

SUSTAINING LOCAL HERITAGE: FIBRE ART AS A NEW PARADIGM TO UPLIFT MALAYSIAN CRAFT PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

By putting forward contemporary fibre art as a new paradigm in Malaysian craft production, this study aims to uncover how it is applied involving selection of material, utilization of technique right up to the appraisal of resultant product. The underlying rationale is to ensure incessant appreciation of Malaysian crafts by the society, especially the younger generation. This research utilized the Design Development Research (DDR) that consisted of three (3) phases. Selection of research participants used purposive sampling based on the respondents' expertise in the area. In Phase 1, Needs Analysis, was carried out using semi-structured interviews with three (3) textile experts. In Phase 2: Design and Development, the researcher used ADDIE model to develop crafts using fibre art material for Malaysia craft production. In the third and final phase, Implementation and Evaluation, sixty young people from Shah Alam community took part in an assessment of their acceptance of craft using fibre art. However, discussion on this study focuses on the first phase which is the needs analysis. The findings suggest that contemporary fibre art as a new paradigm to Malaysian craft production is relevant and has the potential to be implemented in Malaysia.

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Keywords: Contemporary art, Fibre art, Paradigm, Malaysia Craft, Acceptance



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INTRODUCTION

The importance and sustainability of traditional arts and crafts has been a continuous subject of interests to academicians, art enthusiasts, and practitioners in Malaysia. It has been highlighted by Zumahiran (2013) that cultural themes are significant in the foreground of traditional crafts which include the inclusion of local motifs. Not only that, traditional arts craftsmen have long been true in their essence of making crafts either in technique of construction, design, and material used. They remained ‘originally traditional’ in efforts of sustaining the distinctive values of craftsmanship while upholding their cultural identities. Mimar (2014) believes that cultural heritage affirms our identity as the people of a nation because it creates a comprehensive framework for the preservation of cultural heritage including cultural sites, old building, monument, shrines, and landmark that have cultural significance and historical importance. Culture and its heritage reflect and shape value, beliefs and aspirations thereby defining people’s national identity. Hence, it is important to preserve our cultural and heritage as it keeps our integrity as a nation.

According to Luckman S. (2015), the arts and crafts, or any other professions often grouped under the creative industry are often equated to the “neglected orphans” of a nation’s drive toward industrialization and in becoming a developed economy; they tend to be side lined as sciences and technology are viewed behoves for industrialization (Yang and Mohsin, 2018). Arts and crafts should be emphasized too because not only can these fields contribute to the nation’s economy, they also support the achievement of sustainability development goals (SDGs) in Malaysia via increasing labour productivity, reducing unemployment rate especially for young people, and improving access to financial services and benefits – all of which are essential components of sustained and inclusive economic growth. Also, the various skills and capabilities acquired by local craftsmen can help enhance themselves specifically while boost the nation’s economy generally.

Bringing fibre art as a new paradigm of producing craft is new in Malaysia. Fibre art has its rich and long history. Literally every culture around the world works with fibre art for utility purposes as well as artistic application. Previously, fibre was used only for clothing;, but in this new

era, fibre utility has expanded to include crafts, wall decorations and many more. Fibre art refers to fine art in which the materials used can range from natural or synthetic fibre and other components such as fabric or yarn. It focuses on the materials, and on the manual labour on the part of the artist. The vital part of fibre art is its aesthetic value over utility. Nowadays, modern fibre art takes from the textile art, which have been practiced globally for millennia. Traditionally, fibre is sourced from plants and animals. For instance, cotton from seed pods, linen from flax stems, wool from sheep hair, and silk from spun cocoons of silkworms. In addition to these traditional materials, synthetic materials such as plastic and yarn now have been used as fibre supply.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

In September 2015, the General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on the principle of “leaving no one behind”, the new Agenda emphasizes a holistic approach to achieving sustainable development for all. Sustainable development, or sustainability, is now seen to be pervasive and multidimensional (Ross, 2009). The 21st century has been acknowledged as the era where countries need to find new pecuniary activities for growth. Creative industry is viewed as a prospect with possibly high impact and turnover to economic prosperity. Hence, through creative industry, Malaysia strives to achieve the eighth SDG namely promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all citizens.

Craft as a medium through which ideas about environment and sustainability can be communicated has huge potential (the converse is less the case). While craft is not a sizeable identifiable economic sector from a national perspective, it can and may still have significant contributions at the micro level. Locally appropriate, culturally connected craft practices may build social capital and boost local economics. Sustainable organizations and presumably sustainable economics arise from sustainable societies (Shepherd, 2011). A future dovetailing of sustainable development thinking, and craft practice would seek to confirm and strengthen a society where craft is valued and hence economically viable. At the same time, craft

would support a culture where Sustainable Development aspirations are more likely to be met.

Local crafts have numerous uniqueness and functions, especially to people who value art. Based on this standpoint, the researchers intend to produce contemporary fibre art as a new paradigm for craft. This is because over the years, Malaysian local craft has been ignored if not forgotten, especially among the youths. Therefore, this study was prepared to rouse the young generation to appreciate Malaysian local craft especially on the usage of fibre art. This is because the younger cohorts tend to believe Malaysian local craft is passé and unfashionable and was only relevant in past decades. Tangible and intangible heritage, such as the performing arts, crafts, traditional norms and values and anthropological healing practices, are said to have succumbed to the onslaught of modern technological development that have affected the behavioural expressions and lifestyles of individuals and the community (Ghouse Nasuruddin, 2017).

Traditional intangible heritage is being threatened due to the lack of awareness of its value and its significance to national identity and pride. One of the issues with arts and crafts among Malaysians is that most cannot envisage a way forward for it to flourish but hopefully this will change with the inception of the Cultural Economy Development Agency (Cendana). Furthermore, young Malaysians tend to view craft industry as unattractive and unpopular, thus making efforts to preserve the craft challenging. The low number of active apprentices in the craft sector is also depressing. Only certain people value Malaysian craft, with mostly the elders being the ones in practice. By bringing fibre art in the foreground of heritage crafts medium for present time and future Malaysia craft production, the researchers hope to stir interest, enhance awareness and provide value-added knowledge for the community. It is a sense of service to others through infusion of values as suggested by Claire (2004). According to her, awareness of timelessness and continuity, the deep commitment and humility of craftsmanship are just a few of the values inherent in our textile heritage that have the most appropriate potential to transform our art and lives.

Research Objectives

This study aims to identify the understanding of experts about contemporary fibre art in Malaysia craft production. The scope of understanding tapped into includes (a) general understanding about fibre art, (b) appropriate method for producing craft using fibre materials, (c) essential elements to produce a craft, (d) strategies to add value of Malaysian crafts thus making them more appealing, (e) suitable fibre art craft product and (f) the need to produce craft using fibre.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using the Design Development Research (DDR) developed by Richey and Klein (2007). DDR involves systematic research of designing, developing and evaluating instructional programs, processes and products that must match the criteria of constitutional flexibility and effectiveness. In this study, the use of DDR enabled the researchers to engage in the process of bringing fibre art as a new paradigm to Malaysian craft production. As previously mentioned, this paper reports only on one (Phase 1) out of the three phases of the overall study, focusing on the understanding of community about contemporary fibre art in Malaysian craft production. The methodology used in this Phase 1 was semi-structured interview. It was the method of choice because semi-structured interview allows the collection of in-depth information about the interviewee's experiences (Creswell, 2013) while providing the freedom to modify the wording and order of questions based on needs (Abawi, 2013). All interviews were carried out face-to-face.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The research population for this study were academic experts in the field of craft and textile. For this first phase, a purposive sampling frame was used to identify those who eventually became the research participants. According to Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012), the person selected via purposive sampling must be representative of the population, and meet specific criteria identified based on the research needs. In this study, the specific criteria set for selection of research participant was that they must possess more than ten years of teaching experience and would have had industrial exposure. Detailed information on the sample and sampling

used are as highlighted in Table 1 below: All interviews were carried out face-to face.

Table 1: Research Matrix for Qualitative Approach

Respondent	Sampling Technique	Instrument
(N) 3 Expert on craft and textile field	Purposive	Semi-structured Interview

Source: Author

FINDINGS

Profile of Respondents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the Needs Analysis with the objective to identify the understanding of the community about fibre art in Malaysian crafts production. In the Needs Analysis phase, the researchers collected and evaluated the crafts experts' opinion on the use of fibres in producing crafts. The participants for the semi-structured interview were three experts who have experience in crafts and traditional arts for more than 10 years. The participants were selected because of their in-depth experience and accumulated understanding on crafts while being involved in producing Malaysian traditional crafts. Before conducting the interviews, participants were given a consent letter to earn the needed data and they were informed that their opinions were recorded while the interview sessions were strictly confidential and to be used for research purposes only. Prior to the interview, participants were briefed in detail about the objectives of the research, the significant, and the procedures of the interview. All data captured from the interview were recorded through the Voice Memos Apps on the iPhone. During the interview, participants were asked with questions related to the research objectives in order to collect necessary data for the Needs Analysis.

This paper reports on findings related to experts' understanding and views related to fibre art craft. The research participants' responses are as follows:

On Understanding About Fibre Art

An understanding of fibre art is very important to attract interest and attention of the public about craft using fibre. Generally, all three experts are in unison that the use of fibres in art has its aesthetic values, and that the materials used may be natural or synthetic in nature, as indicated in the following interview excerpts:

“Fibre art is artistic expressions that use fibre materials as the primary basis for producing them” RP 1.

“Fibre art is an artwork that used fibre. For this fibre, we use yarn that can be weaved or that can be woven or can be braided which normally is related to rope thread. They use yarn to do soft sculpture and wall hanging in fine art terminology or fine art medium. Also, they process it using various techniques, but the origin medium is fibre.” RP 2

“First you must know what fibre is ... if you want to make an artefact, usually it involved weaving, all can be a collage in art itself. This fibre art concept is broad, and it consist various techniques...[like] weaving, as for tapestry; there are many techniques used such as coiling, basket wave. This fibre art term also means that you can create it into a sculpture, wall decoration, wall sculpture as a sculpture itself and you are doing with fibre, using fibre, that is what I understand about fibre art.” RP 3

Importantly, research participants 2 and 3 emphasized various techniques in fibre art such as braiding, weaving, and coiling, with the possible products or final outcomes that include collage, sculpture, basket weave and wall decoration.

On Appropriate Method for Producing Craft Using Fibre Materials

When asked for the most suitable method to be used in producing craft using fibre, all three research participants indicated that weaving or anyaman as their prime choice. RP1 thinks that weaving is the best option “which is also the choice of RP3 but RP2 thinks that; “The usage of fibre art can be divided into several usages which are weave, coiling....”.

Nonetheless, RP 2 did indicate that the choice of method is largely determined by the types of fibres used; "...comes in knotting or makarame shape. Usually, these items such as cotton, hemp, jute, or synthetic material are used in fibre art and there are many more items that can be used through experimentation. However, knotting and coiling tie are usually used".

On Essential Elements to Produce Craft

Unlike their understanding of fibre art and the method(s) of choice when producing fibre craft, all three participants gave differing views with regard to the essential element needed to produce craft, including fibre art. RP 1 is in the opinion that creativity is key when producing craft by mentioning that; "The most important element is creativity force through colour, form, surface and the most vital is the value of certain work itself."

Meanwhile, RP3 viewed heritage as an important element in craft production while preserving critical aspects related to the "what" and "how" in fibre art is produced, considerations on the needs to use certain types of materials, and their availability locally.

"As for me, the important part is about the heritage. So, this Malay craft of using fibre resembling Malay heritage include anyaman, weaving and the material itself is from bamboo, nature material like screw pine and gunny instead of cotton and silk. This is because, cotton and silk are from other countries such as China and India" (RP3).

On Strategies to Add Value of Malaysian Crafts thus Making Them More Appealing

The research participants also put forward various opinions on the strategies that can be employed to add value to Malaysian craft so that the public find them appealing and of value. Focus can be given to how product information is communicated be it manually through printed materials or using technology-supported platforms as suggested by RP1; "...in terms of information sharing aspect or importance from certain aspect is still low among society....sharing related information through website, the most important thing is always updating the official site regarding craft in Malaysia so that each individual and society will obtain the information and indirectly, this will increase the appreciation rate towards craft in Malaysia generally."

Another strategy that can be adopted emphasized on product positioning during marketing. RP2 highlighted psychological-driven approach tapping into the desires of the public. Pitching the product according to what people find appealing could also be done by market segments (the elite vs. the masses) and by levels of product enhancement (based on material quality) as suggested by RP2 below:

“We depend on the product that we want to use where it solely depends on the user. If you want to make an exclusive user, so the material somehow must be exclusive. Vice versa, if the user is not exclusive so the material used can be a common material. For instance, if gold thread embroidery is used, so the thread used must be gold thread or silver thread. Besides that, if you want to enhance it, the fabric used must be more expensive or let say if the craft is made from wood or bamboo, maybe we can enhance it by using exclusive material. Whether the yarn is immersed with gold, silver or floss that were woven or combined with other things.”

Meanwhile, RP3 suggested the notion of practicality. According to him, craft products is at its best practical, simple and yet contemporary. The importance to innovate and iterated the possibility of up scaling craft products by using more fashionable materials was highlighted; “Usually, the traditional craft is not being emphasized by people so why not we create craft either practical and simple or it must be up to date. For example, as we weave, we can improvise it either by using leather or metal like copper or silver. Other than that, this can encourage everyone to appreciate it. As for the handbag, the weave can be combined with leather and I do believe that this can attract people towards this craft. However, avoid making things hard and instead create something simple yet practical.”

On Suitable Product to Produce Craft Using Fibre Art

Among the products seem fitting for fibre art craft production include wall decorations, accessories, and embroideries. Respondent 1 suggested that a suitable product to produce craft in fibre art is wall mounted art while Respondent 2 considers fibre art would be appealing for accessories. In a lengthy and detailed response, R2 suggested the following; “... in terms of the accessory, why not you tackle it by trying to implement horse tail so that it can look more exclusive because this horsehair can show the exclusiveness as you make it as an accessory. Not only that, you can use fleece that can

also become as felt. Apart from that, you can combine it with gold thread which people used for embroidery. On the other hand, silver threads or bird's feather can be made as the support for the product so that it can look more exclusive. For the horsehair, it already looked exclusive because it is a rare item to be made. Besides that, as for me when doing things like this, tidiness needs to be taken care including the finishing. As for craft, it is more on finishing and detailing compared to art. Art will always be an art even though it looks messy. But craft is more on detailing and neatness. That is the difference between craft and art. When you want to sell the craft, it must have packaging and cannot simply hang it. In terms of price, you cannot set high price because it will discourage people to buy it. If possible, for the packaging, there must be some information about those products so there is added value there."

Respondent 3 considers the rattan has been receiving much attention of late; "Nowadays, people tend to use rattan. No one has added enough value towards Anyaman rattan and anyaman screw pine. However, many people like rattan because it does not only used to make furniture but also make the bag more resistance. Screw pines are also good but between those two, one is from soft type and the other one is from hard type, but both are fibres".

On the Need to Promote Fibre Art and Craft

All research participants agreed that promoting craft products from fibre is another effort towards maintaining more sustainable heritage craft and it should be put in the forefront. The use of fibres in traditional arts and craft has the magnitude to keep everlasting cultural identities with their illustrious aesthetics. Both RP1 and RP2 indicated that fibre art can promote aesthetic appreciation that could connect people through tangible feelings and emotional appeal of the product as well as their historical accounts. RP1 feels that "Fibre art ... is not just to be seen but also can be touched and it wholly different from other craft like painting shown at the surface only." RP2 however reminded that "...we must have visual and text, only then they will understand. As they use it, they will know about the story behind that object," in which the background information of the arts and craft should be well documented to be used as reference.

Apart from its artistic worth, fibre art is also important in promoting creativity and critical thinking as highlighted by RP2; "For me, the usage

of fibre can be implemented, and it depends on the way to express the idea, creativity and target market. So, when doing this sort of things, it must consist of tag information about the product to make it more attractive.” Hence, one of the best ways to promote fibre art is through education. By educating people, not only can others especially the younger generation learn about their tradition but also it is the only mechanism to preserve skill, culture and history through apprenticeship of the artisan; “...if we want to put forward this craft, we must educate people, till now many people have not been exposed to craft, and this includes youths. It was RP2 that brought to our attention when RP2 mentioned that; “... we need to change our product to a new type that can be used either for daily use or interior. These things should be taught in school, not when it is considered too late. So, we have to give early exposure to the young generation maybe from primary school.” Through education and training, cultural arts and crafts could be kept perpetually in the field of arts and ultimately in history. RP3 asserted that; “

Upholding heritage through living and practising the skills and knowledge of fibre art was also reiterated by RP3 when she noted that it is important for us not disregard our heritage. For me, it is important for us not to disregard our heritage especially anyaman. We have been using it for a long time but nowadays it has been replaced with an object like plastic. It does not look as beautiful and the value of art drops. We must continue anyaman screw pine to anyaman rattan to preserve our heritage”.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic promotion and formal education of fibre art could enhance Malaysians’ awareness and knowledge about the development and approaches to art which includes heritage values. By doing so, it also can open avenues that will help spur other functions and uniqueness of crafts. Since this research aims for the acceptance of community, it has proven to bring new knowledge to the community especially craft makers in combining contemporary materials such as synthetic fibres as alternatives with traditionally used materials like dried nipah leaves (mangrove palm), various parts of the coconut tree, and bamboo, which are usually produced through fibre art. Thus, the result of this research is practical to the body of

knowledge to the community and the implementation of this method can be an eye opener to craft makers where traditional crafts can be enhanced through combination of materials without losing the uniqueness and by maintaining the quality of Malaysian craft. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the art syllabus in schools by engaging students in fibre art so that the skills, techniques of construction and aesthetics of the heritage remain sustainable in art education. Also, it is essential to enhance competitiveness in fibre art production through the application of technology as well as the application of contemporary fibre materials in its production.



Figure1: Actual Craft Product from Fibre Art Material Made Throughout this Study

Source: Author

CONCLUSION

This study has provided some important points relating to the needs for the researchers to further explore and deliberate in the next phase of this present research. Among others, the findings revealed essential elements to produce fibre art craft, strategies to add value that would make fibre art craft more appealing, and suggestions in the production of fibre art. However, the interviews also inform us of necessary future directions whereby strategic planning and serious actions should be taken on the implications of the study outlined in previous section of this report. Further studies on how arts and art elements can supplement the sciences will not only promote greater innovations but also ensure quality, sustainable products and processes.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the participants demonstrated the use of fibre art in the paradigm shift of producing Malaysia crafts using fibres of traditional materials such the mangrove palm leaves and bamboo and mixing them with contemporary fibres which are synthetic. They also suggested that the most suitable method in producing craft using fibre materials are weaving (anyaman), knotting and coiling. This is because these methods can bring the uniqueness in the products and by using personal creativity. The use of colours and materials that reflect the uniqueness of certain cultural identities will not only highlight the aesthetics but also the importance of the arts in cultural history. In order to appreciate and enhance the appreciation of Malaysian craft, more efforts should be invested that would put the heritage aesthetics and history in the limelight. The participants also mentioned that the crafts which had been produced using fibre art are functional and they are sturdier in its construction using mixed fibre materials such as rattan that has become in trend and synthetic fibres. Data gathered from the analysis phase were used by the researcher to proceed to the next phase of this research which is the Design and Development Phase in order to bring fibre art towards a paradigm shift in Malaysian crafts production.

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