TAKING MUSIC TO THE STREETS: BUSKING, THE NEW POP CULTURE

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ABSTRACT: *Buskers are not valued highly in Malaysia because they are viewed as obstructions of public space. This study is an attempt to understand buskers and their culture to bridge the gap of knowledge in society. This study aims to explore how busking is socially and culturally constructed, and critically evaluate social power imposed over them. Buskers are being restricted from voicing out their expression of art as they are often associated with adjectives such as 'violent, rebellious, lazy, and unemployed'. In this research, a qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted on buskers in Kuching. There are several factors that motivate them to busk. These factors can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation is seen to be the inherent tendency to seek out challenges to constantly dare one's capabilities and learn new things. In contrast, extrinsic factors come from social pressures to do something that would allow one to partake in a certain kind of responsibility. Even though busking is generally an enjoyable activity meant to provide pleasure to the public, at times the buskers face certain challenges from the society. The social construction of the society towards buskers as a bad role model has led authority figures to enforce certain policies to control them.*

1- INTRODUCTION

Streets are the main public places of a city which aid in interconnecting all activities throughout the city. Researcher [1] stated that streets are the spaces that can develop "spontaneous, democratic, and intimate encounters on a human level". In addition, streets can also be areas of performance. Historically, street performances were highly appreciated as a form of communication and social interaction. According to researchers [2], the tradition of public performance has remained in a modern setting, for instance, busking. However, technology restricts the development of busking groups as music can now be digitally projected into spaces.

In Malaysia, there are various local talents involved in the busking lifestyle as well. Generally, as of the year 2012, the majority of the public accepts buskers and even enjoy their performance. In a news article, it is said that the authority in Malaysia in the form of security guards or policemen are trying to restrict buskers in public areas because they are trying to exert social control in ensuring the peace of the society [3]. However, in recent years, authorities are trying to impose influence in a more direct manner by issuing permits to buskers only if they adhere to the predetermined conditions [4]. Buskers are not valued highly in Malaysia because sometimes they are merely viewed as obstructions of public space. That is why this study is an attempt to understand buskers and their culture to bridge the gap of knowledge in society. This study aims to explore how the busking group is socially and culturally constructed, and critically evaluate social power imposed over them.

In an ideal setting, music is a form of expression that everybody can relate to. It is part of the popular culture that is mass-produced and mass-consumed by society [5]. For example, mainstream music is usually played on the radio in order for the majority of society to be able to accept it as a form of social norm. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. There exists an alternate type of music performance that is deviant from the mainstream music which is known as busking. Buskers are being restricted from voicing out their expression of art due to the power relations of the government on the society by the fact that buskers are often associated with adjectives such as 'violent, rebellious, lazy, and unemployed'. The current situation of buskers is that they are being controlled by the government through various codes of practice or acts that restrict their movement. If the buskers are continually constrained by the government, they may form pressure groups that will advocate influencing government policies for more freedom. On this note, several questions have been raised to address this issue; why do individuals choose to busk and what are the challenges of being a busker.

"Magicians, mimes, dancers, acrobats, and musicians who gather in pedestrian dominated places to perform were originally called buskers." [6] According to researcher [7], busking is a culture of an individual involved in street performance mainly at public places. However, busking was constantly being rejected by the society in the nineteenth century even though it is a form of culture. As compared to the historical times, the perceptions of the public towards buskers have changed drastically.

1.1 The Negative Connotation of Buskers in the Nineteenth Century

The existence of the busking culture dates back to the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, it has always been shunted aside by the dominant culture. It is noted that "Busking frequently has been either ignored by historians or treated in a perfunctory or romantically sentimental manner" [8]. He also said that buskers are being stereotypically constructed as it will bring bad impacts to the society where it might increase criminal activity and poverty in a country. Hence, the connotations of "beggars and vagrants" were raised at that time to label buskers. Buskers were perceived as beggars who attempt to coax people to donate some money. In other words, busking culture is constantly seen as a popular culture where it represents the inferior accomplishment of the lower class people. Perhaps all definitions of deviance are value-laden and biased to a certain extent [9]. However, these busking groups are portrayed as 'beggars' or 'unwanted disturbance' even though they perform in public spaces to earn money or on occasion, other rewards like food, drink or gifts [10; 11]. With this, researcher [5] stated that "Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture". Ranging from a sole player to a group of members, buskers across the world like to differentiate themselves by the clothes, music styles or activities they perform. It can be seen that