

The Restriction towards International Celebrities' Performances in Malaysia and the Implication Towards Malaysian Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the implications of restrictions on international celebrities' performances in Malaysia and the implications on the nation's tourism and cultural identity. Rooted in Malaysia's commitment to Islamic and conservative values, these limitations often correlate with global entertainment practices, which resorts to creating chaos. qualitative content analysis method is the method for this research, where this research explores cases where international artists faced performance bans or restrictions due to issues such as LGBT advocacy, religious sensitivities, revealing attire, and perceived negative influences. The findings highlight the issues created by these restrictions, such as the potential impact on international artists, the subsequent reduction in Malaysia's attraction as a cultural tourism destination, and its standing in the global entertainment industry. The study emphasizes the importance of balanced regulatory regimes that respect local values while meeting the aspirations of international artists. Differentiated rules throughout Malaysian regions, as well as more communication with overseas stakeholders, are recommended to facilitate cultural interchange while preserving national identity.

Keywords: International Celebrities, Malaysian Tourism, Banned, Performance, Culture

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia, a nation celebrated for its cultural diversity, harmonious coexistence of ethnicities, and deep-rooted Islamic values, is often lauded as a prime example of multiculturalism in Southeast Asia. Its tourism industry, underpinned by the motto "Malaysia, Truly Asia," portrays the country as a cultural melting pot, offering an array of unique experiences that appeal to international visitors. However, Malaysia's strict regulatory framework concerning foreign entertainers and celebrities has recently become a contentious issue, especially following a series of high-profile events that shed light on the delicate balance between cultural preservation and international engagement.

One such event occurred in 2023, when the Good Vibes Festival, a popular music festival in Kuala Lumpur, was abruptly cancelled after Matty Healy, lead singer of British band The 1975, made controversial comments during their performance. Healy's remarks about Malaysia's LGBTQ+ laws, which are stringent under Islamic law, resulted in the band's immediate ban from performing in the country. The fallout from this incident was significant: Future Sound Asia (FSA), the festival organizer, sued The 1975 for RM12.3 million in damages for the breach of contract, while numerous businesses and artists filed class-action lawsuits for lost revenue and reputational damage (Reilly, 2023). This controversy highlighted the tensions between Malaysia's desire to attract international acts and its strict adherence to Islamic values, with the consequences extending far beyond the music industry.

While the Malaysian government's intent to maintain cultural integrity and societal norms is clear, the imposition of these restrictions has broader implications for the country's tourism sector. Tourism plays an essential role in Malaysia's economy, contributing approximately 6.8% to the national GDP in 2019 (Statista, 2024). The country, known for its natural beauty, cultural diversity, and rich history, has been a major tourist destination in Southeast Asia. In 2022, Malaysia emerged as the second-most visited country in the region, demonstrating its resilient appeal despite the significant challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Statista, 2024). However, the pandemic took a significant toll on the tourism industry, reducing international arrivals and overall tourism revenue during a two-year period of restricted travel and lockdowns.

On the other hand, international events like music festivals, sporting events, and entertainment showcases are integral to global tourism. These events act as powerful tools for promoting a country's image, encouraging repeat visits, and stimulating local economies. Malaysia has long relied on such events to attract foreign tourists, with the government using these platforms to showcase its cultural diversity and commitment to international tourism (Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia, 2023). However, the restrictive approach toward foreign celebrities and their performances can create an atmosphere of uncertainty, which in turn may discourage major international events from being held in Malaysia. This could result in lost opportunities for tourism and local businesses, as was evident in the aftermath of the 2023 festival. As Malaysia seeks to recover from the effects of the pandemic and grow its tourism industry once more, it is crucial to examine the interplay between cultural policies and the broader tourism economy. While the protection of local values and the preservation of social harmony remain paramount in Malaysia's political landscape, the

country's tourism success relies heavily on international collaboration, exchange, and exposure. The tension between these two priorities necessitates a thorough exploration of the potential implications for both the entertainment and tourism sectors.

This research, therefore, seeks to investigate the restrictions on international celebrities' performances in Malaysia and their implications for the tourism industry. By analysing recent controversies, such as the 2023 Good Vibes Festival incident, and exploring the broader economic and cultural ramifications of such policies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how cultural preservation and international tourism can coexist. The findings of this research will be valuable not only to policymakers in Malaysia but also to global stakeholders in the tourism and entertainment industries, as they navigate the challenges of post-pandemic recovery and globalization

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The restrictions on international celebrities performing in Malaysia have been a subject of debate, particularly concerning their implications for the nation's tourism sector. Government-imposed regulations, often rooted in cultural and religious considerations, limit the extent of foreign entertainment acts in the country. Studies have highlighted that while such restrictions aim to preserve local values, they may also affect Malaysia's image as a global tourism hub (Zaini et al., 2020). The relationship between celebrity endorsements and tourism attraction suggests that international celebrities significantly shape the perception of a travel destination (Mat et al., 2019). This raises concerns about how these restrictions might hinder Malaysia's potential to attract a diverse international audience.

One of the key arguments against strict performance regulations is the economic impact on the tourism sector. Celebrity endorsements and international entertainment events contribute to destination branding, which in turn attracts foreign visitors and boosts revenue (Cheah et al., 2019). The Malaysian tourism industry has historically benefited from celebrity-driven campaigns. Michelle Yeoh's efforts to promote Malaysian tourism globally serve as a prime example (McCartney & Pinto, 2014). However, the restriction of high-profile international performers may weaken Malaysia's appeal compared to regional competitors like Singapore and Thailand (Gan, 2019).

Additionally, the rising influence of the Hallyu wave and Western pop culture has contributed to tourism growth in many Asian countries. Countries like South Korea have capitalized on their entertainment industry by integrating celebrity endorsements into tourism campaigns (Sin & Omar, 2020). In contrast, Malaysia's strict regulations may deter potential visitors who seek cultural experiences linked to international celebrities. A study on Malaysian adolescents' perceptions of the Hallyu wave indicates that idolization of foreign celebrities influences travel decisions (Zaini et al., 2020). Entertainment restrictions may therefore act as a barrier to tourism development (Chan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the evolving digital landscape has intensified the impact of celebrity culture on travel trends. With the growing prevalence of social media, tourists often base their travel decisions on celebrity-endorsed locations (Mookda et al., 2020). This phenomenon suggests that restricting international performances could limit Malaysia's ability to capitalize

on influencer-driven tourism. By contrast, countries that embrace celebrity marketing enjoy a competitive edge by leveraging global pop culture to attract millennial and Gen Z travellers (Avraham & Ketter, 2017). Malaysia's rigid restrictions may hinder its ability to compete in this digital era (Cheah et al., 2019).

In conclusion, while Malaysia's restrictions on international celebrity performances align with cultural preservation efforts, they pose potential drawbacks to tourism growth. Research indicates that celebrity endorsements and international entertainment events significantly influence tourist preferences and destination branding (Gan, 2019). Policymakers could explore regulated flexibility, allowing selective international performances that align with national interests while maximizing tourism benefits (Mat et al., 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What factors influence international celebrities to be banned from performing in Malaysia?

RQ2: How does the absence of major international events in Malaysia affect the country's tourism industry and global brand identity within Southeast Asia?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RO1: To understand the influence of international celebrities to be banned from performing in Malaysia

RO2: To explore how the absence of international celebrity tours in Malaysia affects tourism industry and global brand identity within Southeast Asia

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of international celebrities in tourism is undeniable, as their influence can shape public perceptions of destinations and their appeal. However, Malaysia has faced challenges in balancing the allure of celebrity-driven tourism and maintaining national integrity. Zaini et al. (2020) analysed how the Hallyu (Korean Wave) phenomenon shaped the destination image among Malaysian youth. The study indicated that celebrity influence significantly affects travel preferences, where young Malaysians exhibit a heightened interest in destinations associated with their favourite idols. This suggests that celebrity performances could elevate Malaysia's tourism profile but also risk being affected by restrictions on international celebrities. Similarly, Zeno and Zhang (2025) explored the implications of celebrity culture in tourism, asserting that international figures, especially those with substantial social media presence, impact tourism-related decisions. However, these trends can be undermined by legal frameworks that impose restrictions on celebrity engagements in Malaysia.

Celebrity performances have been linked to economic growth within the tourism sector, especially in countries like Malaysia, where events draw both local and international crowds. The participation of international celebrities in Malaysian performances has historically boosted tourism revenue through concert tourism and related activities. According to Mat et al.

(2019), celebrity endorsements, particularly from Korean celebrities, significantly influenced Malaysian consumers' attitudes toward travel destinations. This was corroborated by Rosli et al. (2024), who highlighted how post-COVID, international celebrity endorsements remained a strong determinant in brand perception. However, governmental restrictions on celebrity appearances could diminish these economic benefits, as tourists often plan visits around such performances, contributing to tourism's direct and indirect revenue streams. This demonstrates the potential economic drawbacks of restricting celebrity engagements.

The regulations surrounding international celebrity performances in Malaysia are complex, intertwining legal, cultural, and social considerations. While celebrity involvement can boost tourism, concerns about cultural preservation and public order sometimes lead to restrictive policies. Zaini et al. (2020) mentioned that despite the positive influence of international celebrities in shaping travel destinations, Malaysia's conservative policies have occasionally limited such performances, especially those perceived to conflict with local values. Moreover, Zeno and Zhang (2025) emphasized the challenges Malaysia faces in harmonizing international celebrity performances with its domestic legal framework, including the constraints imposed on public events due to religious and cultural sensitivities. The inability to showcase international celebrities freely could lead to a loss of potential tourism revenue and cultural exchange.

The younger demographic in Malaysia is particularly susceptible to the influence of international celebrities, who drive trends and interest in travel destinations. Mat et al. (2019) explored how Malaysian youth, particularly those influenced by Korean culture, were likely to engage with tourism products endorsed by international celebrities. In contrast, the restrictive environment in Malaysia can deter such engagements, which may result in missed opportunities for tourism providers to capitalize on youth-driven travel trends. Rosli et al. (2024) further supported this idea by noting that the credibility and reach of celebrities directly influence Malaysian youth's brand and tourism choices. The absence of international celebrities from the performance scene might cause a shift in youth tourism behaviour, with young travellers seeking destinations with fewer restrictions, potentially impacting Malaysia's tourism competitiveness in the region.

The restriction of international celebrities in Malaysia, while driven by considerations of public order and cultural integrity, poses significant implications for tourism. While some studies, like Zaini et al. (2020) and Rosli et al. (2024), suggest that celebrity culture plays a crucial role in boosting the tourism sector, the limitations placed on their public appearances can stifle this potential. On the other hand, Zeno and Zhang (2025) highlight that celebrities' influence must be managed within the bounds of the country's legal and cultural context to avoid negative repercussions. Overall, it is evident that while celebrity-driven tourism has the potential to significantly enhance Malaysia's tourism appeal, regulatory restrictions can undermine the industry's growth if not carefully balanced.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the impact of foreign celebrity performance bans in Malaysia on tourism, utilizing qualitative content analysis to explore data gathered from online sources.

Shava (2021) notes that analysing such content allows researchers to discern key narratives by categorizing data into relevant themes. Data will be collected from diverse sources, including news articles, social media posts, and public opinions surrounding international artist bans. By evaluating these materials, the study seeks to identify the reasons behind the bans and their influence on Malaysia's reputation as a cultural and entertainment destination. Patton (2022) argues that analysing public discourse is essential for understanding how national policies shape global perceptions, particularly in the context of tourism.

According to Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis enables researchers to identify recurring patterns that emerge from large datasets. In this study, systematic coding will highlight themes such as cultural values, political motivations, and the social implications of performance bans. By categorizing the data, the research will examine how these themes influence the public's perception of Malaysia as a tourist destination. Lim and Tan (2022) emphasize that celebrity bans are often framed as necessary for cultural preservation, but such restrictions also generate mixed public reactions, with some viewing them as detrimental to Malaysia's image as a global cultural hub. Kraus et al. (2022) further argue that such societal conflicts are reflected in tourism trends, which the study will investigate by looking at how foreign visitors respond to these restrictions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

LGBT

The tension between LGBT issues and religious values in Malaysia is highlighted through multiple instances where artists faced restrictions. For example, Adam Lambert's 2010 performance faced protests from conservative groups for its explicit nature, including same-sex expressions on stage. Though Lambert made minor changes to his show out of respect for local sensitivities, the controversy demonstrated the resistance towards overt LGBT representation (Dan Martin, 2010; Press, 2013). In 2023, The 1975 further sparked controversy when their lead vocalist kissed a male bandmate during a performance and criticized Malaysia's anti-LGBTQ laws. This act led to the premature cancellation of the music festival, reflecting the government's zero tolerance for public LGBT advocacy (Sabrina, 2023). Similarly, Elton John's 2011 concerts in Malaysia were met with protests by the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), which argued that performances by openly gay artists promote immoral values. Despite the opposition, John proceeded with the event, challenging the conservative resistance (Kate Hodal, 2012).

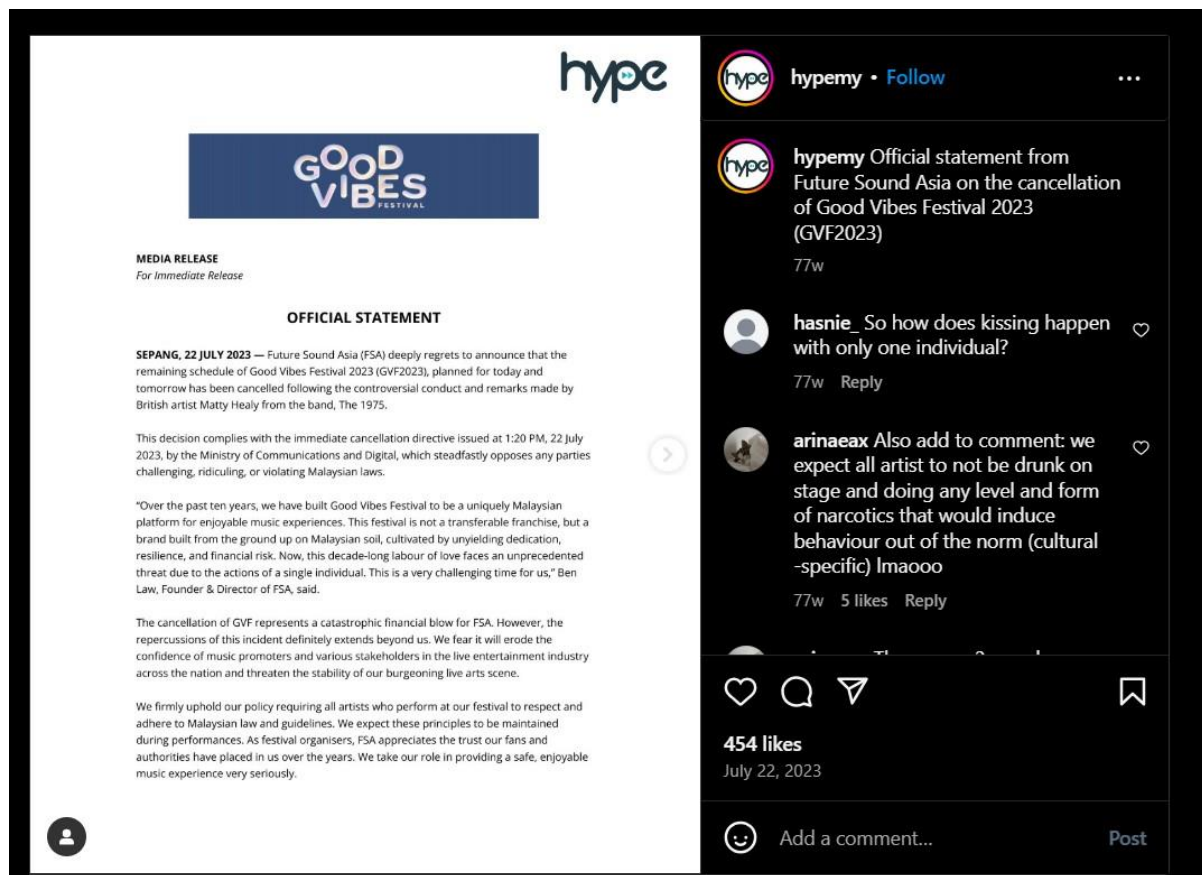


Figure 1: Good Vibes Official Statement on Instagram

Religion

The American singer Kesha also experienced a ban on her 2013 performance due to concerns about religious sensitivities, despite agreeing to modify her act. She expressed frustration on X apps (formerly Twitter) on 26th October 2013 over the decision, even hinting at the threat of imprisonment if she performed. In 2012, Erykah Badu's concert was abruptly cancelled after an image of her with an "Allah" tattoo on her upper body circulated online. The Malaysian government deemed it offensive to Islam, with officials stating it was a serious insult. Badu accepted the decision with understanding, even though it disrupted her planned performance ("Malaysia cancels Erykah Badu show over 'Allah tattoos'," 2012).



Figure 2: Twitter Screenshot of Kesha's updates

Revealing Attire

International celebrities have sometimes cancelled performances in Asia due to strict cultural dress codes. In 2007, Beyoncé cancelled her first Malaysian concert, reportedly over concerns about the country's rigid clothing rules and potential backlash from Muslim groups (Reuters, 2007). Similarly, La Toya Jackson's association with Playboy magazine led to complications. The Malaysian Ministry of Tourism's Department of Culture revoked the permit for Atlantic Starr, the band she was affiliated with, after it was revealed that she had posed half-naked in Playboy in 1989. As a result, Atlantic Starr decided to remove Malaysia from its tour schedule (Ilham, 2022). Mukhtar Abdullah, the department secretary, stated that Jackson's actions did not comply with government restrictions but did not clarify the specific rules (LA Times, 1990). These incidents highlight how local cultural standards can conflict with international artists' practices, sometimes resulting in cancelled performances.

Bad Influence

Michael Jackson faced pressure to adjust his performances during his 1996 "History World Tour" in Malaysia. His iconic crotch grab was modified to appease religious leaders, and the Selangor government denied him permission, citing concerns that his hip-thrusting dance moves could negatively influence children (Hype, 2022). Although Selangor officials banned him, the mayor of Kuala Lumpur allowed two concerts, despite opposition from the Malaysian National Youth Council (Tribune News, 2021). The prime minister stated that fans should be free to judge the performances themselves, with Jackson's first show selling out. In 2001, American thrash metal band MEGADETH was initially scheduled to perform in Malaysia, but the concert was cancelled due to authorities' unfavourable views of the band's music and image. However, the group was allowed to perform in Malaysia in 2017 (Sabrina, 2023). These cases reflect the challenges international artists face when balancing artistic freedom with local cultural expectations.

THE MAJOR THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The PUSPAL code in Malaysia, which regulates international performances, has both benefits and drawbacks. It promotes social cohesion by aligning performances with local cultural and religious norms, fostering respect for sensitivities (Sabtu et al., 2018). However, strict regulations can discourage international artists from performing, as they may feel restricted by rules regarding attire or behaviour. Some, like Coldplay, have opted for more lenient countries such as Singapore, citing rigid event restrictions during religious holidays (Haizan, 2023).

To balance cultural preservation with attracting global talent, Malaysia could implement differentiated regulatory frameworks. For instance, Sabah and Sarawak—home to events like the Borneo Sonic Music Festival—allow more flexibility, including looser dress codes and alcohol, reflecting the region's cultural diversity (Ong et al., 2022). Sabah's Chief Minister's secretary, Ceasar Mandela Malakun, has emphasized that international concerts should not be seen as a cultural threat (Cheah Chor Sooi, 2022).

Meanwhile, stricter rules may still apply in Peninsular Malaysia, maintaining respect for traditional values. Promoting tourism through regional cultural distinctions offers flexibility while upholding national principles. Additionally, fostering dialogue with international artists and organizers by offering clearer guidelines can build mutual understanding and reduce conflicts (Salin et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, even though Malaysia is Southeast Asia country known for its unique and exotic diversity in terms of culture and the people, somehow when it comes to concerts and tours from international artists, there are limitations that limits international artists to perform in Malaysia as Malaysia is known to practicing conservative values, resorting them to skip Malaysia for their Asia Tour. Notable reasons to skipping their tour are such as attire wise, religion and LGBT as there are artists that wants freedom to perform without having to adhere Malaysia's protocol when performing live. Therefore, in future research, the researcher may consider to research on this area of interest based on the perspective of local celebrities as despite the fact Malaysia is known to be conservative, there are Malaysian celebrities that perform live without thinking about their attire and protocols. Besides that, the researcher can also conduct a case study on in depth about the aftermath of the 1975 concert how does it affects other international artists when performing, which highlights the preparation of Coldplay's Music of Spheres tour (2023) and also besides concerts, the researchers can also look through the strict protocols of Animation, Comics Games Conventions (ACG) which is a rising trending event in Malaysia ever since after the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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