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## **PRESERVATION OF CRAFT HERITAGE AND ITS POTENTIAL IN YOUTH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

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### **Abstract**

The community's involvement in preserving cultural heritage is very important and greatly impacts it. One of the ways to involve the community in the preservation of cultural heritage, especially in fine arts and crafts, is to combine those efforts with economic benefits for the target group. The strategy will attract the community's interest, especially those looking for a job or wanting to increase their economic resources. Financial problems, job loss, and unemployment are big issues among today's youth. The study focuses on forming a step that can act as a double-edged sword that aims at two objectives; preserve cultural heritage and create new economic resources, especially for the youth. Therefore, this study aims to identify the potential of intangible cultural heritage (fine arts and crafts) in creating new economic resources for youth facing unemployment. This study was carried out using a mixed-methodology approach which is a combination of quantitative and qualitative implemented in Malaysia covering all zones, namely North Zone (Penang), West/Central Zone (Selangor), East Zone (Terengganu) and East Malaysia Zone (Sabah). The questionnaire involved 155 youth groups involved in the traditional craft sector. In-depth interview method with respondents consisting of government bodies such as the National Heritage Department, the Malaysian Handicrafts Development Corporation, and NGOs from other relevant agencies. The results of the study found that intangible cultural heritage (fine arts and crafts) can be preserved by making it a new economic resource among the youth. With the support of the government, help from the aspect of training, and the interest of the youth itself, the craft heritage has the potential to generate income while guaranteeing the sustainability of this cultural heritage. This study is expected to be a backup for the government in designing any cultural heritage preservation program that greatly impacts the community, especially the youth. It becomes a new economic source for them.

**Keywords:** preservation of heritage, cultural heritage, handicraft, youth

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite the dimension of societal change towards the era of progress and modernity, the cultural heritage left behind by our ancestors should not be allowed to disappear with the tide of time. At the international level, the emphasis on cultural heritage is clearly expressed in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goals. The 11th SDG goal regarding the sustainability of cities and communities (sustainable cities and communities) has placed the preservation of cultural heritage as one of its targets (SDG 11.4). Awareness of the importance of preserving intangible cultural heritage has driven foreign countries to preserve the intangible cultural heritage in their countries equally, and Malaysia is no exception in this regard. The direct involvement in UNESCO by the Malaysian government proves that the country takes the preservation of intangible cultural heritage seriously (Sharafina Zaky & Ida Madieha, 2018). In Malaysia, the government has taken various measures, including law enforcement, the establishment of responsible bodies, support agencies and various other follow-up programs to preserve the intangible cultural heritage among Malaysians with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Fine arts and crafts are part of the legacy of previous generations that must be continued to ensure the skills and knowledge of fine arts and crafts continue from generation to generation. The knowledge and skills to produce crafts are highly valued by UNESCO when listed in one of the five intangible cultural heritage categories that must be protected (UNESCO, 2003). The preservation of cultural heritage, including fine arts and crafts, is a responsibility that cannot solely rest on the shoulders of government bodies. Nevertheless, it can have a substantial impact when there is active community involvement. However, it is essential to invest effort in capturing the attention and cooperation of the community to participate in the preservation of cultural heritage. The role of the community in the matter of heritage preservation constitutes one of the effective steps, complementing the initiatives undertaken by policymakers, academic institutions, and the government (Pimid et al., 2020; W. Ariffin, 2023). In light of the need for increased collaboration between the community and tourism stakeholders, it becomes evident that fostering this partnership is crucial (Azwar et al., 2023).

The preservation of the cultural heritage of fine arts and crafts needs to be combined with economic benefits to attract more young people to venture into the fine arts and crafts industry and further empower Malaysian handicrafts to a higher level as marketed internationally. At the same time, it becomes a new source of the economy that can be ventured by the youth facing unemployment and financial problems. In Malaysia, youth between 15 and 24 years of age account for 2.8 million of the labor force, which is 18 percent but already represents 58.2 percent of the total unemployed (Berita Harian, 2020). According to current statistics, the unemployment rate in Malaysia is now quite significant

and worrying. Job loss increased by 42 percent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2020 and is expected to continue to increase for each subsequent quarter in 2020 (Rahman, A.A, 2020). The unemployment rate, as recorded by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in February 2023, is 3.5% of the population, or 591,900 people unemployed (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023). Youth unemployment in Malaysia is higher than other age groups. It is understood that the factors causing the problem are Malaysia's lack of education, low-quality jobs, and skill mismatches (Aun, 2020). Therefore, the youth's involvement in preserving the heritage of fine arts and crafts is in line with Act 222 - Malaysian Handicrafts Development Corporation Act of 1979 and Act A562 - Malaysian Handicrafts Development Corporation Act (Amendment) 1983. Among the objectives is to expand the size of the product market crafts and provide trained personnel according to the needs of the craft industry. Through this policy, it is necessary to prepare the youth who have the potential to make the heritage of fine arts and crafts their main economic resource. Handicraft is one of the cultural products that can be found in Malaysia. As one of the cultural assets, it can become a cultural product that can be a tourist attraction (Mohd Yunus et al., 2021). Its potential as a tourism product cannot be denied because the latest report by the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia) recorded high sales of various Malaysian handicraft products even during the COVID-19 pandemic. A report from Malaysian Crafts in 2016 states that developing the country's craft industry opens up job opportunities for residents in the local area. In 2016, there were 10,404 workers involved in this craft industry, where 54% were in the field of textile craft, followed by 20% in forest products and the rest in the field of land products, metal products and various crafts. In conclusion, fine arts and crafts are hand-made skills and the height of knowledge that can be applied in various forms of goods, which are also cultural heritage that should be preserved. Community involvement in heritage preservation will positively impact and increase economic resources.

However, the focus must be on ensuring that the youth are ready to engage with this industry. The potential of the community and the opportunity from the responsible party is the emphasis given in this study in designing a preservation model for intangible cultural heritage, namely the heritage of fine arts and crafts. It shows that handicraft is not only a cultural and tourism product which can greatly contribute to the country's economy (see Azinuddin et al., 2022a; 2022b; 2022c), it also has a strong potential as a source of income, especially for the youth.

## **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

UNESCO sees intangible cultural heritage as a tradition or expression of life inherited from previous generations. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the

Intangible Cultural Heritage held in 2003 by UNESCO presents five domains expressed by intangible culture. Among them are 1) Oral traditions, 2) Performing arts, 3) Community practices, rituals, and festival events, 4) Knowledge and practices about the environment and nature, 5) Knowledge and skills to produce crafts (Zaffwan Idris 2016; Solihah Mustafa & Yazid Saleh, 2017). As part of tangible cultural heritage, fine arts and crafts manifest the community's culture and identity, which is also a valuable national heritage. According to the National Heritage Department (2016), fine art involves the process of building, creating, or producing objects or goods through the creation of hand skills. Malaysia, as a country with a multi-racial society, gives advantages and uniqueness when various types of carvings or crafts belong to the culture of each ethnic group, such as the architecture of houses and mosques, daily clothing made of pottery or ceramics, batik, wood carving, woven mats, woven Songket, clothing manufacturing, silver and gold embroidery, batik, and woven cloth, beads, copper production, gourds, jewellery and others (Solihah Mustafa & Yazid Saleh, 2017).

To preserve the heritage of traditional handicrafts, one of the causes of the extinction of traditional handicrafts is the need for more involvement of the new generation in the handicraft manufacturing industry. This new generation tends to avoid venturing into traditional handicrafts due to a lack of interest, no economic value found and difficulties in making the craft. As is the case among the Che Wong Aboriginal people, where crafts such as traditional hats and wood-made clothes face extinction (Jamilah Bebe et al., 2016). The same goes for Mengkuang mat handicrafts which are increasingly difficult to find and face the threat of extinction due to the lack of people skilled at weaving these mats (Som, 2020). Youth involvement in traditional handicrafts will not only preserve cultural heritage but also preserve local wisdom. A study from Nocca (2017) found that cultural heritage positively impacts economic productivity as a new form of economy. Cultural heritage can be a new economic source of social capital that can generate income. It becomes a significant indicator of community involvement in the strategy of heritage preservation. Social indicators can contribute to conservation projects that can improve living conditions in an economic context. At the same time, it can help overcome the problem of unemployment among the youth. Unemployment, which refers to individuals who do not have a job and are actively trying to find a suitable job, is an issue that is often discussed. The current economic situation, which is very challenging, sometimes forces employers not to hire new employees after some have retired because of financial problems, which greatly impacts people just starting to look for a job (Ong, 2018). Many factors cause the problem of unemployment that occurs and is not limited to academic qualification factors only. According to Nurhadhinah and Dayangku Aslinah (2020), in a study identifying the causes of youth unemployment, especially in rural Sarawak, they stated that unemployment

factors include insufficient job opportunities in certain areas, education levels that do not meet vocational matching requirements, lack of communication skills, lack of confidence employers towards graduates, the family influence that emphasizes working in the government sector only, being the backbone of the family and having to take care of sick family members.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a mixed methodology technique combining qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain data. The data collection done in this research uses primary and secondary sources. For primary data collection, various techniques were used, including semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews and questionnaires. As for the interview process, interviews were conducted to obtain as much information as possible from key informants such as traditional craft operators, officials from government departments, and youth involved in the craft industry, either as artisans or business owners. Interviews are an important technique for collecting qualitative data (Yusuff, 2004). This interview allows the researcher to obtain information from the informant by asking questions according to a predetermined theme. The researcher obtains research information directly from the informant through the interview process. Qualitative data obtained through interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using Nvivo software. While for quantitative data, a set of questionnaires consisting of several items identified based on the study's objectives was distributed to 155 respondents who were selected using the purposive sampling method. The research sampling area and framework cover four zones in Malaysia: The North Zone, East Coast Zone, West/Central and East Malaysia Zone (Sabah), as shown in Table 1. Regarding the distribution of the number of respondents in each zone, 30 respondents are from the North Zone, 21.9 respondents in the Central Zone, 37 respondents in the East Coast Zone, and 54 respondents in the East Malaysia Zone. The study population consists of youth aged 15 to 45 who are involved in the craft industry. Questionnaires in this study are divided into several parts, namely Part A: Socio-Demographic and Part B: Intangible Cultural Heritage Craft Preservation Indicators, which include several items such as government efforts, innovation, education, tourism and attitudes. A 5-point Likert scale was used for this study. The 5-point scale was chosen for this study because it is often used and has the best characteristics, in addition to its ability to measure attitudes consistently (Joshi, 2015; Jamieson, S. 2004). The mean value is seen in three levels; low level, average level, and high level (Zeynep Copur, 2015; Alan Agresti & Barbara Finlay, 2009 and Zainudin Abu Bakar et. al., 2007). The potential level is low if the mean value is 0-1.67. While the mean value between 1.68 - 3.33 shows that the level of potential is at an average level. The mean value of 3.34-5.0 shows that the level of potential is at a high level. The quantitative

data obtained from the questionnaire was then analyzed using SPSS software to support the qualitative data in this study.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Qualitative data were obtained from this study through interviews with several respondents regarding the potential of traditional handicrafts as an income generator among youth. A total of 15 respondents were interviewed, and they believe that craft heritage has the potential to be used as an economic resource, especially for the youth. The average respondent sees potential in several indicators, namely the marketing of craft products, government support, the role of craft activists, perceptions of craft heritage, and technology and innovation. As a summary, the findings obtained through the interview method are illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Research Findings through Interview Methods

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
<i>The market of craft products</i>	R15, R1, R4,
<i>High demand by users</i>	R6, R8, R9,
<i>Tourist's attraction</i>	R11, R10
<i>Government support</i>	R2, R3, R12, R4,
<i>Youth support program such as training, capital, market opportunities</i>	R7, R5, R13
<i>The role of Craftsmen</i>	R14, R3, R4,
<i>High-demand opportunities for traditional craft products</i>	R9, R11, R5
<i>Perception of craft heritage, Appreciation for cultural heritage</i>	R1, R14, R4,
<i>Digitization, technology and innovation in marketing</i>	R7, R8, R3

Findings obtained through interviews found that the craft market in Malaysia received high response and demand. Most of the found craft entrepreneurs stated that the community still appreciates the artistic value of craft heritage. Their interest in and appreciation for the subtleties of traditional craft art is the main reason that motivates them to buy craft products. The work of art usually requires the time and skill of the craftsman. Some respondents admit they sometimes need help to fulfill buyers' requests due to time and human resources constraints. They admit that when there is a lack of craft makers, the high demand by consumers causes some to be rejected or have to wait a long time to meet the buyer's demand. In terms of the role of the government, there are now various efforts to empower the heritage of handicrafts, including handicraft exhibitions, design competitions, training courses, financial assistance, and marketing

support. This shows that youth have had many opportunities and forms of support to venture into traditional craft enterprises.

*"According to our research data, craft sales are increasing. For instance, in our big events like in KL or in Johor Craft Festival at (Plaza) Angsana, craft sellers can earn up to million (Ringgit)".*

*(R1, II)*

By organizing the National Craft Day and other craft festivals organized by the state, handicrafts can be marketed more widely. It can also attract tourists to visit Malaysia and improve the socioeconomics of the local community while preserving Malaysian-made handicrafts. It can be used as a tourism product for foreign visitors who come to Malaysia for vacation. Apart from that, respondents also agreed that handicrafts are products that better reflect local cultural values compared to other souvenirs. Respondents also stated that handicrafts can bring profit to the entrepreneur. The high demand for handicrafts will not only guarantee the sustainability of the handicraft manufacturing industry but also create more job opportunities and expand business opportunities. The high response to this craft shows that the potential to make handicrafts a source of income for youth is high. The aspect of government support is also seen as one of the important elements in empowering traditional crafts among the youth. Among the programs offered by the government through the Malaysian Handicrafts Institute is the incubator program, where qualified handicraft entrepreneurs will be given free business space assistance, and entrepreneurs will only have to bear the cost of utility bills and production costs without having to think about monthly shop rent.

*"We provide help for young entrepreneurs, they have no capital (yet), so we'll provide an incubator. Where they can use our space for up to six months, free of charge, they only have to pay for the utilities and materials (that will be used in the production of craft)".*

*(R10, II)*

Malaysian handicrafts have designed and implemented various initiatives to help handicraft entrepreneurs and encourage those who want to venture into this field. Apart from the incubator, Malaysian Handicrafts also provides a Craft Apprenticeship Program where those interested in joining the handicraft industry will be placed under the care of experienced handicraft entrepreneurs for six months. They will be given a training allowance throughout

the program by Malaysian Crafts. This program targets youth who are interested in handicrafts.

*"Another program that we have is 'Craft Attachment', where we attach anyone who is interested in joining Craft (industry) with craft entrepreneurs, and they will train (those involved). So, in six months, we (Kraftangan Malaysia) will pay an allowance. We encourage the youth to participate in this program".*

*(R5, I1)*

In addition to assistance in the form of skills training, Malaysian Crafts also provides workshop and machine repair assistance on a 'one-off' basis to entrepreneurs in need. Help like this is important for handicraft entrepreneurs. The craft-making workshop must be comfortable to guarantee safety while working. Handicraft entrepreneurs need machines that can work well in producing high-quality products. Malaysian handicrafts also assist in the form of marketing networks for handicraft entrepreneurs. Among them is through marketing on digital platforms. MyCraftShopee is an online shopping site operated by Malaysian Craft. Along with that, Malaysian Crafts also provides a Craft on The Go smartphone application where users can find the craft items they need along with a complete directory of the products, such as prices, store locations, and pictures.

*"And then we help with platforms like MyCraftShopee, e-Craft Bazaar, and Craft on The Go. It helps tourists who want to buy crafts, they can just go there. It is complete with location (of the craft shop)".*

*(R1, I1)*

A modern and digital platform like this is certainly closer to the youth. This form of online marketing is expected to attract youth not only to buy handicraft products but also to become an attraction for them to work on handicrafts. This form of digitization can counter the view that handicrafts can only be traditionally marketed at the market or worn by older people.

To serve the purpose of this study, the study's results through a questionnaire found that handicrafts have the potential to become an economic resource for youth based on several indicators. Briefly, the quantitative data findings are displayed in Table 4 below.



**Table 4:** Potential indicator of craft heritage as a youth economic resource.

<b>Potential</b>	<b>Mean Value</b>
Craft Demand	3.9168
<i>Tourist's attraction</i>	3.8194
<i>Innovated Crafts</i>	3.7652
<i>Local Demand</i>	3.7484
<i>Participation of Youth</i>	3.9026
<i>Craft as Business and better local product</i>	4.1484
<i>Reflects Local Value</i>	4.0129
<i>Profitable</i>	3.9935
Government Aids	4.9086
<i>Play important roles in helping craft makers</i>	4.8800
<i>Had play it roles in marketing and preserving crafts</i>	4.9323
<i>Special aids should be given to craft makers</i>	4.8830
Youth Interest	4.8415
<i>Attending programmes related to craft</i>	3.9717
<i>Have interest in craft</i>	4.8697
<i>Have skills in craft making</i>	4.7644
<i>Willing to learn more about craft making</i>	4.8719
<i>Attending marketing program held by the government</i>	4.7046

In order to fulfil the purpose of this study and support the findings obtained through interviews, questionnaires regarding some potential indicators have been identified and distributed to respondents. The indicators used are the handicraft market, government agency support and youth tendencies. The indicator with the highest mean value is government agency support, with a score of 4.91; youth tendencies, with a score of 4.84; and the handicraft market, with a score of 3.92. From the mean value shown, government support is the indicator with the highest mean value of 4.91, showing that support from government agencies is the leading indicator in ensuring that the traditional handicraft industry finds a place among the youth and is an economical source. Respondents in this study showed a positive attitude towards handicrafts. Most of them have attended courses related to handicrafts. The mean value also shows that most respondents have interests and skills in handicraft making and tend to venture into the field more seriously.

## DISCUSSION

Traditional handicraft has significant potential in generating income and being an economic resource for the youth. Support from government agencies through

support programs, financial assistance, training, exhibitions, and access to the market implemented makes traditional handicrafts a potential economic resource for the community, especially for the youth. This support helps handicraft entrepreneurs increase their chances of generating sustainable income and expanding their businesses. The government has carried out its responsibilities well in marketing and preserving handicrafts in Malaysia, in addition to increasing assistance and initiatives to handicraft entrepreneurs for the sake of the sustainability of the country's handicraft industry. In addition, technological developments have enabled handicraft entrepreneurs to access the global market more easily through e-commerce platforms and social media. Handicraft entrepreneurs can market and sell their products globally through websites, online markets, or platforms such as MyCraftShopee, e-Craft Bazaar and Craft on The Go. This platform provides an opportunity to increase market reach and revenue. The potential is also seen in the tourism sector, which opens up ample market space for traditional craft products. Tourists often look for handicraft products as souvenirs or souvenirs related to the places they visit. Tourist attractions such as cultural and heritage destinations are often good places to sell handicraft products to tourists. Therefore, vast marketing opportunities can guarantee the future of the traditional handicraft industry.

The potential of crafts to be used as an economic resource for youth is also influenced by the willingness and acceptance of the youth themselves. In venturing into the field of entrepreneurship, especially involving traditional craft products, attitude plays a role in making an agenda successful, even more so when it involves business or enterprise. Nor Hanim et al. (2021) state that the attitude required to succeed in a handicraft business is the attitude of seizing opportunities in business, entrepreneurial spirit, and customer service. In short, attitude affects the success of a handicraft business. Handicraft products that connect with cultural heritage, traditional arts, or specific special skills are sure to be of interest to anyone looking for different products with cultural value. Handicraft entrepreneurs who can produce unique and high-quality handicraft products can attract customers willing to pay a higher price. For this reason, traditional handicraft entrepreneurs do not see profit solely because, for them, the satisfaction of making artwork is more important for preserving local art and culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

Traditional craft products are the result of art and hand skills that highlight the value of cultural heritage and the uniqueness of the local community. The intellectuality of the local community and culture manifested in every craft product must be preserved through various means. One is through entrepreneurship by involving the youth as the next generation to continue this cultural art. From the results of this study, handicrafts have great potential to

generate income and significantly impact the local economy. However, despite the potential, the success of making handicrafts in generating income still depends on other factors such as product quality, innovation in design, business management, effective marketing, and patience and perseverance in this craft industry.

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