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Twirling Textiles in Transit: The performance of *Keretapi Sarong*

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Abstract

Public performances revolving around public transportation continue to be a common sight in transit areas such as London's Tube and the New York subway. Malaysia is even taking a step further by allowing various performing art events to take place at stations and in transit. This exploration is carried out to investigate the possibilities of utilising public transportation services to benefit performing artists in Kuala Lumpur. This research argues that this symbiotic co-existence between transit areas and serving arts practitioners, with the case study of the *Keretapi Sarong* activity, would foster vibrant arts lifestyle community whereby these efforts will continue to enrich public transport commute experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Performances, Public Transportation, Social Media, Flash Mob

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1.0 Introduction

A Nation's public transportation system is expected to connect users to many destination points within its locality. For example, in Malaysia, public transportation consists of buses, e-hailing services, trains, LRT (Light Rapid Transit), MRT (Mass Rapid Transit), BRT and monorail trains, boats and aeroplanes. In other parts of the world, public transportation includes trams, cable cars, and high-speed or bullet trains. The geographical terrain also will influence the different available public transport services. However, because these transit public services attract significant traffic for public commute, artists tend to seize the opportunity to show off their talents. For that very reason, buskers or street musicians often frequent these locations to perform their music. Street performers frequently exercise this strategy as it is easy to connect with people, provides free publicity and generates income.

Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur urban transportation system, known as the Kuala Lumpur Rapid Integrated Network (its Malay acronym RapidKL) over ten years, is no longer marketed just for commuting but also can be used as an arts hub or creative site. There are several initiatives that RapidKL has done besides providing designated areas where musicians can perform. With public transportation transit hubs becoming the main traffic point for incorporating various other trades within this public space serving performing arts, practitioners feel they could use some areas to showcase their performances. In 2016, Think City, an urban planning company in collaboration with Prasarana (RapidKL's parent company), started Arts on The Move that ran programs on a calendar of arts events at Masjid Jamek, one of the train stations, that included performing arts and visual arts. A local newspaper, The Star revealed that a survey was conducted on 800 respondents between 2016 and 2017 on the Arts on the Move (Meng, 2018). The article mentioned that "...60% said that they had the opportunity to watch live performances at the station for the first time through the Arts on the Move platform, which hosted 36 live

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shows and six visual arts exhibitions in 2016, and 94 live shows and four visual arts exhibitions in 2017". The survey also mentioned that "(o)verall, about 83% felt the shows contributed positively to the atmosphere." From October 19 to November 13, a performing arts theatre group Orang Orang Theatre group performed a 90-minute dance performance within the train carriages of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) (Maganathan, 2021).

Thus, with the existence of public transport, when a majority of the city dwellers frequent the system, the ultimate goal is to reduce road congestion and simultaneously provide opportunities for various types of commercial trade, particularly for performing artists. Public transport is necessary in crowded and cosmopolitan cities as a mode of transport (Schmocker, Bell & Lam, 2004). Public transportation is a common way to move about in cosmopolitan towns as it is the most convenient and fastest way to commute. The users of mass public transportation come from various economic backgrounds. Van Exel, Graaf & Rietveld (2011) revealed that good public transport management could turn the community independent of its transport. China, Japan, South Korea, and the United Kingdom are examples of countries that can get their people to go from one location to another without relying on their automobiles.

Commuters relying on these transit systems would then benefit from a rejuvenated public art display as what Craig Amundsen (1995) mentioned as "... humanising transit stations and integrating them into their surrounded context. Public art has a role in this process: it can help make transit stations more than places to wait." (P.75). The positive effects of using art in improving environments could be viewed in the research of arts in hospitals, whereby, researchers have found patients actively engaging with arts display and found a sense of comfort in a very sterile environment (Nielsen, Fich, Roesler & Mullins, 2017). In one of Malaysia's private hospitals, Sunway Medical Centre, visitors are entertained by live instrumental music at the lobby. Short piano recitals or a Chinese board zither, the guzheng are frequently heard within lobby area. In a press release on Sunway Medical centre on the 1st of July 2019, the article mentions that "...we ensure that the hospital's lobby is constantly filled with soothing music to help ease our visitors and patients' mind and soul." (No Author, 2019). To conclude the need for integration between artist and transit areas, a report by Stone & Nezam (2017) argues that "(t)ransportation systems can and should be a powerful tool to help people access opportunity, drive economic development, improve health and safety, and build the civic and social capital that binds communities together" (p.3). As more developed countries are taking this approach to develop their communities further, this research aims to examine how this could be imposed in developing countries like Malaysia.

This research will investigate the existing and potential benefits of performing in public transport spaces by examining the *Keretapi Sarong*; a flash mob completed within the RapidKL trains and stations. The first event was held in 2014 in London, the United Kingdom, and then in Kuala Lumpur in 2017, 2018 and 2019. *Keretapi Sarong* is an event that initially aimed to gather the public to experience dressed in our local traditional sarongs to celebrate Malaysia Day. In addition, the event was aimed to promote peace and acceptance among communities in Kuala Lumpur and was organised by the local Malaysian Organisation LOCCO in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. This initiative has taken a step further by making arts more integrated with the service to reduce the feeling of a mundane commute. LOCCO's other projects include *Retro Klang*, *Joget Kita*, *Yee Sang Kita*, and *Game On Lah!* According to the organisation's website (<https://www.locco.com.my/>), all these events are conducted with one goal: to ignite the spirit of national unity and culture and indirectly benefit the arts industry, including the musicians also. If this research is to be executed, it can be a framework for other countries, especially in Southeast Asia.

2.0 Research Design

Based on the introductory arguments, there is an excellent potential to promote performing arts within the public transport system. This research will be able to discuss the possibility of this relationship for the betterment of performing artists in Malaysia. At the same time, this research intends to investigate the benefits of these public transport spaces' incorporation with performing artists in Kuala Lumpur. The *Keretapi Sarong* program will be analysed as a case study for this research. Through analytical content analysis of the published materials available online about the event. This research will analyse various trajectories from the activities and processes collected throughout the years that the performance was held, which is a case study analysis process.

The research was conducted based on existing published data. The reception and the social context of the performance were reconstructed from social media and video-sharing sites. Public postings were analysed to understand information that is relevant to the objectives which are to investigate how live performances within public transport services will create a vibrant arts lifestyle community that benefits performing artists and the public transport consumers and explore its fullest potential. Therefore, content analysis was used to look into text analysis in public postings and to understand aspects of social phenomena (Prasad, 2008). A selection of materials will be chosen for study, and it will be analysed within a frame of objectivity, systematic and generality (Bordens & Abbott, 2022; Holsti, 1969; Prasad, 2008)

2.1 Data Collection

The collected data will be extensively analysed based on audience comments most relevant to the topic and any potential concerns indicated in previous research to prevent just disclosing positive results. Each issue may comprise numerous subthemes as subdivisions to acquire a comprehensive view of the data and identify a pattern in the participants' perspectives (Vaismoradi, 2016). All comments from YouTube, feedback from Facebook, and tweets from Twitter will be screened to ensure that they can serve the objective of this study. Since most of the comments were written in either Bahasa Melayu, bilanguage, or short forms, the translation was provided by the authors. All comments pertinent to the research topic will be added, collated and translated to English. To allow objectivity, both positive and negative responses will be included. Hence, the data will provide the readers with various opinion points.

The following lists recorded archival material that was used in the research. The data collection consists of 33 videos from YouTube, 317 tweets from Twitter, three posts from Facebook and 14 articles from online newspapers. However, a couple of data sets were not

selected because the responses did not reflect the topic in discussion. Instagram data will not be used in this study since there are very few responses that are related to the analysis. Some data may be accessible, but there is a limitation to the amount based on relevancy.

3.0 Media Content Analysis

The number of responses varied due to the contrast in the number of comments available. Only 100 tweets were selected from 317 feedback results gathered using the hashtag on Twitter. Twitter is a microblogging service provider, and it allows users to publish short 280-character postings. While only 23 tweets were included in the study out of 100 gathered due to the similar tweet content appearing again and over. In addition, these were the only relevant tweets to be analysed. Hashtags were used to understand the general information. The table on the usage of hashtags is as follows:

Table 1. Hashtags responses for each year of performance

An example of a column heading	Responses
#keretapisarong2014	22 Tweets with an average of retweets of 1 and 2 retweets
#keretapisarong14	1 tweet with 0 retweets
#keretapisarong2017	11 Tweets with the highest retweets were 21
#keretapisarong17	83 Tweets with the highest retweets were 408
#keretapisarong2018	6 Tweets with the highest retweets were 10 retweets
#keretapisarong18	93 Tweets with the highest retweets were 328
#keretapisarong2019	8 Tweets with the highest retweets were 144 retweets
#keretapisarong19	98 Tweets with the highest retweets were 176

During the coding process, the analysis of the users includes elements of excitement, positivity, nationalism, togetherness and cultural awareness. The majority of the respondents provided positive comments on the event. Besides Twitter, YouTube, an online video-sharing platform, also captures activities on *Keretapi Sarong*. The following analysis captures the viewership on YouTube's video uploads from various sources; however, some videos have little to no responses in the comments.

Table 2. The audience responds to every video each year

Year	Number of Videos	Responses	YouTube Chanel
2014	4	The highest video had 552 views	ManawebLife
2017	6	The highest video had 978 views	Gaya Travel Magazine
2018	10	The highest views had 2600 views	LOCCO Malaysia
2019	13	The highest views had 26,212 views	ML Studio

The comments recorded on YouTube also reflect the same sentiments as those on Twitter. Due to the nationalism value of the performance performed, some of the respondents mentioned how the version made them feel patriotic. When Hakim (2021) mentions that "*Memartabatkan budaya, Melayuku bersatulah*" (Uplifting the culture, unite the Malays), "*Terbaik, Budaya kita kebanggaan kita*" (excellent, Our culture our pride), (Wan Hazimi, 2021). One video published by ML Studios, a local YouTube channel with 1.36 million followers and reviews various current events and lifestyle activities, shared her experience at the 2019 event. One of their viewers responded as follows:

Program ini antara inisiatif terbaik yang dilakukan untuk memelihara kesenian dan kebudayaan negara kita. Ramai yang melihat kain sarong ini sinonim dengan orang Melayu semata-mata, tetapi program jelas melihat bagaimana penglibatan daripada pelbagai bangsa terhadap kesenian dan kebudayaan kita. Hari Malaysia kebiasaannya dilihat sebagai hari percutian semata-mata tetapi dengan program sebegini sememangnya berguna untuk membuka mata masyarakat dalam menjaga kebudayaan dan kesenian kita supaya tidak ditelan zaman. Daripada program berskala kecil kini sudah menjadi program yang sangat besar. Mesej yang sangat besar dibawa oleh program ini. Diharap pihak penganjur terus meneruskan menganjurkan program ini setiap tahun. Sayangi Malaysiaku.

This program is one of the best initiatives used to preserve our country's arts and culture. Many see the sarong as synonymous with the Malays; however, this program considers the involvement of various ethnicities in our local arts and culture. Malaysia Day is usually viewed as a holiday, but this program, is beneficial and an eye-opener to the community in preserving the arts and culture, so it remains current. From a small-scale program, it is now significantly expanded. The message carried out in this program is very significant. Hopefully, the organiser will continue to organise this event every year. Love our Malaysia. (Amirzam, 2017)

The videos posted by other than the organisers, especially those with a more significant following, of the 33 videos, ML studios have the most considerable number of comments, which is 122. The second-largest number of observations is from SKYRUN MALAYSIA, which has 63,200 subscribers and has 53 comments, 11 of them from the author's replies. The rest of the 31 videos have 16 or fewer

words. The majority of the comments show a positive reaction towards the performance. Out of these positive responses, show regret for not taking the time to participate but was very entertained by the published recording.

4.0 Discussions

The existence of activities such as *Keretapi Sarong* will provide many benefits for various parties. Returning to the study's objectives, we found how live performances in public spaces could achieve beyond providing opportunities for performing artists. This goal has been demonstrated when additional activities are organised in addition to the *Keretapi Sarong* and how the community respond to the initiative. Although partnering parties together have varied goals, they all have one thing in common: the existence of an active arts lifestyle community with musicians involved. Indirectly, events like these might push other parties to host similar events and possibly develop events far superior to the prior one. As a result, individuals will get habituated to such activities.

When comparing the three social media platforms within this research, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, Twitter had the most reach in terms of community feedback, which is the total number of tweets and retweets. However, YouTube was important in curating video evidence and has a higher viewership than Twitter. Compared to the other two social media platforms, for this case study, YouTube receives the highest engagement, counted by the number of views. Although the number of viewers could be argued that some viewers watch repeatedly, it is good enough to say that this would drive the YouTube algorithm to be among the higher search hits. For Facebook, it didn't create enough traction or engagement in relationship to Twitter and Facebook.

Promoting large crowds to converge on an idea creates a sense of urgency. In the case of the *Keretapi Sarong*, this sparks a collective movement to encourage nationalism among the local community. The phrase "flash mob" was used to describe a phenomenon where several individuals gather in a public place, conduct a random act, and then disperse swiftly. The term "flash mob" was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in July 2004 (Nicholson 2005; Gore 2010; Molnár 2014), and it has since been widely used in various disciplines, sectors of society or scenarios to accomplish a task, usually a dance or music performance collectively by mobilising a group of people in virtual and/or physical spaces. This is a much lighter than its heavier counterpart of protest music or art, where it may follow a public discontent or push for a social change (Haycock, 2015; Manabe, 2015). In this case, it to promote peace and unity and nationalism and idea, which Zelensky (1988) expressed as "intense devotion to the nation, [a] real or supported community of individuals who are convinced they share a common set of traditions, beliefs, and cultural characteristics" (p. 17). Williams (1989), referring to John Plamenatz mentions that nationalism is the "...desire to preserve or enhance a people's national or cultural identity when that identity is threatened or the desire to transform or even create it where it is felt to be inadequate or lacking" (p.43).

While this process is in play, the camaraderie and the enjoyment of being together would best describe the idea of *communitas*. A term first used by Victor Turner (1969) in his book *The Ritual Process*, then developed by Edith Turner in 2012. Sharpe (2005) described *communitas* based on Arnould & Price (1993) as "when people step out of their structural roles and obligations, and into a sphere that is decidedly "anti-structural" ... (t)hese conditions fostered an emerging social dynamic characterised by feelings of equality, linkage, belonging and group devotion to a transcendent goal." (P.256). These communities then form the idea of what Benedict Anderson (1983) describes as *Imagined Communities*. Here groups of like-minded people "...invents the nation where it doesn't exist" (p.6). he continues to imply that communities are understood "...in which they are imagined" (p.6)

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the analysis, it has been argued that activities such as the *Keretapi Sarong* succeed in attracting the public's attention and, therefore, would benefit from future reimplementation of the program. The steadily increasing number of attendees every year, recorded by the organisers, as well as the increase in media traffic, also proves that people are looking forward to events like this. This activity will not only boost local tourism but also will affect the country's economy positively. These activities create opportunities for performing artists and visual artists to showcase their talent. The outcome of these activities will help rejuvenate and inspire other communities to follow suit, and these events will continue to improve and cultivate culturally empowered communities.

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