



Communication
Volume 3, Issue 1, Feb-Jul 2026, pp. 223-231

Invisible Travelers and the Cultural Marginalisation in Kerala's Travel Advertising

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Received on: April 23, 2026 | Accepted on: May 11, 2026 | Published on: July 15, 2026

Abstract

In the contemporary media and marketing ecosystem, advertising operates as both a commercial tool and a cultural text, shaping public perceptions of identity, lifestyle, and belonging. Travel and leisure advertising, in particular, constructs aspirational narratives that are deeply tied to ideas of modernity and social mobility. Yet, these narratives often privilege dominant cultural identities while marginalising communities that form a substantial portion of the consumer base.

This study examines the case of Green Oasis, a Calicut based travel agency whose consumer data reveals that Muslim families from the Malabar region constitute the majority of its clientele. These consumers are significant contributors to the local leisure economy, engaging in domestic, national and international tour packages. They are participating in family oriented leisure activities largely. However, their cultural identity is significantly absent from the agency's visual and narrative communication. Promotional materials such as posters, ad films, campaigns, and anchor videos showing generic, mainstream imagery. Grounded in qualitative content analysis, this study develops an in-depth understanding of travel ads and their important in media and cultural studies. The agency producing Green Oasis's campaigns, this research interrogates how marketing strategy intersects with cultural politics. The study explores how 'mainstreaming' as a communication practice results in the erasure of specific cultural signifiers such as attire, language, and social settings despite their relevance to the target audience. It further examines how industry norms, creative decision making, and aesthetic aspirations contribute to representational gaps that normalise exclusion.

By situating Green Oasis within broader debates on media representation and market segmentation, this paper argues that advertising not only reflects consumer trends but also shapes cultural visibility. The marginalisation of Malabar Muslims in leisure advertising, despite their economic centrality, highlights the structural marginalisation embedded in mainstream marketing narratives.

Keywords: *#Travel #Culture #Kerala #Marginalisation #Advertising*

Introduction

Advertising, Travel Agencies, and Cultural Marginalization

Advertising is one of the most influential forms of communication in modern society. At its simplest, it is the activity of promoting products, services, or ideas with the purpose of persuading consumers. Its history stretches back to ancient civilizations, where merchants used painted signs and oral announcements to attract buyers. With the invention of the printing press, advertisements began to appear in newspapers, and

by the 20th century, radio, cinema, and television transformed advertising into a mass cultural phenomenon. Today, digital platforms and social media have given advertising massive reach and immediacy.

Beyond its commercial function, advertising also plays a cultural role. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall identified advertisements and films as “cultural texts,” meaning they do not simply sell commodities but also convey meanings, values, and ideologies. An advertisement often reflects the society it is produced in it encodes ideas about gender roles, class aspirations, beauty standards, or national identity. When audiences engage with these texts, they interpret and sometimes challenge the meanings encoded within them. In this way, advertising is not just economic but also political and cultural, shaping how people see themselves and others.

Within this broader context, the travel industry has long relied on advertising to attract customers. A travel agency is a business that facilitates tourism by arranging transportation, accommodation, visas, insurance, and package tours. Travel agencies act as intermediaries between travellers and service providers, offering expertise and convenience. In the digital age, online booking platforms have changed the industry, yet traditional agencies remain important, particularly for complex itineraries, pilgrimage tours, and international travel requiring documentation. Personal trust, local knowledge, and customized service give travel agencies a continuing relevance.

Kerala, popularly known as “God’s Own Country,” provides a good example of this. The state’s natural beauty and cultural richness make it one of India’s prime tourist destinations. Consequently, Kerala has a large number of travel agencies catering to both domestic and international visitors. From houseboat cruises in Alappuzha to Ayurveda retreats and wildlife sanctuaries, agencies package Kerala’s attractions in ways accessible to diverse tourists. In particular, Calicut (Kozhikode) has emerged as a hub for travel services. Around 5000 registered travel agencies functioning in Calicut. Its strategic location and cultural vibrancy attract tourists, but the city is also a departure point for large numbers of Gulf-bound expatriates. Many agencies in Calicut specialize in ticketing, visa services, and overseas employment-related travel, reflecting the region’s historic and ongoing ties with the Middle East.

Yet, while advertising and tourism open possibilities, they also reveal issues of cultural marginalization. Marginalised communities such as Muslims and Black people have often been excluded or stereotyped in advertisements and cultural industries. Muslims have frequently been represented as outsiders or associated with conflict, limiting their portrayal to narrow images. Black communities, similarly, have been subject to racist stereotypes or invisibility in advertising, reinforcing historical inequalities. Stuart Hall’s theory of representation emphasizes that such portrayals are never neutral they shape social attitudes and power structures. Recognizing advertising as cultural text helps uncover how commercial communication can bring marginalization. At the same time, contemporary debates increasingly call for diversity and authentic representation, pushing advertising and media industries toward more inclusive cultural narratives.

In sum, advertising has evolved from a tool of commerce into a cultural force that mirrors and shapes society. Travel agencies, especially in Kerala and Calicut, highlight how advertising connects industries with people’s aspirations and movements. But alongside these developments lies the responsibility to challenge cultural marginalization and build more inclusive forms of representation.

Advertisements are often seen as cultural texts because they do more than sell products they reflect and shape values, aspirations, and identities within society. Each ad carries signs, images, and messages that tell us what is considered desirable, modern, or respectable. In this way, ads become cultural documents that reveal how a society understands class, gender, race, and lifestyle. However, when advertising is

mainstreamed, it tends to privilege certain groups while overlooking others. For example, communities that contribute significantly to the economy such as working-class labourers, farmers, or migrant workers are often underrepresented or stereotyped in both commercial ads and films. Their absence reinforces their marginalisation, suggesting that they are not part of the “ideal consumer” or cultural mainstream. This creates a cultural imbalance, where visibility and recognition are granted to some groups, while others remain invisible despite their crucial role in sustaining the economy.

In the Indian advertising landscape, Muslims are often caught between absence and stereotyping. On the one hand, they are largely invisible in mainstream commercials that promote a universal “ideal consumer,” who is typically upper-caste Hindu, urban, and middle-class. On the other hand, when Muslims do appear in advertisements, they are frequently reduced to cultural stereotypes portrayed as a “food-consuming” community, as seen in the case of certain food-brand campaigns like Double Horse. Such depictions oversimplify Muslim identity, framing it only through appetite and feasting rather than acknowledging the community's diverse contributions to society and the economy.

A striking example of seasonal visibility is the sudden rise in Muslim representation during festivals like Ramadan or Perunal. During these times, Muslims appear prominently in advertising, but even this visibility is problematic: many of the actors costumed as Muslims are themselves non-Muslims. This indicates that representation is less about authentic inclusion and more about commodifying Muslim culture for targeted marketing. Outside these festive windows, Muslim presence again recedes, reinforcing the idea that they are not part of the everyday cultural mainstream but only appear when their “consumer value” peaks. Such tokenistic use of cultural symbols reduces the community to a market segment rather than acknowledging them as part of the broader cultural fabric.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model helps us to dig this contradiction. Advertisers “encode” messages that construct Muslims as exotic, festive, and food-oriented consumers, especially during seasonal campaigns. The preferred reading invites audiences to accept these portrayals as natural. However, this mainstreaming simultaneously marginalises Muslims by limiting them to narrow roles and excluding them from everyday, aspirational images of the nation. Muslim audiences may negotiate these portrayals accepting cultural pride during festivals but questioning the absence of authentic, year round representation. Others may adopt an oppositional reading, rejecting such ads as tokenistic or exclusionary. This cycle shows how advertising both reflects and reproduces cultural hierarchies, using selective visibility to reinforce who belongs in the mainstream and who is marginalised. The study undergoes content analysing of the travel agency called Green Oasis based in Calicut and their visual ads during the period 2024 studies by the content analysis methodology. During the time they are raised their organic reach of Instagram from 2000 to 14500 followers by strategic communication

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Arnold. Mathew (1869) provided an influential early framework for thinking about culture. From the roots of Arnold's observation later cultural studies find it seeds. The book defines culture and what he meant by anarchy. According to him culture as a pursuit of 'perfection' and 'anarchy' as the condition where individuals or groups refuse to recognize authority above their own opinion and desire. In Victorian England, he noticed that people from different classes; the aristocracy, the middle class, and the working class each pursued their own narrow interests, with little concern for a higher common good. Arnold observes that this led to fragmentation and disorder in society. He criticizes the English tendency to exaggerate the idea of personal liberty. For him, liberty without guidance from reason, culture, and moral principles leads to selfishness, materialism, and social disunity what he calls 'anarchy'. In the book,

Arnold contrasts 'anarchy' with 'culture.' Culture is the pursuit of "sweetness and light," meaning knowledge, reason, and beauty that harmonize society. Anarchy, on the other hand, is when classes or individuals reject this pursuit and cling to raw power, money, or narrow prejudices. Yet, later the scholars and intellectuals criticised the work focus on elite culture. Later, the work of Raymond Williams questioned this and put forward 'popular culture'.

Williams. Raymond (1976) tracing the idea of 'culture' from the late 18 th century to the 20 th century . Williams argues that Arnold saw culture as a civilizing tool to counteract anarchy ,but this reduces culture to something elitist and excludes ordinary people. Williams expand the term culture to include everyday practices ,values and lived experience ,not just elite art and literature. He Saw culture not as timeless 'best' works, but as tied to material conditions and power structures. He opens the door to key shift from Arnolds definition of culture . Williams says popular culture and media as serious ,meaningful, and political. Words don't have fixed meanings their meanings shift with society, politics, and power struggles. For example, culture once meant "cultivation of land," but later came to mean "the arts," and eventually "a whole way of life." Keywords helped scholars see media not just as "neutral channels of information," but as sites where meanings are contested. Media texts such as TV, film, journalism, advertising are use words that are already ideologically loaded, and audiences interpret them through cultural contexts. This makes it a cornerstone for analysing how media constructs meaning and how culture is lived and contested. The culture is a representation. Stuart Hall explain the how media texts brings marginalisation.

Hall. Stuart (1997) focuses on how meaning is produced and exchanged in culture through language, images ,and media. Representation is not a mirror of reality. Meanings are shaped with power relation (who has the power to represent whom ,and how) culture site of struggle or meaning. Hall expands this; popular culture (music ,tv ,advertising ,media) is where struggles over meaning and identity happen. Representation is always political struggles over who gets to define identity ,race, gender ,class. Hall argues that representation is not just reflecting reality but actively shaping it through systems of signs and codes. He introduces three approaches: reflective (language mirrors reality), intentional (meaning is what the speaker intends), and constructionist (meaning is socially constructed). The book emphasizes how culture, ideology, and power shape what we see as "natural." It is key for understanding identity, race, gender, and media's role in meaning-making. Through language, images, and cultural codes, media and cultural texts organize meaning in ways that influence how people perceive the world. This perspective shows that meaning is never fixed; it is constantly produced and contested within society. By analysing representation, Hall demonstrates how categories like race, gender, class, and identity are constructed, maintained, and challenged in culture.

Barthes. Roland (1957) revolutionised cultural criticism by showing how ideology hides in everyday objects and practices. It provided the tools to 'read culture as text' while sometimes criticized for determinism and dated examples, it remains a foundational text in cultural studies ,semiotics , and media analysis. The mythologies consists of two parts shot essays and theoretical essays . In the short essays analysing everyday cultural phenomena in France advertising ,wrestling ,toys ,wine, fashion theoretical essay "myth today" where he explains how ideological messages ,naturalizing history and power relation every day life as ideology ; Barthes shows how objects like detergent ads ,striptease reproduce bourgeois values. He concludes in the essay "Myth Today", where Barthes extends Saussurean semiotics to explain myth as a "second-order sign system" that transforms historically specific meanings. For instance, his analysis of a Black soldier saluting the French flag demonstrates how colonial power relations are masked through seemingly benign images, producing what he terms "depoliticized speech." Nonetheless, as later reassessments suggest, Barthes' methodological innovation treating culture as a text to be decoded remains

highly relevant for analysing contemporary consumerism, celebrity politics, and digital media. Mythologies, therefore, continues to serve as both a historical artifact of early cultural semiotics and a living framework for critical engagement with ideology in everyday life.

Methodology

The qualitative content analysis is employed by the researcher to study the phenomenon of marginalisation and underrepresentation. It involves an in-depth study and analysis of the communication strategy of Green Oasis, a Calicut-based travel agency. The majority of travel consumers are Muslims, but they remain underrepresented or marginalised in advertisements in general. This study investigates the reasons behind this phenomenon through the case study research approach. The researcher conducted an interview with the Communication Head of Green Oasis using a prepared close-ended questionnaire to gain insights into the agency's communication strategy and the selection of cultural elements in its visual advertisements.

Theoretical Framework

1. Cultural Studies: This framework examines how cultural texts, such as advertising, shape and reflect societal values, power dynamics, and identity formations.
2. Representation Theory: This framework explores how media representations construct and reinforce social identities, influencing public perceptions and cultural norms.
3. Marketing and Consumer Culture Theory: This framework analyses how marketing strategies intersect with cultural politics, shaping consumer identities and experiences.

Key Words

1. Cultural Marginalisation: The process of excluding or underrepresenting certain cultural groups in media and marketing narratives.
2. Mainstreaming: The practice of using generic, dominant cultural signifiers in marketing communication, potentially erasing specific cultural identities.
3. Representational Gaps: The absence or underrepresentation of certain cultural groups in media and marketing narratives.
4. Structural Marginalisation: The systemic exclusion of certain groups from mainstream cultural and economic spaces.

Theoretical Perspectives

1. Social Identity Theory: How media representations shape and reflect social identities, influencing group membership and belonging.
2. Cultural Capital Theory: How cultural representations and marketing narratives construct and reinforce cultural value and status.

Analysis and findings

Travel and leisure constitute fundamental human needs, serving as essential means for the refreshment of both body and mind. Beyond their recreational value, travel and leisure also function as important mediums through which consumers engage with and become aware of various services. However, an examination of advertising content produced by travel agencies reveals that Muslim consumers, who

represent a significant segment of the market, are frequently underrepresented in promotional materials and social media platforms. This study addresses such patterns of invisibility, with a particular focus on Green Oasis, a travel agency headquartered in Calicut, with additional branches in Cochin and Malappuram. To gain deeper insights into the organization's communication practices, a structured, in depth interview was conducted with Mr. Haneefa, the Head of Communications at Green Oasis, at the agency's Calicut office.

The interview with Mr. Haneefa, Head of Communications at Green Oasis, highlights the demographic profile of the agency's clientele and underscores the significance of understanding audience diversity in travel marketing. According to him, "our major audience are from Malabar region. Malabar is a Muslim community rich area so our 60–70% are Muslim audience." This acknowledgement establishes the centrality of Muslim travellers to the agency's business model, particularly given its operational base in Calicut, Cochin, and Malappuram. The agency's ability to serve multiple religious communities Hindus, Muslims, and Christians suggests an inherent diversity, yet the disproportionate representation of Muslim travellers raises important questions about visibility in the agency's advertising practices.

Haneefa emphasizes the critical role of demographic analysis in shaping communication strategies. As he explains, "studying traveller demographics is one of the most important steps in communication planning for a travel agency because it helps align messages, channels, and offers with the right audience." He elaborates on this point by illustrating how different groups respond to specific formats "Gen Z short-form video, memes, Instagram, " whereas "families detailed itineraries, safety, kids' activities." This reveals a clear awareness of segmentation strategies that extend beyond religion, taking into account age, lifestyle, and digital behaviour. His response reflects a structured approach to marketing, aligning closely with contemporary communication theories that emphasize personalization and cultural sensitivity.

Despite this understanding of audience segmentation, the interview uncovers a paradox in representation. When asked about casting decisions, Haneefa clarifies that external agencies handle the process but admits that "there is no possibility to consider Muslim audience in the ad films. our anchor video never taking Muslim anchors, Muslim anchors in the sense female anchors who use scarf." He further notes that attempts to include visibly Muslim women in advertisements were discouraged by industry experts, who observed that "people scrolling the social media ad screen while the same anchor without scarf is accepted." This insight exposes the tension between market realities and representational ethics, revealing how industry practices often reproduce invisibility even when a community forms the majority of the consumer base.

Finally, Haneefa reflects on the broader issue of inclusivity within Muslim communities themselves. He suggests that "beyond our wish to consider inclusivity the Muslims themselves considering their invisibility as a positive one because of the religious restrictions." However, he acknowledges a shift in social trends, noting that "things are getting changing, the community prefer education first, employment next." This statement points to an evolving cultural context in which traditional norms surrounding representation may be renegotiated in the future. Thus, while Green Oasis has yet to actively pursue Muslim representation in its advertisements, the interview suggests that both internal organizational factors and wider socio-religious transformations will shape the trajectory of inclusivity in its communication strategies.

The absence of Muslim representation in Green Oasis advertisements can be critically examined through the lens of representation theory and the cultural gaze. While the agency acknowledges that 60–70% of its clientele are Muslims, the deliberate exclusion of visible markers of Muslim identity, such as the hijab, reflects what Stuart Hall (1997) identifies as the "politics of representation," where certain identities are

either rendered invisible or depicted selectively to align with dominant aesthetic expectations. The explanation that “people scrolling the social media ad screen while the same anchor without scarf is accepted” illustrates how the consumer gaze the presumed preferences of audiences shapes which identities are deemed “marketable.” In this process, Muslim women in particular are subjected to what Laura Mulvey (1975) terms the “male gaze,” extended here into the commercial gaze, where their visibility is filtered through perceptions of acceptability and desirability. This invisibility simultaneously denies Muslim consumers the recognition of their cultural identity while reinforcing homogenized depictions of “ideal travellers” in tourism marketing. Such practices have implications for consumer identity formation, as they may inadvertently communicate that Muslim consumers’ presence in the travel industry is valued economically but not culturally.

The interview with the copywriter from Dexito, the advertising agency managing the creative portfolio of Green Oasis, illustrates how strategic decisions in travel advertising are shaped by industry norms, client expectations, and resource constraints. As the copywriter explained, “Dexito handles the entire creative side whether it’s posters, reels, ad films, or even the small festival greetings. Green Oasis gives us the brief and the budget, but how the campaign looks and feels is mostly up to us.” This reveals the autonomy of agencies in shaping the aesthetic and narrative identity of campaigns, while also highlighting the collaborative but client driven nature of the work.

When asked about thematic and visual choices, the copywriter pointed out that most travel advertisements tend to rely on “polished, modern, and kind of ‘generic happy family or young couple at a beach’ kind of thing.” Such representations are aspirational and designed for mass appeal, but they often exclude the real demographic makeup of Green Oasis’s customers, particularly Muslims in the Malabar region. The copywriter acknowledged this gap, remarking that although “it would have felt so natural to show a Malabar Muslim family, because that’s the actual customer,” the prevailing industry belief is that community-specific visuals might restrict the perceived universality of the service. As a result, “neutral” imagery becomes the safe choice, even at the cost of authenticity.

This hesitation to represent Muslim identities in advertising also reflects structural issues such as budget, model availability, and client preferences. As the copywriter observed, “clients usually don’t want to spend extra money finding community-specific models. and stock photos rarely have Muslim families in them.” Moreover, there is a perception in the industry that ads featuring visibly Muslim anchors, such as hijab-wearing women, do not perform well on social media. The copywriter, however, was critical of this assumption: “I think it’s mostly perception. I haven’t seen any data that proves that hijabi women don’t get engagement. But in this industry, people don’t like to take risks.” This dynamic demonstrates how representation in advertising is often shaped more by untested industry assumptions than by empirical evidence.

In order to contextualize this within broader marketing practice, it is important to note that a communication strategy is a systematic plan that guides how a brand conveys its identity, values, and offerings to audiences across different channels. An advertising campaign, in turn, is a coordinated set of promotional activities such as films, posters, and digital content that works to deliver a consistent message to target consumers. Campaigns benefit clients by increasing brand visibility, fostering consumer trust, and creating stronger market positioning. For Green Oasis, Dexito executed the campaign “Green Oasis Vazhi Engottum” (“Wherever the path leads, Green Oasis is there”), which combined an ad film, carousel ads, quick-response videos, and static posters. This integrated approach allowed the brand to reach multiple segments youth through reels, families through posters, and general audiences through film and

static visuals. The copywriter also imagined how a more inclusive campaign could look: “a Malabar Muslim family on a holiday, a Hindu family on an Onam trip, a young Christian couple on a weekend getaway.” Such an approach, he argued, would not only mirror Green Oasis’s real customer base but also build stronger emotional resonance by reflecting the cultural diversity of Kerala.

Conclusion

Advertisements have long served as cultural texts, simultaneously reflecting and shaping social realities. From their earliest iterations in ancient Egyptian papyrus inscriptions to the current digital-first environment, advertising has remained a key site for the circulation of meanings. In the digital age, advertisements are not only marketing tools but also cultural signifiers that reinforce social hierarchies through selective visibility. Scholars such as Hall (1997) argue that representation is never neutral; rather, media reproduces dominant ideologies by privileging certain identities while marginalizing others. This study finds that such dynamics are evident in contemporary travel advertising in Kerala, particularly in the case of Green Oasis.

Despite Muslims constituting the majority of Green Oasis’s customer base in the Malabar region, their representation in the company’s advertising remains minimal. Instead, as the copywriter at Dexto noted, industry norms favour “neutral” or “mainstream” imagery to avoid being perceived as community-specific. This practice, however, results in the systematic invisibility of Muslim travelers. Similar patterns have been documented in Indian media, where Muslim identities are either underrepresented or stereotypically framed, contributing to what Ahmed (2018) terms the “cultural marginalization of visible minorities.” By privileging upper-caste Hindu aesthetics and nuclear family models, advertisements perpetuate w

hat Hall (1996) describes as the “hegemonic encoding of culture,” where dominant groups set the standards for what is shown and what remains invisible.

The structured interviews conducted for this research highlighted multiple reasons behind this underrepresentation. Budgetary constraints, limited model availability, and perceived risks associated with showing hijab-wearing women all contribute to the exclusion of Muslim identities from mainstream travel ads. As the communication head of Green Oasis observed, cultural marginalization extends beyond advertising into cinema and other media industries, where Muslim women in particular have been systematically absent due to both religious restrictions and entrenched media aesthetics. Paradoxically, during Ramadan, non-Muslim models are often cast in hijab roles, demonstrating that Muslim representation is selectively commodified rather than authentically embraced.

However, the study also reveals emerging signs of change. With rising education and employment opportunities, Muslim women in Kerala are gaining visibility in professional and cultural domains, which has begun to reflect in certain testimonial ads and localized campaigns. This shift aligns with findings by Nayar (2020), who observes that evolving social mobility among marginalized communities in Kerala is gradually reshaping media portrayals. Yet, the persistence of invisibility suggests that symbolic exclusion continues in new forms, echoing Kerala’s long history of caste and cultural hierarchies. What was once social untouchability is now rearticulated through representational hierarchies in media. Moving forward, greater inclusivity in advertising should not only be seen as an ethical imperative but also as a strategic advantage. For brands like Green Oasis, authentically reflecting the diversity of their customer base would enhance trust, foster resonance, and challenge entrenched cultural silences in Kerala’s media landscape.

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