

KERETAPI SARONG 17: MILLENNIALS, MUSEUMS AND SARONG DIPLOMACY

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Abstract

Cultural heritage institutions such as museums have been playing powerful roles in our community particularly as the custodians of the cultural soul of the nation, as reference centre to enrich the educational process of our future generations as well as vessels to promote unity in our society through understanding and appreciation of history, culture and the achievements of our forebearers. However, as advancement in digitalisation and internet technology have changed the dynamics of modern society and access to historical and cultural information by the younger generations, many museums around world face obstacles attracting younger audience to their doorsteps. With the digital age providing platforms for the widespread of fake news and racial tension that threaten the social unity of multicultural country like Malaysia, museums can step up their game by organising special social events and programs that promote arts, culture and history to encourage younger generations to get out of their cocoon and get to know one another better. This paper aims to share the Ministry Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia's experience in balancing the need to engage with the millennials and promote social unity and cultural heritage tourism through Keretapi Sarong 17.

Introduction

In 2016, the **Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture of Malaysia (MOTAC)** was tasked to come out with new initiative to promote tourism and culture using social media platform under the Ministry's National Blue Ocean Strategy agenda. In 2010 the Malaysian government introduced the **National Blue Ocean Strategy (NBOS)**, applying BOS principles of ***high impact, low cost and rapid execution*** (University Community Transformation Office, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia n.d.). Blue Ocean Strategy (BOS) was incorporated into government development program in order to inculcate ***creativity, innovation, and out-of-the-box thinking*** in coming up with methods to help and enhance the people's lifestyle with minimum costs (University Community Transformation Office, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia n.d.).

This new initiative was also part of the second phase of the National Blue Ocean Strategy for Tourism after the success of **NBOS: Tourist First** and **NBOS: Voluntourism**, with specific objectives of targeting the millennials to boost tourism in both international and domestic markets (Ong 2016). Pew Research Center a renowned fact tank that has been studying millennials for decades describes millennials as anyone born between 1981 to 1996 (Pew Research Center 2019). The millennial generation has been a subject of interest in various disciplines including tourism, particularly in the area of cultural heritage tourism which museum institutions (Isa and Isa 2012) are categorise in. Various marketing campaigns promoting tourism around the world were also strategically targeting this generation due to their collective size as a global cohort and resulting influence on society, culture and business (Sommer 2018).

Concurrently, MOTAC was trying to come out with new innovative and creative arts, cultural and heritage products that is in line with the essence of the Malaysian award-winning tourism tagline "Malaysia, Truly Asia". Prior to the merging of the cultural sector bodies from the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture

(now known as Ministry of Communication and Multimedia) and Ministry of Tourism to form Ministry of Tourism and Culture in 2014 (presently known as Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture), the cultural heritage tourism in Malaysia was managed and overseen by different stakeholders (Ismail, Masron and Ahmad 2014). The establishment of a dedicated Ministry of Tourism in 2004 had also resulted in the shift in focus from the traditional coastal and cultural heritage tourism to healthcare travel, eco-tourism, cruise tourism, duty free and affordable luxury shopping, MICE (meeting, incentives, conventions and exhibitions), theme parks, spa and wellness, business tourism and events and entertainment. (Mossbah 2014). Moving forward with time, many of the tourists source countries are experiencing changes in demographic, social, and culture which resulted in emergence of niche markets even within the existing cultural heritage tourism destinations (Ismail, Masron and Ahmad 2014). .

After series of brainstorming with relevant divisions and agencies within MOTAC, the MOTAC's NBOS team finally presented the idea of a special social media campaign called **#SayangMalaysia (Love Malaysia) Campaign** to the **National Strategy Unit**, a former unit under Ministry of Finance Malaysia that oversaw and coordinated the progress of Malaysian Government NBOS initiatives, in early March 2017. #SayangMalaysia Campaign aims to promote Malaysia as a tourism and cultural destinations through **curated content on social media platform**. As oppose to traditional usage of social media by government agencies of posting information about events, programs and services, #SayangMalaysia initiative requires MOTAC to go the extra miles by collaborating with various partners such as non-governmental organisations, relevant government agencies, media, private sector both related or not related to tourism and culture and well as state level and local authorities in strategic promotions of tourism and culture.

However, Malaysia has always been proud promoting the idea of being *Truly, Asia* to world. So much so that **Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (Tourism Malaysia)** has been sticking to the tagline for their international tourism campaign for 20 years. Since its inception in 1999, the Malaysia Truly Asia campaign has won more than 25 awards worldwide, including the region's Media Magazine's Marketing

Effectiveness Award in 2006 (Advertising & Publicity Division, Tourism Malaysia 2008). The campaign's success has resulted in more than a tripling of annual visitors to Malaysia with a record 20.7 million arrivals in 2007. Malaysia Truly Asia campaign has also won the second-Best Long-Term Marketing and Branding Campaign Award at the Asian Marketing Effectiveness Awards 2008 held on 17 September 2008 in Macau (Advertising & Publicity Division, Tourism Malaysia 2008).

Nevertheless, there is a huge difference between Malaysia Truly Asia campaign and #SayangMalaysia Campaign. Malaysia Truly Asia campaign is based on **created content**, in this case original content that is written or produced by a public relation agency appointed by Tourism Malaysia for a huge investment budget and distributed to selected promotional and publicity channels based on target market segments (The Search Agency 2016). #SayangMalaysia Campaign on the other hand is a campaign based on **curated content** which may include original content as well as content from external sources that the MOTAC's Corporate Communication Unit networks will share on MOTAC's or its agencies website, and various social media networks. Curated content builds trust with key audience by involving influencers and fans (The Search Agency 2016).

Revival of Keretapi Sarong and Let's Go To The Museum

Various ideas and proposals were presented to the NBOS team as the maiden project of #SayangMalaysia Campaign. In June 2017, the team stumbled upon a proposal from a group of media practitioners, who formed a non-profit online community called LOCCO with the purpose of sharing information and events that celebrate and uphold Malaysian local culture. One of the LOCCO important missions too was to revive the **Keretapi Sarong movement** in Malaysia.

Keretapi Sarong is a special unifying event where folks from all walks of life get together and hop onto the train system here in Malaysia wearing sarong, celebrating Malaysia's diverse and harmonious culture. Since its original inception in 2012, the

event mission is to promote the local public rail transport service to reduce carbon footprint plus preservation and promotion of the common fabric that binds Malaysians as a nation; sarong. On the event day, participants will gather at specific starting stations, and without knowing the end point, the organiser will lead them to the “secret” final destination amidst fun activities on the train such as dancing the joget, balas pantun & singing ‘Rasa Sayang’ together. In the spirit of social unity, 5 editions of the Keretapi Sarong were held on the 16th of September (Malaysia Day) to commemorate the birth of Malaysia.

Keretapi Sarong original founder, a social enterprise called Random Alphabets, was inspired by the ‘No Pants Subway’ movement in the United States (Low 2014). In its first edition in 2012, around 100 participants turned up for the event and were encouraged to display their ‘My first sarong story’ on them. The first edition has proven to be an “Instagrammable” and social media worthy event which garnered huge followings, mostly from younger online users. Promotions and publicity of the event were mainly done on Random Alphabets’ website, blogs and social media channels and the following year the participants number increase to 500.

In the 2014 edition, Malaysian student associations in different cities around the world were called to join the Keretapi Sarong movement to encourage solidarity among Malaysians abroad as well as to promote the sarong (Mookaiah and Tam 2014). Over 12 different cities joined, automatically making Malaysians abroad as ambassadors to the story of Batik and Sarong. Unfortunately, despite drawing a lot of attention from the mainstream media and netizen communities in Klang Valley, Random Alphabet decided not to continue the event in 2015 and 2016 due to other commitments and passed the baton to LOCCO in 2017.

As a fresh update to the narration and curation of Keretapi Sarong 17 promotional content, both LOCCO and MOTAC’s NBOS team agreed that the event should also be a platform to highlight and create interest to visit tourist attractions or cultural heritage buildings located along Klang Valley public rail transport service network. National Museum of Malaysia (National Museum) was selected to be the

“secret” final meeting point for the 2017 edition as it is located on the newly completed Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) rail line.

Setting the National Museum as a “secret” final meeting point might be a thrilling train journey for the Keretapi Sarong participants, however the question remains whether the activities and programs created at the museum will meet the participants expectation as well as encourage engagement and future visitations from the majority younger millennial participants of Keretapi Sarong. The organising team must also consider that national museums are generally perceived as government entity that preserve, store and display artefacts and cultural collections which usually appeal to older generations or young school children.

National museums like many other cultural heritage institutions around the world are facing similar problem in attracting millennials to their doorsteps (Natalino 2016). Many attributed this to the fact that millennials grew up during a time when digital technology usage grew in daily importance thus making them incredibly internet savvy. Furthermore, many millennials own a smartphone that connects them to the world via the internet, allowing them access to knowledge through a simple Google search. Quoting the American Alliance of Museums, (Belo and Machette 2018) state that, *“Millennials are the first generation of digital natives, and they expect their museum visits to seamlessly conform to their digital lifestyle.”* It is estimated that the average millennial spends 17.8 hours a day interacting with different types of media.

On the other hand, (Sommer 2018) states that while millennial audiences may find traditional educational programs such as gallery lectures or tours less appealing, they do appreciate the educational value of the program. What they are looking for is the **educational experience**, means to engage with their peers that will have a lasting impression on their lives. (Sommer 2018) also states that research within the museum field tends to reveal that this age group is not a primary, targeted audience for museums. It is crucial for museum administrators and trustees to note that engaging

millennials are important for the institution's future – as attendees, board members, donors, patrons or perhaps museum policymakers.

As Keretapi Sarong 17 was scheduled to happen on the day to celebrate the formation of Malaysia, another important consideration is how this event could uphold National Museum as an important institution to promote unity through their resources thus encourage understanding and appreciation for the various groups and cultures that exist in Malaysian society. Although Malaysia is perceived as a model for unity in diversity to the world, in recent years Malaysia seems to be stuck in a whirlwind of hate speech and fake news, fuelled by worsening racial relations particularly by both sides of the political divide.

In relation to this, programs and activities promoting social unity through Keretapi Sarong 17 required a more tactful and strategic approach which cannot entirely be rested on the shoulders of National Museum alone. Therefore, holding true to the principles of NBOS, MOTAC's NBOS team roped in other organisations such Department of Museums, Malaysia, Tourism Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur Tourism Bureau (tourism arm of Kuala Lumpur City Hall), Prasarana Berhad (owns and operates the country's urban rail services that include three LRT networks and the KL Monorail, in addition to operating the MRT line), Gaya Travel Magazine, TapauTV (online TV channel), MARA University of Technology Malaysia (UiTM), Management and Science University, Malaysia (MSU), Englishjer & Co (a social enterprise that aims to create a better ecosystem of learning English in Malaysia) as well as mainstream media and local influencers.

Special attention was given on the narration and promotion of sarong wearing culture as a shared and common heritage among the different ethnic groups in Malaysia, along the local political lingo of Bumiputra-non Bumiputra, Malays-Non-Malays. As sarong-wearing culture is usually linked to Batik Sarong made popular by Indonesia, 2017 edition of Keretapi Sarong had thoughtfully included other forms of textiles such the Palikat, the Pua Kumbu, and not forgetting Malaysian Batik as well

as encouraged participants to wear their traditional attire based on sarong. With the theme “the Weave that Binds”, Keretapi Sarong 17 aims to set the path for Malaysian version of Sarong Diplomacy in Malaysia’s multicultural and plural society.

Making the event more memorable, the Department of Museum spearheaded “A Night at Museum” program with the participation of 1,959 students from 126 schools at 32 museums nationwide starting from 3.00 pm on the 15th September 2017 ending at 1.00 pm on 16th September 2017 to coincide with Keretapi Sarong 17 (Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture 2018). Students who from various different backgrounds were given the chance to sleep at the museum galleries as well participating in educational and interactive activities such as the Ice Breaking Session, Museum Race, and Museum Tour. Among the participating museums were the National Museum, the Royal Museum, Lembah Bujang Archeological Museum, Taiping Museum, and Telekom Museum.

Keretapi Sarong 17 Outcomes

Nearly 1300 people donning their best sarong attire turned up at 5 different Mass/Light Rapid Transit (MRT/LRT) train stations (Subang, Puchong Prima, Gombak, Ampang and Bandar Utama) on 16 September 2017, transiting at the Masjid Jamek station for the “secret final destination” announcement by LOCCO on their social media accounts. Various activities inside the train were led by a total of 60 volunteers ranging from **singing patriotic and folk songs, Trivia, Sarong Fashion Catwalk** and many more. Some groups even started flash mobs at a few train stations dancing to the catchy local tunes played by random buskers’ group and street performers who happened to be at the scenes.

Participants also made pitstops at various landmarks such as the iconic Sultan Abdul Samad Building, the newly launched River of Life project and Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) before making their way to the National Museum. Participants

were reminded to include **#KeretapiSarong17**, **#SayangMalaysia** and **#MuziumNegara** when sharing their photos and videos on social media. At the National Museum, the group was greeted by the former Minister of Tourism and Culture, head of the departments from MOTAC and other government agencies as well as around 300 participants of the A Night at The Museum to a medley of joget lambak and traditional performances. A Night at The Museum by the Department of Museum, Malaysia was also awarded the “Most Number of Participants Overnight Simultaneously For An Educational Programme At The Museum” in The Malaysia Book Of Records (Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture 2018).

A total of 10 different media channels covered the event and **#KeretapiSarong17** became the number 1 Twitter trending hashtag in Malaysia with **1,154,259 impressions** that week. The beautiful National Museum stairways and façade and the iconic pink minibus at the museum ground, a retro reminder of Kuala Lumpur in the 70s and 80s, suddenly became “Instagrammable” spots.

Despite the rave reviews and increase in the number of followers on LOCCO and other strategic partners social media channels, post-mortem conducted after the event regretfully showed that the media plan for the event did not help National Museum of Malaysia to further promote their future events line up or direct thousands of the millennials social media users to National Museum’s official social media account. Many millennials use social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to learn about places they can visit in their free time. Therefore, it is important for National Museum to have an active online social presence and engage with this group of audience.

Another important takeaway from the 2017 Keretapi Sarong edition is that there should be an important balance between educational and entertainment elements in the cultural heritage institutions promotions and programming especially museums. Special events that are more social in nature are typically designed to entertain rather than educate. The hype and vibes on sarong wearing culture propelled by the Keretapi

Sarong movement for example may drown the message to lure the participants to visit the National Museum's special Malaysia Day exhibition which highlighted the importance of social unity to foster a peaceful and cultured nation.

Conclusion

The millennial generation is an important global cohort which museum institutions should pay special attention to in order to effectively play a powerful role in building cultural identity by celebrating diversity of race, culture, customs and religion in a country as well as vessels for promotion of unity and enrichment of present and future generation. Engagement with the millennials educational and social needs are crucial for they influence the landscape of future society, culture and business environments.

In order to do this, museum institutions should examine creative and innovative social programs that encapsulate both the educational and entertainment experience of museum institutions to engage and lure the millennials to their doorsteps. Special and meaningful events such as Keretapi Sarong with narrative that focus on social unity through arts, culture and heritage is a great example for the curation of exciting promotional and publicity content helping museum institutions to engage with younger audiences and establish an active social media presence.

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