

Hacking Creativity to Sustain Diversity in Southeast Asian Performing Arts

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Abstract—In this paper, the discourse on disruptive innovation and growth hacking is applied to concepts and approaches in the sustainability of performing arts. One of the principal applications of art is to reach an audience. Presentational art forms such as music, dance, and theatre have traditionally relied on word of mouth, newspaper, radio and television advertisements to reach broader audiences. In the era of disruptive innovation, however, technology platforms guided by artificial intelligence, data input and algorithms play a significant role in determining what content appears in front of users. For many emerging artists, finding an audience in the era of disruption means funneling through just five technology platforms that generate 80% of global mobile advertising revenue [1]. How do Southeast Asian performing artists reach their audiences in a consumer-based society that is increasingly dependent on the immersive technology of computers and hand-held devices? Carefully designed cooperation between creative artists and growth hacking experts has the potential to help artists reach virtual and live audiences. Growth hacking, a process of rapid experimentation to identify the most efficient ways to grow, is particularly prevalent among startups and smaller businesses. Using the analogy of performers as small business, I explore the efforts of such arts as Kelantanese shadow puppetry, Balinese marching bands and cartoon satire to use unconventional marketing techniques where data analysis and creativity merge. Given that just five tech platforms are deciding what type of content is seen and why this oligopoly shapes audience preferences that tend to lean toward aesthetic uniformity. To counter this, I argue that an alliance between strategic growth hacking and creative artists has the potential to empower diversity in the performing arts of Southeast Asia.

Keywords—growth hacking, disruptive innovation, sustainability, ethnomusicology

I. INTRODUCTION

Let me be clear from the beginning of my presentation today that I am not a market analyst or a computer programmer. In fact, I usually ask my students to help me understand a new app on my jmobile phone or how to link content to a website. But what I do focus in my research as an ethnomusicologist is the sustainability and diversity of performing arts in Southeast Asia, particularly traditional heritage forms that have been marginalized by modernity's rapid economic and cultural changes.

The topic that I have chosen today, however, requires me to venture into the world of business marketing and computers because the discourse on performing arts sustainability is inextricably linked to regional, national and international markets through tourism, commerce, and trade.

The overlapping theme between business marketing and sustainable performing arts that I am interested in exploring is reaching an audience. An audience in the world of business is made up of paying customers. An audience in the world of performing arts is made up of sympathetic listeners. IN both worlds reaching an audience is critical to the sustainability of the product or artform.

In this paper, I would first like to outline some key concepts and theories in Disruptive Innovation based on the ICONARC theme for this year's conference. Its now more than 20 years since Clayton Christensen coined the term disruptive innovation, it seems useful to consider the Innovator's Dilemma' particularly in arts industries searching for new audiences. In the next part of my paper, I will examine disruptive technologies behind the marketing strategy called 'growth hacking'. This marketing technique to increase audiences to products has been crucial to the rapid growth of such titan corporations like Facebook, Airbnb, Gojek, Bli-Bli, and Dropbox. These companies have rapidly products and services. I not implying that local musicians, dancers, and painters are going to market themselves and become billionaires over night! But I do ask the question are growth hacking techniques useful for emerging artists to market their 'goods and services' to virtual and live audiences in ways that are currently ineffective?

Then I take up the issue of sustainability in the performing arts to explore how growth hacking may help empower diversity, teaching, and transmission and applied arts approaches. Several performing arts start-ups from Malaysia, Laos, and Indonesia are gaining traction in using online internet platforms to find new audiences for shadow puppetry, marginalized ethnic instruments and classical dance styles in ways that empower diversity and generate sustainable incomes. I argue that carefully designed cooperation between creative artists and growth hackers has the potential to help marginalized music and dance traditions reach virtual and live audiences in this Disruptive Innovation age.

II. DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION

As I mentioned before reaching an audience is common to both performing artists and business marketers. In his seminal work 'The Innovator's Dilemma', Clayton Christensen introduced the idea of 'disruptive technologies' as most affective on creating new audiences or consumers. According to Christensen, "...a disruptive innovation is a

product or service designed for a new set of customers” [2]. The creative industries are particularly apt at the design component of this definition but fall short in terms of researching consumers. For an audience of customers, a disruptive innovation displaces established market-leading services and products because its “...an innovation that creates a new market and value network” [3].

Disruptive innovation is not a new concept. For example, I typed this paper I am reading right now on a personal computer. History shows, for example, computer technology existed for decades alongside the manual typewriter. The first general purpose electronic digital computer was operational as early as the 1940s but of course, it cost millions of dollars. Only when personal computers became affordable in the early 1980s did they rapidly disrupt the manual typewriter. Other examples of disruptive innovation in history that are closer to the arts industries include digital synthesizers disrupting acoustic pianos, digital cameras replaced chemical-based paper processing of film, and Music CDs and DVDs disrupted cassette tapes and albums. In all of these examples, disruptive innovations saw products and services rapidly reach new audiences.

But the rapidity comes with great responsibility on two important fronts: reaching an audience and content diversity. Today big corporations reach their audiences via technology platforms that all of us access via our computers and mobile phones. Mobile phones are ‘immersive technologies’ driven by artificial intelligence and the ‘internet of things’ that create an augmented and virtual reality. This corporate controlled reality is designed to manipulate user preference. Instead of a diversity of content, audiences are corralled into consumption categories. Screen-based devices driven by ‘artificial intelligence’ are technologies that immerse, submerge and even drown human perception in a computer created realities. Certainly, music and art are not controlled by artificial intelligence right? A recent study by the World Economic Forum states otherwise:

One of the challenges of A.I. is that it lacks a conscious will and is unable to explain its output. Instead, it must rely on the data it receives and the algorithms used. This may seem trivial in the context of machine-generated music or art. But when the technology can determine what editorial content appears in front of users, the ability to inform and shape public opinion grows and the potential risks of opacity in decision-making become bigger [1]

As a musician, I don’t like to be corralled into consumption categories. I would like to determine what content appears in front of me. But in the name of market growth, immersive technologies are criticized by the World Economic Forum largely because artificial intelligence collects consumer data and “decides what type of content is seen and why” (ibid.)

III. GROWTH HACKING

In the next part of this paper, I introduce the argument that an alliance between strategic growth hacking and creative artists has the potential to empower diversity in the performing arts of Southeast Asia. A growth hacker is a market strategy specialist who helps start-up businesses grow. A growth hacker focuses on low-cost platforms for

finding an audience through social media and viral marketing analysis. And a growth hacking team consists of product developers, engineers, managers and coders who, “...specifically focus on building and engaging the user base of a business” [4].

Now I know what you are thinking. A user base for a business and an audience are not the same thing. Musicians and dancers are not products. They don’t need computer coders and hackers to tell them what to do. But when you consider that the disruptive technology of, for example, a music streaming giant like Spotify killed iTunes and Napster, growth hacking was at the core of their success. Like Dropbox, Facebook, and Airbnb, Spotify music streaming exploded into a billion dollar business because people shared music and could do it for free. Like Dropbox offering free storage space, Spotify expanded its listening audience by offering free listening. But nothing is free in this world. As the Spotify audience grew, they referred to friends, shared playlists, and many purchased subscriptions. Today 80 million users on Spotify are monitored by computer coders, product managers, and data analysts, tracking their user preferences and pairing them with advertisements.

Here in Indonesia Nada Kita is growth hacking is audience of consumers to do the same thing. Modeled after Spotify, Nada Kita streams local music content from record label partners such as Aquarius Musikindo, Musica Studios, My Music, Nagaswara, and Trinity Optima Production. This Australian-based company growth hacks for audience music preference directly with particular advertising brands:

Nada Kita menyasar penikmat musik sehari-hari secara luas, yang biasanya mendengarkan siaran radio lokal. Mereka mendengarkan lagu hits lokal dan musik yang ‘akrab di telinga’ setiap hari, namun pada dasarnya mereka mencari rekomendasi dan daftar putar yang siap digunakan. Itulah yang ditawarkan Nada Kita. Orang tidak perlu berfikir, mereka hanya memainkan musiknya dan Nada Kita yang akan mempersonalisasikannya kapan dan di mana saja untuk mereka, berkat sistem pembelajaran mesin yang ada di dalamnya [5].

Determining when and where young people listen to music is not creative freedom, its corporate control. Measuring the number of visitors to a website is Orwellian monitoring, not the freedom to discover and explore. Eventhough growth hacking in the hands of the top 1% controls the world of business, the marketing technique is useful in empowering the creative world of traditional performing arts. I turn now to examples of small performing arts startups in Laos, Malaysia, and Indonesia who consciously utilize data analysis, computer metrics and growth hacking techniques to embolden marginalized indigenous artforms towards sustainable futures.

IV. SUSTAINABLE DIVERSITY THROUGH GROWTH HACKING

My first example is Tara Gujadar, co-founder of the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang, Laos. One of her principle roles in this UNESCO Heritage city is marketing and strategic development. Tara works with a team to promote sustainable tourism by strategically linking their website content. They growth hack for other technology platforms that cater to tourists who care about

culture. Like our growth hackers from AirBnB and Dropbox who, ‘specifically focus on building and engaging the user base of a business’ Tara’s agenda is to attract a user base, an audience of online traffic who will potentially become visitors to Luang Prabang. Tara intentionally avoids marketing to mass tourism, packaged tours and greedy guides. Like a growth hacker, Tara tests and refines marketing strategies to attract culture conscious tourists who spend tourist dollars supporting local artisans, crafts people and musicians, and dancers. My colleague Marie-Pierre is a Belgian ethnomusicologist who works alongside Tara. She recently launched, ‘Voices of the Wind’ that features an interactive museum display of traditional Laos instruments. Marketing specialists are utilizing growth hacking techniques to promote performing arts in an ethically responsible and sustainable way [6].

My second example comes from Action Tintoy Design Lab in Malaysia. Their sustainable approach to performing arts has seen them partner with Pak Dian, a senior Master Puppeteer from the repressive and authoritarian state of Kelantan. Pak Dian and his traditional Wayang Kulit artform were suffering from ‘arts impoverishment’ in Kelantan where very few young dhalang were interested in continuing the legacy. Tintoy Design Lab created ‘Fusion Wayang Kulit’ to revive the dying art of wayang by merging it with mainstream pop culture characters such as Darth Vader, Batman, and Spiderman. Although see this as controversial for appropriating, and at times misrepresenting authentic wayang stories, Fusion Wayang Kulit’s online presence has amplified awareness of the dying artform. The dual agenda of popularizing and generating revenue to support the teaching and transmission to a younger generation seems to be working. It is still early days but Fusion wayang’s followers on Facebook have been instrumental in finding new audiences beyond Malaysian borders. This has resulted in income generation in tours to Australia, Europe, Singapore and the United States [7].

The last example I share about finding new audiences through disruptive innovation and growth hacking comes from Bali, Indonesia. On this hyper-commercial tourist island, virtually every aspect of culture and arts can be commoditized. Log on to AirBnB and click ‘experiences’ and you can pay for a cooking class, temple tours, and Dance lessons. Dengan harga 150,000 rupiah perjam, tourists can have a Bali Dance Lesson, dress like a Legong dancer and take as many pictures as they like. The AirBnB platform uses growth hacking to funnel consumers through its virtual dragnet, to take a corporate cut from Bali’s cultural pie.

Mekar Bhuana, however, has a different agenda when it comes to marketing their music and dance lessons. Mekar Bhuana has spent 15 years carefully cultivating and researching rare and extinct gamelan. Led by Evie and her husband Vaughn, Mekar Bhuana has marketed themselves and found an audience who support their mission at reviving lost and forgotten gamelan compositions, dances, and choreographies. In order to generate revenue, Evie offers online dance classes via Skype. Their audience finds them through their website, Facebook and TripAdvisor. Like

other growth hacking business models, referrals are welcomed. When Evie teaches dance she narrates hand gestures and eye movements in English with subtitles. It is clear Evie reaches out to audiences who appreciate Balinese dances and support Mekar Bhuana’s agenda to revive lost and forgotten repertoire. This form of online marketing has earned them accolades from TripAdvisor [8].

In summary, my paper has explored the discourse on disruptive innovation and growth hacking for its application to concepts and approaches in the sustainability of performing arts. One of the principal applications of art is to reach an audience. In the era of disruptive innovation, technology platforms guided by artificial intelligence, data input and algorithms play an increasingly significant role in determining what content appears in front of users. For emerging artists like Tara in Luang Prabang finding her audience to support the UNESCO-endorsed museum in the era of disruption means funneling through technology platforms that attract tourists who are sensitive to cultural preservation. For Fusion Wayang Kulit, growth hacking via Facebook and other social network platforms has brought a marginalized dhalang out beyond the state of Kelantan to help sustain interest shadow puppetry. Finally, taking online dance lessons and making referrals on Tripadvisor supports the restoration of lost and forgotten gamelan and dance repertoire. Through disruptive innovation, performing artists and market analysts can team up, not to earn millions of dollars in corporate profit, but to create an alliance between strategic growth hacking and creative artists which has the potential to empower diversity in the performing arts of Southeast Asia [9].

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