

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

Parveen Kaur

Department of Anthropology and Sociology Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak Jalan Datuk Mohamad Musa, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Malaysia,
sspkaur@unimas.my, +60126523375

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.*

Keywords: *Busking, control, culture, power, role model, Kuching*

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

buskers are frequently separated from the high culture which is a way to distinguish one's social classes in the society, namely, it is a way to define "them" and "us".

1.2 Functionalism: Social Action Theory

Functionalists view society as having interconnected elements that contribute to the functioning of the whole system [12]. The interconnected parts are referred to social institutions such as education, religion or government that are all linked together. Any changes in one institution will bring effects on other institution. As a result, the system will seek equilibrium in order for all parts of society to function accordingly.

From our perspective, we can relate buskers to this functionalism theory. Social action theory which is a branch of functionalism, as asserted by the researcher [13], conceptualizes the basic unit of a social system as 'unit act'. An act must involve an actor, an end and actions. The actor refers to individuals who are able to exercise some form of actions whereas an end indicates a future which still do not exist. Social actions are usually performed by an actor either as an individual or a group. According to Parsons, actors are first motivated to action which in this case is busking before they find the means to attain a goal. For them, the goal would be to release stress or earn income. Then, buskers must work within the social system where there exists a code of practice, acts or government policies as the actor deals with the hindering conditions such as the society's perception towards them.

1.3 Factors that Contribute to Buskers indulging in Street Performance

Performing in an unconducive environment is definitely not what anyone would want, but these buskers have the compelling motivation that gives them the courage to perform in the streets. The main motivation for a busker is usually because of the money, but that only holds true to a certain [14]. Approval from the society towards their performance is very important too. Other factors that contribute to buskers' motivation in street performance are freedom from routine life, good training ground and the element of megalomania.

1.4 The Role of Authority Figure in Controlling Buskers

In addition to the negative connotation against buskers, they were seen as a threat to the society by power holders or authority figures. As a result, they were prohibited from performing in the public domain. As stated by the researcher [15], "The songs themselves were not particularly subversive or challenging, but by banning this music, the post-1979 government effectively gave pop music its subversive power." Even though different forms of culture exists in our society nowadays, it does not express that various cultural groups have equal access to political power or to impose their cultural patterns on

society [16]. By busking in public place, the harmony of the society is seen to be disrupted where it is always alleged as a platform to challenge the government's policy. Ruling social class groups can exercise social authority over the inferior classes (busking groups) by not only winning but shaping them under their authority [16]. There are, in fact, various codes of practice as well as acts which the government used to restrict, or ultimately banned the movement of busking groups, for instance, 'Guide to Busking in Cambridge', 'Glasgow Code of Good Practice for Buskers and Street Performers', 'Melbourne Street Activity Policy and Busking Guidelines 2011' so on and so forth.

2. Methodology

In this research, a qualitative analysis through the in-depth interview and participant observation were conducted. The interview questions were semi-structured which allowed informal conversations, observing the facial expression of the interviewee and control the interview content. The behavior of the buskers and the reaction of the audience were also observed. Furthermore, this research is a theoretical study where deductive research is used to assist in the data analysis. Our data collection is gathered from the interview questions which designed with semi-structured questions. With this, we are flexible to create different questions during the interview session depending on the responses given by the interviewees. To ensure the reliability of the data gathered, the researchers conducted the interviews with 11 interviewees who are always involved in the busking culture. English Language and Bahasa Malaysia were used in conducting these interviews based on the preferred language of the respondents.

Kuching Waterfront is a famous place that is often frequented by tourists which are located at Kuching's Golden Triangle and also Dewan Undangan Negeri's (DUN) historical building is also the attractive point for tourism purpose [17]. Hence, it is always crowded with tourists and locals looking for an evening stroll. Besides, the buskers also perform along the riverbank of Kuching Waterfront. The study area in this research will focus on the buskers who perform at the area of Kuching Waterfront Riverside. The location chosen is convenient to gather information from the respondents where it is considered as an assembly place of the buskers. In general, there are various groups of people involved in busking culture. Hence, our target population for this research is emphasized on buskers who are performing along the way of Waterfront, Kuching despite their age, ethnic and social background. As shown in *Table 1*, the respondents are categorized into two groups that are based on their status of employment. Mostly, respondents who are under the unemployed category are mostly students. The classification codes of respondents are as follows;

Table 1: Classification of respondents with specific codes

Category	Respondents						
Unemployed	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7
Employed	E8	E9	E10	E11			

To cope with some infeasible circumstances to obtain information about busking culture, we used non-probability sampling to choose our respondents. Due to the limited resources, snowball sampling which is also a part of purposive sampling is utilized in our data sampling.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was easy to identify buskers along Kuching Waterfront even when they are not playing their instruments. They always had their instruments nearby and their style of dressing is similar: skinny jeans, printed tee, sneakers and a cap or beanie. Buskers or more commonly associated with street performers are one of the art-based subculture groups that usually work independently. At times, they also form groups based on various extrinsic and intrinsic factors. One of the unique norms among buskers is that they do not fight amongst each other to grab the crowd’s attention. There is no rivalry as to who has more audience or who earns more than the rest. They are a very peaceful community who is willing to help each other out including those who are not their band members. The buskers that we have interviewed are not homeless; in fact, most of the buskers still live at home with their families.

Our interview is mainly conducted in the Malay language which is then translated to English for this paper's purpose. Based on our respondent E8, his definition of busking is very specific, "Buskers are, well, street performers that perform using the natural setting of the surroundings, without the aid of speakers or microphones to amplify your voice." To him, once a busker uses speakers to help amplify his or her voice, it does not count as busking anymore because the real test of becoming a busker is being able to sing or play aloud without any tainted effect that technology provides. This response is also similar to the challenges that the respondent U1 faces. Initially, it was difficult to start singing and playing music in public because it required a lot of courage. This was one of the challenges that they faced as a busker. Busking may look easy; standing by the streets, strumming the guitar and just singing, but it is more than meets the eye. Busking requires a vocal practice that requires you to throw out your voice because it is an open space and there is no reflective surface to enhance your voice.

In general, buskers use two main instruments which are the tambourine and the guitar. This is because it is much more convenient for them to move around as most of the buskers we interviewed travel by motorbike. Other instruments that are used in larger bands of 4 or 5 people consist of the Cajon, clarinet, and flute. One truly captivating aspect of the instruments that we found is that some of the bands

make their own instruments such as the Cajon and flute. We were told that it is cheaper than buying a store-made instrument and also that they can customize their own instrument by tuning it to their liking. In this manner, while expressing their love for music, they are also displaying their talent in crafting instruments.

Factors Contributing towards Busking

From the respondents we had interviewed, we found that there are several factors that motivate them to busk. These factors can be divided into two categories which are 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 [18]. In contrast, extrinsic factors come from social pressures to do something that would allow one to partake in a certain kind of responsibility.

Motivation, according to researcher [19], refers to the changing of behavior in which our actions are started, supported, guided, and ended. In fact, many motivated activities start with a need which in the case of the buskers was the lack of income [14]. Drives activate a response intend to push them toward a goal which is the target of the motivated behavior. In short, motivation is a tendency to urge to move towards one's goal; to accomplish tasks. To many people, like buskers, being motivated means being interested in achievement [20]. Needs for achievement may lead to wealth and prestige, however, people who are high achievers in art, music or science may excel without seeking riches. As asserted by researchers [21], such people typically enjoy challenges to test their abilities.

The findings of our study correspond with the past researches that we have found. The buskers we have interviewed put their passion first as the main motivation to busk followed by side income. Apart from that, the pleasure of being able to provide entertainment to their audience also contributed to their motivation.

Intrinsic Factors

Most of the buskers interviewed had intrinsic motivation to start busking. Firstly, it all starts from their passion for music that encouraged them to further sharpen their musical skills. Buskers comprise of individuals who love to play music and feel that they should share their love of music with people. Besides that, they feel that they are able to overcome their fear of performing in front of a crowd after constant practice in the busking field. They view the chance of busking as a training ground for performing. Since all of our respondents have been busking for more than 2 years, they have testified themselves that busking does help them in overcoming stage fright and also in sharpening their vocal and technical skills in music.

Extrinsic Factors

Of course, intrinsic motivation is not the only factor for them to indulge in busking. Extrinsic factors such as stress, peer groups and economy also contribute to busking. The main factor that our respondents start to busk is because of the stress they feel in either work or studies. Respondent U3 mentioned that it is a method for them to escape from the stress they feel in life because playing music makes them feel good about themselves. By doing something they love, it makes them happy and when they are able to make the crowd happy, it motivates them to continue busking. Apart from that, the peer group they are in creates a social influence to be included in the group by busking. For example, respondent U5 claimed that he likes to follow his friends around to busk even though he could not sing or play any instruments except the tambourine. He feels that by performing on the streets, they could also earn some income in a good manner instead of getting involved in unbeneficial activities such as loafing around or gambling. In addition, the respondents also feel that it is a good method to earn a side income for purchasing better instruments and fuel money for transportation. All of these factors undoubtedly contributed to the extrinsic factors that motivate them to perform in the streets consistently every week.

Challenges Faced during Busking

Even though busking is generally an enjoyable activity meant to provide pleasure to the public, at times the buskers face certain challenges from both the society and also the authority figure. Although these challenges faced by buskers are not consistent among all the buskers that we had interviewed, we have summarised the findings of our interviews into two points which are the negative social perception and restriction from authority figures.

Social Perception

From respondent E9, he claims that there have been complaints about their music being too loud and too intrusive on the public atmosphere. "There was this once that one of the spectators even swore at us when we were performing. He was asking us to leave the Waterfront area," he sighed. Some of the spectators definitely perceive buskers negatively by connoting negative terms such as 'beggars, jobless, and homeless'. Taking into account their views on society's perception, we decided to observe their performance from afar for about an hour. Certainly, what we have found is that most tourists paid attention to their music while the locals who are probably used to their performance tend to ignore them. On the contrary, the shopkeepers along the Waterfront approves of the buskers because they think that it helps them improve their business by providing entertainment for their customers. For the buskers, busking by the streets is definitely better than staying at home and not doing anything because at least through busking, they are able to earn a little side income while sharpening their musical skills.

Authority Figure

Apart from society's perception, buskers are constantly being challenged by the authority figure in the form of government. Since 2014, the main criterion for buskers to perform at Kuching Waterfront is that they are required to obtain a permit for free from the Kuching Waterfront Management Office to register them as a performer. This permit restricts them from performing anywhere else except Kuching Waterfront. If the management stumbles

upon a busker without a permit, the authority figure holds the power to ask them to leave the premises. According to respondent E11, buskers who are registered under the Kuching Waterfront Management will be protected under the law in case of any unruly occurrences since they will not be hassled by the authorities. Furthermore, we were told by a few respondents that there has been a rumor that soon, the management will be charging the buskers RM 25 per night to perform at Waterfront. "I think this is really unfair because we are simply performing in a public space. We are not using any utilities or facilities provided by them. If this rumor is true, I will not pay the fee," explained respondent 04. The buskers are against the fee because it would definitely be a burden to buskers who are trying to earn a side income.

This form of governance by the Kuching Waterfront Management is a form of social control that is trying to exercise their power to limit the buskers in terms of creativity and space. The Kuching City North Commission (DBKU) is in support of establishing buskers as a social responsibility to get closer to the community. In addition, DBKU would like to showcase Kuching talents and also be able to reach out to them when they need any performances. Most buskers see street performing as a form of musician career but much freer because they are entitled to flexible times. On the contrary, they are being constrained by the government, which amounts to no freedom after all.

3. CONCLUSION

The social construction of the society towards buskers as a bad role model has led authority figures to enforce certain policies to control their behavior. Thus, the true nature of buskers is frequently left untold. The advancement of technology has affected the real meaning of busking which is defined as natural and original without any modification according to one of our respondents. In Kuala Lumpur (KL), most of the buskers are using electronic facilities such as microphone and speakers to assist in their busking performance which actually disrupts the real busking culture. Some of them are still busking in the traditional way; they have their own style of busking without following any trend. As respondent U6 said, they are busking for revolution. In other words, buskers are more likely to share their busking culture to the public instead of for a good cause. They wish to raise awareness of the public towards buskers and also hope to share it out. They do not attach any extravagant hope to enhance the status of buskers in the society but they only wish to bring some small changes to it, at least, they can have some freedom from the eyes of the people. Busking in itself does not bring any destructive effect on the society; it is only the public that is social constructing it.

Recommendation

There are a few recommendations which are relevant to this research. The existence of busking has led to many difficulties to separate whether it will be seen as a serious issue if the voices of buskers are still being negotiated by relevant units or parties. Hence, it is important to create awareness among the society who do not take note of the busking culture because they might develop into pressure groups if their movements are restricted too much. The authority figure should not restrict the movement of buskers to perform from one place to another. In other

words, the buskers should be given freedom and not be controlled in performing at a place. Maybe there could be certain consensus to be achieved between buskers and the power holder. From the agreement achieved, not only the buskers can obtain their rights as buskers, but the authority figure can also execute their responsibility in maintaining the harmony of the society easily. On the other hand, the authority figure should support the busking culture in our state by promoting it to the public so that buskers can be more accepted by society. The busking culture may become a representation of our nation in becoming a great attraction point to boost up tourism if busking culture is being recognized by our citizens.

In short, busking culture should not be ignored or looked down in our society. From another perspective, busking culture has its advantages to society. Thus, it should be given an opportunity to be accepted by the public.

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