketing strategies emphasizing halal infrastructure, seasonal diversity, and virtual reality previews (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020). Decentralized promotions could specifically target East Malaysians. Collaborations with Zanjan province and Iran's support for Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN chairmanship illustrate actionable steps to promote tourism (Tehran Times, 2024; The Sun Daily, 2025). Social constructivism highlights how experiential tourism can create shared meanings and strengthen mutual cultural understanding, fostering long-term relational capital.

Economic cooperation ensures durability in bilateral relations. While respondents held positive perceptions of Iranian products, awareness of broader collaborations was limited (Rosecrance, 2013). Optimism among Chinese Malaysians suggests opportunities in pragmatic sectors such as halal products (Fischer, 2016). Commitment-trust theory underscores that trust-based partnerships can reduce transactional risk and enhance long-term collaboration (Ratz, 2024). Recommended strategies include establishing a bilateral business council to organize trade delegations, focusing on halal and technology sectors. Iran's call for economic collaboration in July 2024 and the Iran–ASEAN conference in 2025 align with these objectives (Press TV, 2024; Fars News, 2025). Integrating cultural and economic initiatives, such as joint certification programs and culturally sensitive marketing, strengthens both trust and soft power influence, with recent trade milestones providing momentum (Melissen, 2005).

Finally, regional and ethnic differences, such as lower tourism attitudes among East Malaysians, underscore the need for inclusive strategies. Soft power and trust-building initiatives must be decentralized to address awareness gaps and ensure equitable participation. A phased approach—starting with cultural and sports exchanges, expanding into education and tourism, and institutionalizing economic cooperation—supports sustainable relations. Recent engagements, including Prime Minister Anwar's call with Iran's president in March 2025, reinforce these pathways, positioning Malaysia–Iran relations for mutual benefits despite geopolitical challenges (Malaysiakini, 2025).

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The study's sample, while diverse, may not fully reflect Malaysia's population, particularly in rural areas and among minority groups. Focusing solely on Malaysian perceptions excludes Iranian viewpoints, limiting a comprehensive understanding of bilateral relations. The quantitative design captures general trends but does not provide in-depth insights into cultural or ideological nuances, such as Shia–Sunni dynamics. Additionally, the use of hypothetical scenarios may affect how broadly the findings can be applied. The study was conducted prior to recent diplomatic developments, including the February 2025 visit and Malaysia's ASEAN engagement, which could influence public perceptions.

Future research could address these limitations by including larger, more representative samples and incorporating Iranian respondents for comparative perspectives. Longitudinal studies would help track changes in perceptions following initiatives such as scholarship programs or cultural festivals. Qualitative approaches, including interviews and focus groups, could provide deeper insights into trust-building, barriers, and cultural understanding. Comparative studies with other Muslim-majority countries may reveal broader trends in international engagement. Case studies of specific collaborations, such as those with Zanjan province in trade and tourism or Iran's ASEAN participation, could identify best practices. Investigating the role of digital platforms in shaping youth engagement and tracking economic outcomes, particularly in halal sectors, would further inform strategies for sustainable bilateral partnerships.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of Malaysians' perceptions of Iran across higher education, culture, sports, tourism, and economic engagement, framed through social constructivism, soft power diplomacy, and commitment-trust theory. Findings reveal that shared cultural and Islamic heritage serves as a strong enabler for bilateral engagement, while gaps in awareness, visibility, and ideological understanding act as key barriers. Younger and urban populations appear most receptive, highlighting demographic opportunities for targeted initiatives. Higher education and cultural exchange emerge as foundational platforms for building mutual trust and intercultural understanding, while sports and tourism offer accessible, apolitical avenues for engagement. Economic cooperation, though currently limited in visibility, presents long-term potential when paired with trust-building measures and culturally sensitive strategies. Overall, a phased, integrated approach starting with culture and sports, expanding into education and tourism, and institutionalizing economic partnerships can strengthen Malaysia–Iran relations in a sustainable manner. The study underscores the importance of strategic

policy interventions that leverage scholarships, cultural diplomacy, sports initiatives, and bilateral economic programs to enhance trust, mutual understanding, and long-term collaboration. By aligning these efforts with theoretical insights from social constructivism, soft power, and commitment-trust frameworks, Malaysia and Iran can create a multidimensional partnership that benefits both societies while navigating geopolitical and socio-cultural complexities.

Acknowledgement

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