



Dance as Cultural Embodiment in Public Space: Performances at Kuala Lumpur International Airport

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Submitted: December 15, 2025. Revised: May 23, 2026. Accepted: June 22, 2026

Abstract

Airports are public spaces and gateways into a country or region, and nowadays they have become cultural reflections, turning them into more than just a means of transport. Through a specific focus on dance at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), this study aims to explore the significance of these performances in embodying and communicating Malaysian culture for both dancers and airport visitors. This study is qualitative, drawing on ethnochoreology, performance semiotics, and a cultural embodiment perspective. Data were collected through direct observation of dance performances at KLIA, interviews with dancers and performance managers, documentation, and visitor survey data provided by Malaysia Airports. Triangulation was used to enhance the validity of the findings, while analysis techniques were used for data condensation, presentation, and verification. The findings indicate that dance performances at KLIA Airport are organized by airport management. As a multiethnic country, performances are scheduled in accordance with major commemorative events and meticulously designed in terms of themes, dancers, movements, music, costumes, and makeup. The airport transit space serves as the performance setting, adding a distinctive cultural experience for both dancers and visitors. For the dancers, the body becomes a medium for representing cultural codes. Their role extends from executors of choreography to co-authors of meaning and cultural ambassadors. For airport visitors, dance performances offer a culturally embodied experience that remains memorable long after the airport visit. This study contributes to the development of the concept of cultural embodiment by examining dance performance in the context of airport analysis. Dance serves as a conductor of cultural representation, embodied identity, and global audience participation.

Keywords: dance performance; public space; airport; cultural embodiment; semiotics of performance

How to Cite: Paranti, L., Ha, S. W., Hussin, H. b., Putri, R. P., Prameswari, N. S., & Latifah, A. N. A. (2026). Dance as Cultural Embodiment in Public Space: Performances at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. *Harmonia: Journal of Arts Research and Education*, 26(1), 41-59

INTRODUCTION

International airports have long been viewed as critical components of a nation's infrastructure. As vital transit points in

international travel, airports are the main gateways through which representatives enter a country (Jones & Dunse, 2015). Such spaces in airports are multidimensional and potentially reflect their nation's

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culture, identity, and development (Adey, 2007; Ceren & Correia, 2018; Victoria et al., 2025). The first impression tourists receive is at international airports. The impression of a country is related to airport architectural design, operational efficiency, cleanliness, and employee sociability (Baxter et al., 2018). Well-funded and efficiently managed airports demonstrate operational consistency, technical sophistication, and administrative agility. Conversely, poorly maintained airports may create an unfavorable impression that is difficult to change. Airports, therefore, may embody national identity through architecture and branding (Cadge, 2018; Swartz et al., 2016). Integrating national characteristics into airport design and service provides passengers with a local cultural experience that can help to reinforce national identity (Blichfeldt et al., 2017). Such aesthetic coupling during airport construction articulates and preserves a particular national identity for visitors from around the world (Ramli et al., 2018).

KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport), operated by Malaysia Airports, is one of the notable examples of this evolution (Bardai et al., 2017; Ghadzali & Kamarudin, 2019). Malaysia Airports' vision is to be a 'Global Airport Group That Champions Connectivity and Sustainability'. This vision sets goals for Malaysia to become a global network activator for environmental and social sustainability within the community. One strategy to achieve this vision is through memorable airport experiences, such as a scheduled dance performance program (Malaysia Airport, 2020). In line with Stangel's research, art in public spaces like airports can create unforgettable experiences for visitors (Stangel, 2016). Dances performed at KLIA are regularly scheduled. The type of dance is usually adapted to the theme of major holidays in Malaysia, such as Merdeka Day, Islamic Holidays, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and Wesak Day.

Malaysia, as a multiethnic country, boasts a rich and diverse culture, including traditional dance. Traditional dan-

ce performances at KLIA require special consideration, as the airport is a busy global public space with a constant flow of passengers (Ramli et al., 2018; Wattanacharoensil et al., 2022). Passengers have limited time and come from diverse cultural backgrounds (Blichfeldt et al., 2017). Therefore, the selection of dance types, the setting and timing of the performance, and the performance elements are highly considered. This differs from performances held on conventional stages at specific locations and times.

Research on dance performance at KLIA should also consider the airport's position as the first tourist destination encountered upon entering Malaysia. MacCannell explains that culture performed for tourists has been curated or adapted (MacCannell, 1973). This is essential because the dance performances at KLIA cannot be viewed as "Malaysian culture as it is," but rather as culture created to fit the needs of the airport environment, tourism promotion, and international visitors' experiences. This aligns with Edensor's view that tourism can be understood as a performative practice in which space, bodily movement, spectatorship, and social convention interact to produce a tourist experience (Edensor, 2001). How the audience experiences the performance, stops, and records it may lead to cultural interactions. In other words, the activities carried out by visitors in airports in viewing performances and recording them could become a form of cultural encounter. Furthermore, Edensor's theory plays an important role in the process of adapting the cultural product for the realm of tourism. However, MacCannell and Edensor have not yet examined the performative practice of dance in airports as global transit spaces rather than merely tourist destinations.

The existing literature documents several roles played by airport public spaces. Chi et al., (2018) studied that KLIA can function as a service environment for promoting Malaysian national identity, although their analysis remains focused on branding elements and service design rather than on

performance as a cultural practice. Likewise, Ariffin & Yahaya (2013) demonstrate that airport image and national identity positively influence passenger delight, but their study relies on survey responses and does not address how cultural identity is embodied through live performance. At a broader level, Monge-Zamorano (2023) conceptualizes the airport as a cultural heritage space capable of offering memorable experiences through art, music, and gastronomy, yet the discussion remains conceptual and non-empirical. Meanwhile, Victoria et al., (2025) argues that airports are city-like spaces shaped by micro-embodied interactions, but does not examine curated artistic performances as forms of cultural representation. Based on previous literature regarding airports, no one has discussed performative dance practices at airports

To sharpen this discussion, this study adopts the concept of cultural embodiment as its theoretical grounding. In tourism and place studies, embodiment has been used to challenge visual and representational understandings of place by emphasizing that place is experienced and produced through corporeal, multisensory, affective, and cognitive engagement (Rakić & Chambers, 2012). Everingham et al. (2021) further show that embodiment in tourism has developed toward analyses of body-practices, sensuality, affect, and performativity, moving beyond vision-centered accounts of experience. In cultural experience research, Richards et al. (2020) argue that cultural experience comprises not only cognitive understanding but also affective, conative, and novelty dimensions and is strongly shaped by active involvement. From a dance perspective, Atkinson & Duffy (2019) show that the dancing body inscribes and fills place corporeally, revealing tacit bodily knowledge in the constitution of space, while Pickard (2018) studied how choreographic practice embodies and reproduces sociocultural values. Previous studies suggest that culture is not only represented symbolically but is also enacted, transmitted, and experienced

through the body in relation to space and social interaction. In this research, cultural embodiment refers to the process through which culture is produced, communicated, and experienced through the moving body within a specific spatial and relational context.

Taken together, previous studies confirm that airports are important spaces of identity, experience, and cultural embodied interaction. However, there is still relatively little empirical research on curated dance performances in airport contexts, particularly on dance as an embodied cultural practice in these environments and the meanings it produces for both dancers and audiences. This study addresses that gap by examining dance performances at Kuala Lumpur International Airport as a form of cultural embodiment in public space.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine dance performances at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) as a form of cultural embodiment in public space. According Hammarberg et al., (2016) that the qualitative method is appropriate for answering research questions related to experience, meaning, and perspective, particularly from the participant's perspective. This research also refers to Fraleigh and Hanstein, which positions dance as a multidimensional object of study (Fraleigh & Hanstein, 1998). Dance encompasses bodily experiences, aesthetic practices, cultural expressions, and social events. Dance research goes beyond simply uncovering movement forms. It also encompasses experiences, contexts, meanings, values, and the relationships between performers, audiences, space, and culture. Therefore, a qualitative approach is considered relevant because it allows researchers to understand dance through observation, interviews, documentation, movement analysis, and interpretation of bodily experiences and the surrounding socio-cultural context.

The analysis was informed by three complementary perspectives, namely ethnochoreology, performance semiotics, and cultural embodiment. Ethnochoreology examined dance as a cultural practice in relation to its form and context (Narawati, 2013). Following Kaeppler, dance movements are structured by distinctive movement motifs derived from the local cultural context (Kaeppler, 2000). This perspective is crucial for analyzing dance that combines movements from various ethnic traditions. Moreover, the research approach fits into the theoretical framework developed by Giurchescu (2001) concerning dance and its connection to identity as well as Buckland (1999) emphasis on the reflexive nature of dance within the social and historical practice. This theoretical approach will provide an effective tool for examining the combination of multi-cultural traditions in the modern setting of the international airport. Then, performance semiotics is used to interpret how meaning is produced through movement, music, costume, space, and performer-audience interaction (Marinis, 1993). Cultural embodiment explains how these signs are enacted and experienced through the body in public space (Counsell & Mock, 2009).

Data were collected through direct observation, interviews, documentation, and supporting visitor response data. The research used direct observation of dance performances at Terminal 1, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Malaysia, on 12 June 2025. This study was conducted following all necessary guidelines, and with permission granted by the relevant authorities of Malaysia Airports in accordance with letter number MAHB/CEM/07-KULRSCH (2/5) 1. It also offered an important chance for the researcher to gather field data firsthand. The observation focused on the structure of the performance, theme, movement, costume, music, staging, and the way dancers interacted with visitors at the airport.

Researchers conducted interviews with five dancers, a performance coordinator, and a program manager. All infor-

nants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives and agreed to participate in the interviews and in the research documentation. The informants in this study were selected because they were directly involved in planning and performing the airport dance program. The interviews sought to understand the program's goals, how they recruited performers, choreography, performance schedules, and what the dancers and organizers found meaningful about the performance. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes because they were conducted between performance breaks. They were informed about the purpose of the study and that their statements would be used for research purposes, anonymized with a participation code (see Table 1).

Documentation used to collect photos and videos during fieldwork was supplemented with media content from Malaysia Airports' official channels. As direct interviews with visitors were not possible due to limited access to the airport, audience data were collated from visitor questionnaire responses. Researchers obtained data from a survey on entertainment satisfaction from July to December 2024. The survey was conducted by the customer experience management team to gather responses and evaluations from airport visitors on performance. The survey included a request for a rating (1 to 5) and for suggestions or feedback. The survey instrument was written in English, but visitors were given the flexibility to answer questions using the language they understood best. Based on the data obtained, researchers selected data related to cognitive, energetic, and psychological meanings or effects, informed by Marco de Marinis's theory of performance semiotics. These responses were then used as additional data to help the researchers make sense of impressions, audience responses, and reactions to the performances. In this study, the audience dimension refers to a mix of visitor feedback documents and field observations of visitors' behavior (e.g., hesitating, looking at, recording, clapping for, or getting in-

volved in the dance). Accordingly, we acknowledge this limit in order to ensure transparency in the interpretation of audience meaning. Any visitor responses containing personal names are anonymized by replacing identifying information with participant codes before analysis and publication (see Table 1).

Table 1. Informants Code

Informants	Code	Type of Data
Dancers	D1, D2, D3, D4, D5	Interview
Performance Coordinator	C	Interview
Program Manager	P	Interview
Visitors	V1, V2, V3, V4, V5, V6	Survey

Informants' identities were protected by using participant codes. Dancers were coded as D1, D2, D3, D4, and D5. Performance coordinator as C1, program manager as P1, and visitors as V1, V2, V3, V4, V5 and V6. These codes were used to replace personal names in the analysis and publication.

The data were examined through the interactive model of Miles and Huberman as applied to qualitative analysis, including data condensation, data display, and data verification (Miles et al., 2014) (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Data condensation was conducted through thematic coding of interview transcripts, observation notes, documentation, and visitor response data. The data were read repeatedly to identify units of meaning related to the form of the dance performance, the interaction between dancers and visitors, the use of airport public space, cultural representations, and the cultural embodiment of performers and visitors. These units of meaning were then initially coded and grouped into thematic categories. Categories with similar meanings were then synthesized into the main themes of the findings. The coding process was conducted by the principal

researcher and team members through discussions to maintain interpretive consistency and reduce subjectivity in the analysis.

The data were presented descriptively and analytically through narrative explanations and interpretive tables. In the verification data, the results were analyzed within the framework of performance semiotics and cultural embodiment, in relation to the creation of meaning through the relationship between performance texts and the distinct transitional public-space environments of the airports.

Data triangulation involved comparing data obtained from observations, interviews, documentation, and visitor responses. For example, the interpretation that dance performances in airport public spaces shape visitors' cultural experiences was supported by multiple data sources. The findings from observation included that some visitors stopped, watched the dance performances, took photos and videos, and engaged with the dancers. Data from interviews with the dancers also confirmed that the performance aimed to welcome and introduce cultures. Visitor response data reinforced these findings by demonstrating a positive perception of the performances as a cultural experience in airport spaces. Thus, conclusions were not derived solely from a single data type but were obtained through cross-verification across sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Form of Dance Performance at KLIA As a Cultural Practice in Public Space

KLIA has provided public space for scheduled dance performances since 2020. (Yerimou et al., 2026). This public space is a strategic venue for showcasing Malaysian multi-ethnic culture. (Halpern & Bråthen, 2011). The synergy between public and cultural spaces creates unique branding opportunities that reflect Malaysia as an exotic destination, particularly in the context of dance multiculturalism. The dances are themed around major holidays each

month. Rentak@KUL is a dance creation performed for airport visitors in June 2025.

A performance must have three requirements. Those are intentionality, uniqueness, and an event that connects the performer's intention to perform with the audience's expectation of witnessing something unusual. According Simatupang as foundational figure in Indonesian Art Anthropologist, the performance demonstrates a planned and organized intention to perform, rather than something unintentional or spontaneous (Simatupang, 2013). Rentak@KUL dance at KLIA is a program developed by Malaysia Airports to promote Malaysian culture to the public. It was not a one-off event but rather an official program organized by Malaysia Airports as part of its visitor-welcoming initiative (welcome dance). Unsurprisingly, this intention was evident in the selective selection of dancers, the set schedule (two sessions daily, five days a week), and, more importantly, the introduction of Malaysian culture at a level of cultural engagement felt from the moment one entered the country. The dance performance was part of a strategic plan, not a spontaneous one. Thus, the first performance's requirement was met.

Dance performances at airports are also unusual for many airports. The performance stage is located in the center of the airport waiting area, a space normally used for passenger traffic (Cruzan et al., 2021). Audiences see this as an unusual and memorable experience. Therefore, according to Simatupang, dance performances at airports fulfill the second requirement about uniqueness.

Dance performances are evident in direct interactions (taking photos together, joining in the dance, applauding, recording), positive emotional responses (joy, admiration, nostalgia), and the awareness that this performance is the 'first face' of Malaysia seen by international tourists. Thus, Simatupang's third requirement is fulfilled for a meaningful meeting between the performers' intentions and the audience's expectations.

Understanding meaning through the interpretation of dance cannot be separated from the form of dance performance. To understand the meaning of dance, there must be a unified understanding of the elements that shape a dance performance. This means that we cannot understand the meaning of dance solely through its movements. We also need to consider other elements that complement the dance performance (Martino & Jazuli, 2019). The elements of dance performances at airports can be analysed according to theme, dancers, movements, music accompaniment, costume, and makeup (Hadi, 2007; Jazuli, 2016).

Dance Theme

Rentak@KUL is a creative dance performance featuring movements characteristic of several traditional dances from various ethnic groups, including Malay, Indian, Sarawak, Chinese, and Bugis. The theme of the dance performance at KLIA during June 2025 is multiculturalism. This theme was chosen to introduce Malaysia's multi-ethnic, harmonious culture. Based on its theme, the Rentak@KUL dance is classified as a non-literary dance. Non-literary dance themes do not directly tell a specific story (non-narrative) but rather express ideas, feelings, moods, or abstract values (Adshead et al., 1988). The Rentak@KUL dance represents cultural diversity while remaining unified, and is intended to welcome airport visitors as they enter Malaysia.

The multicultural theme of Rentak@KUL dance is interpreted through the cultural diversity of the dancers, movement vocabulary, musical accompaniment, and costumes. Nevertheless, the concept of multiculturalism takes on an additional layer of complexity when examined against the backdrop of the airport's liminality. The airport becomes a transitional place, since people who are inside it are neither completely inside nor completely outside the country. They temporarily exist between arrival and departure, walking and waiting, origin and destination,

and between local and global spaces. From this perspective, airports become symbols of liminality where national identities can be performed, interpreted, and negotiated. As Huang et al., (2018) argue, airports are global public spaces where abstract national values such as diversity, harmony, and openness are translated into embodied experiences. Rentak@KUL operates precisely within this liminal condition. In this case, the performance takes this transitional airport space as a point of momentary cultural exchange, giving the possibility for tourists to experience Malaysia's diversity of culture through dancers' performance and bodily rhythm. Therefore, multiculturalism is not only represented as an artistic theme but is realized as a cultural experience lived by the body in public spaces that are shaped by movement, waiting and transition. At Malaysia's main entry point, Rentak@KUL functions as a performative gateway and frames the airport as a cultural space that is ephemerally embodied, witnessed, and affectively experienced.

Dancers

Rentak@KUL features five dancers who were officially recruited and employed by airport management. They have participated for about three to five years in such activity, so one can assume that these performers have considerable experience related to performance. Moreover, these dancers are not simply entertainers but cultural bridges as well. The reason why these dancers perform is that they are able to show Malaysia's multiculturalism to the whole world. One of the dancers stated:

"Dancing in the public area of the airport is like being cultural ambassadors. We are all from different cultural backgrounds and use dancing and music to develop our own individual character by promoting what we have into other cultures" (interview with D1, 12 June 2025).

The five Rental@KUL dancers represent various ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malay, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Sarawakian). The dancers conveyed distinct cultural characteristics through their

movements and costumes. Moreover, their Malay dance movements are marked by a certain softness, which contrasts with the dynamic, more energetic nature of Indian dances. In this way, the dancers at KLIA represent Malaysia's multiracial society in a readily recognizable form to visitors.

The significance of the dancers' role at KLIA, in terms of their adaptation to new circumstances, also stems from their ability to perform in an international environment. As the interview data showed, the importance of dancers extends beyond their dancing abilities to include their interactions with international visitors, an essential component of the performance. According to one of the interviewed dancers: "We are recruited not just because we can dance, but because we can adapt to audiences from different countries. We must be friendly and interactive, while maintaining the authenticity of traditional dance movements" (Interview with D2, dancer, June 8, 2025).

Dancers are carriers of culture in human form, representing a particular cultural identity by experiencing it and making it tangible for people in a dynamic, multicultural public space. This finding aligns with the approach of embodiment studies, which considers experience an important element alongside perception and action in the creation and interpretation of cultural meanings.

Apart from interacting with international audiences, dancers' professionalism is also evident in their performance. KLIA dancers dance two times per day and five times per week. Such a great number of performances imposes high physical and psychological pressure on dancers, requiring high endurance. As D1 stated, "We have to refresh our energy at every performance because the audience is always changing and they deserve the best we can give." (Interview, June 12, 2025). Professionalism here is not only about technical precision but also about maintaining expressive energy and cultural presence across multiple performances. Pickard's view of choreographic practice as a means of em-

bodying and representing socio-cultural values is highly relevant, as the repetition of exercises undertaken by KLIA dancers not only maintains the continuity of movement vocabulary (Pickard, 2018) but also continuously presents and rebuilds Malaysia's multiracial identity before an international audience.

Thus, each dance represents a personal heritage, professional discipline, and national representation for the KLIA dancers. Thus, dancers at KLIA demonstrate that airport dance can serve as a tool for cultural dynamics in public spaces, where identities are not only reflected but also created by the influence of institutional factors and audiences.

Movements

The body language of Rentak@KUL reveals that dance in KLIA is more than just something to look at. This analysis examines the types of movement: pure and meaningful. Pure movement is a type of movement that lacks a clear storyline or referential meaning, aiming instead to create visual beauty, rhythm, and composition in the performance (Adshead et al., 1988). In this performance, the focus is solely on curving hand movements with gentle wrist turns (graceful hand movements), rhythmic steps to the left and then right with gentle stomps, and body turns.

The dancers are placed in horizontal symmetry and positioned equidistant from each other, balancing the body position for the audience from every angle, maintaining a rigid, vertical posture that contrasts with the parallel lines of the arms at shoulder height and the horizontal shoulders with their curves, another characteristic of Malay dance, which emphasizes fluidity and continuous movement. The high degree of synchronicity among the dancers demonstrates unity of movement, a fundamental principle of Djelantik as a foundational figure in Indonesian aesthetics, in which adherence to position and timing with one another can foster a sense of collective coherence (Djelantik, 1993).



Figure 1. Pure Movement

(Source: Lesa Paranti, June 12, 2025)

Note: This figure is used with permission for academic publication purposes.

Figure 1 shows an example of pure, meaningless movement that enhances the dance's beauty. The four dancers' hand movements differ from those of one dancer sitting at the lower level in front. The dancers play with levels and face directions to move in multiple directions. The movement formation is clearly set up, and the body's position is modified, such as turning diagonally to create an illusion of depth in the visual composition. Pure movements shape the aesthetic identity of the performance, maintain group cohesion, and serve as visual anchors that guide the audience's attention in a dynamic public space such as an airport. As stated by D1, the dancer,

"Sometimes the movements are not meant to tell a story, but to make the audience feel comfortable watching. If every movement has meaning, it becomes tiring to watch. So, there must be movements that are simply beautiful." (Interview, 12 June 2025).

This reinforces the idea that pure movement serves an aesthetic and dramaturgical function, maintaining the audience's attention in a public space full of distractions.

Morris states that meaningful movements convey specific meanings or symbols that can be interpreted by the audience (Morris, 2002). Meaningful movements play a crucial role as a medium of cultural welcoming. Some of these meaningful movements include a greeting gesture with hands folded at the chest, symboli-

zing respect; opening the hands forward as a sign of openness and friendliness; and stomping the feet at the climax, inspired by Portuguese and Indian dances, symbolizing enthusiasm and joy.

Hadi emphasizes that meaningful movements in traditional dance represent cultural symbols that can be understood by the wider community, including cross-cultural audiences (Hadi, 2007). This was conveyed by the dancers in an interview: “I think dancing in a public area is like being a cultural ambassador. When we bow or open our arms towards the audience, it is a sign that Malaysia warmly welcomes all guests” (Interview with D2, 12 June 2025). These meaningful movements also reinforce Malaysia’s image as a multicultural country.

The movement dynamics in Rentak@KUL dance at KLIA are contrasting flow, a change in energy and tempo that is opposite to create tension and release. Performance dynamics analysis based on the performance structure divided into four parts, namely 1) the opening section has a slow tempo and smooth movements to build the atmosphere (low energy), 2) the middle section has an increasing tempo with foot stomps and hand claps (medium energy), 3) the climax section is characterized by fast, rhythmic, energetic movements accompanied by broad smiles (high energy), 4) the final section returns to a slow tempo, ending with a closing greeting. These changes in dynamics are important because they help maintain the audience’s focus in a busy space. In addition, the energy transitions allow the audience to experience an emotional journey from relaxation to euphoria.

The airport’s open public space is used for the dance space. Placing the dancers at the very center makes it easier for some audience members to see them. This choice of space is a branding decision. People who walk by will be exposed to Malaysian culture without having to ask for the show. According to dance space theory, using strategic and public spaces can increase cultural exposure and reinfor-

ce audience memory of cultural symbols (Sachs, 1937).

Music Accompaniment

The Rentak@KUL dance accompaniment has a multi-ethnic yet modern traditional musical nuance. Malay and Chinese nuances convey a soft, graceful impression, while Indian nuances are more energetic. Musical accompaniment functions as accompaniment, illustration, and atmosphere-building (Burger, 2020; Caddy, 2020). The Rentak@KUL dance accompaniment functions as an accompaniment because its tempo serves as the basis for regulating the dance movements’ rhythm. The accompaniment’s tempo has good dynamics, alternating between moderate and fast. The dynamics of the accompaniment create a lively atmosphere.

The Rentak@KUL dance accompaniment is divided into two parts. The first part is without vocals and uses a modern blend of Malay, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Sarawakian ethnic accompaniment. The second part features the song “Visit Malaysia 2026,” whose lyrics introduce Malaysian culture. Music can unite diverse cultural heritages, integrating them into a unified performance that reflects the nature of contemporary life (Orgs & Howlin, 2019).

The opening intro features a gentle bamboo flute, a slow drum rhythm, and other wind instruments. The purpose of this intro is to establish a tranquil environment, inviting the audience into a space of cultural imagination.

The verse part reflects a distinct Malaysian motif and melody. In this section, repetitive elements allow the dancers to add variation to their pure moves (such as arm-waving and footwork) and to incorporate additional meaningful movements (symbols of respect and hospitality).

The chorus section culminates in a fusion of ethnicities. The repetition of the main melodic motif in the chorus helps create familiarity for the audience, and the song also builds an appreciation for cultural integration. For each chorus, there is a

dynamic movement device, enhanced by a series of jumps and small turns, and sweeping arm arcs that follow the rhythm of the music.

The ending then repeats the initial motif, played in full by all ethnic instruments, signifying unity in diversity. The final part of the Rentak@KUL dance features an accompaniment to Visit Malaysia 2026, with the themed song "Surreal Experience" by Ernie Zakri, featuring Lil' J, Nicole, Reza, Daves, and Thamiera. The uniqueness of the lyrics is used in six languages, namely English, Malay, Mandarin, Iban, Tamil, and Dusun, as a symbol of cultural diversity and the unity of Malaysia. The following are some of the lyrics and meanings of the Surreal Experience song based on interview data with the dancers (D1 and D3), performance coordinator (C), and researchers' analysis (see Table 2).

Overall, the lyrics of "Surreal Experience" represent Malaysia as a beautiful, welcoming, multicultural country full of extraordinary experiences. The multilingual strategy is a key strength, demonstrating that Malaysian identity is built through ethnic and cultural diversity (Navickaite-Martinelli, 2015). This strategy aligns with the Malaysia Truly Asia branding concept. The combination of familiar and foreign languages in Malaysia's tourism promotions can attract tourists

seeking a different experience. For foreign listeners, hearing the chorus lyrics switch between languages is like being taken on a tour of several cultures at once. It is a cross-cultural experience that arouses curiosity and reinforces the impression that Malaysia offers Asia in one package.

Costumes and Makeup

Costumes serve as choreographic elements that influence the audience's perception of the dancers' characters (Paranti et al., 2023). Makeup and costumes help construct the performance's narrative. When dancers wear different outfits on stage, the audience will grasp the multicultural message. The variety of dancers' costumes provides a visual experience that emphasizes the message of diversity. The dance costumes in Rentak@KUL performance were chosen with consideration for Malaysia's ethnic diversity, ranging from delicate Malay attire to Indian costumes rich in ornamental details, to elegant Chinese attire dominated by red and gold, and Portuguese dancer costumes wearing a white dress (see Figure 2).

The first dancer from the left used a Sarawak ethnic costume dominated by yellow, red, black, and orange. Visually, this attire is reminiscent of the traditional attire of the Dayak people of Sarawak, particularly the Iban group, known for their

Table 2. Lyrics and the Meaning of Surreal Experience Song

Lyrics	Meaning Interpretation
<i>"Malaysia is Truly Asia. It's a land with rich heritage for you to explore....."</i> (English)	Malaysia is a representation of Asia because of its multicultural and rich heritage
<i>"Malaysia yang unik. Kaya dengan budaya. Destinasi menarik. Mari sini semuanya....."</i> (Malay)	Malaysia is a unique country and invites anyone to enjoy its cultural richness.
<i>"Ma lai xi ya wo mei li de guo jia...."</i> (Mandarin)	Malaysia is a beautiful country
<i>"Rayat iya, cukup kemerah Pengadung iya, nyelapkan mata...."</i> (Iban)	Its friendly people are an important part of Malaysian culture.
<i>"Malaysia nerukkam unarvoo Vaanin neelam, minnum alaigal Azhagaana iyarkai..."</i> (Tamil)	Malaysia, as a cultural space, is close to human feelings through its natural beauty, such as blue skies, shining waves, and enchanting landscapes.
<i>"Koyonon auh kopiagal dit suai, Noponu koimayaan, Timpu ngawi dit atalang, Auh milo oolin-gan..."</i> (Dusun)	Malaysia is a unique, exhilarating, beautiful destination and leaves a deep impression on anyone who experiences it

rich textile motifs, beadwork, and accessories. The skirts and headpieces create a graceful impression. The second dancer from the left wears an Indian-inspired costume, dominated by turquoise, paired with a maroon-gold scarf that hangs down the front of her body. This attire conveys a graceful, formal impression, with vertical lines elongating the dancer's silhouette. The light-colored trousers and footwear reinforce the impression of stage attire tailored for the performance.



Figure 2. Multiethnic Costumes in Rentak@KUL Dance (Source: Rimasari PP, 12 June 2025) Note: This figure is used with permission for research purposes

The dancer in the middle is a dancer in Malay costume. Malay dances are performed by men wearing *songket* shirts, brown trousers, and golden sashes. This Malay costume reflects ethnic identity and conveys a sense of dignity, politeness, and cultural refinement. The second performer from the right dances wearing a strikingly red outfit with prominent golden decor. The combination of red and gold is a powerful visual symbol in Chinese cultural representations, often associated with good luck, prosperity, joy, and celebration. The costume adapts elements of traditional Chinese attire. The dancer on the right is wearing Portuguese-style clothes, with white and blue dominating the costume and accent colors being red, yellow, and blue on the skirt. The attire includes a dress and a white apron. It consists of a puffed-sleeved blouse and a red hair cover, which give this dance an air of femininity, cheerfulness, and a European folk-dance feel.

Costumes and makeup play a crucial role in shaping the atmosphere of the performance space.

The makeup employs correctional techniques that emphasize the natural features of the face. According to Ravelhofer (2023), the costumes and makeup of Rentak@KUL help transform the airport waiting area into a temporary cultural stage where Malaysia's diversity can be seen, felt, and remembered. They play a pivotal role in shaping a sensory atmosphere where cultural practices are rescued from being mere static spectacles, emerging instead as an active, embodied visual experience for the audience. Thus, costumes and makeup are integral to cultural embodiment in public space (Ariffin & Yahaya, 2013), because they allow multicultural identity to be performed through the dressed and expressive body at the gateway of the nation.

The Meaning of Dance Performances at KLIA for Dancers

The meaning of the performance was analyzed using Marco de Marinis' semiotic theory of performance, whereby the meaning of a performance is generated through the interaction between the performance text (the sign structure formed from movement, music, and costumes) and the socio-cultural context (the public space situation, the audience, and the purpose of the performance) (Marinis, 1993). The Rentak@KUL performance at Kuala Lumpur International Airport featured a multicultural dance that combined the basic movements of traditional Malay, Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, and Sarawakian dances. For the dancers, each movement was not merely aesthetic, but a cultural sign representing a particular ethnic identity. Based on analysis, the meaning of performance for dancers is divided into five aspects (see Table 3).

In Rentak@KUL, body movements and facial expressions form the language of a performance text that can be read as a system of signs through its relationship to musical rhythms. According to Marinis, the dancer's body becomes a sign that

Table 3. Analysis of the Meaning of Performance for Dancers

Aspects of Analysis (Marinis)	Signs/Elements Produced	Meaning for Dancers
Performance as a sign system	Gentle hand movements (Malay), dynamic expressions (Indian), and upright posture (grounded) are characteristics of tradition	Pride in reviving ethnic identity through the body
Interactive Code (Performer-audience relationship)	Adjusting interactions with audiences from different countries	Feeling like a friendly and adaptive cultural mediator
Embodied Experience	Physical energy and consistent expression in every session	Professionalism and commitment to providing the best experience
Representation of Identity	Ethnic costumes, traditional music medley	Becoming cultural ambassadors, promoting culture through art
Context & Purpose of the Performance	Regular performances by Malaysia Airport	Being part of the country's cultural strategy

includes specific cultural codes (Marinis, 1993). The soft movements of both hands represent Malay femininity and hospitality, while facial expressions represent the hospitality of a multi-ethnic society. Dancers know that to communicate these markers authentically, they must embody them physically and emotionally.

Dancers should not just be considered as executors of the choreography. They are also co-authors of the performance text (the meaning is to be built together). The dancer's social adaptability and cross-cultural interaction are considered during recruitment. This indicates that dancers do much more than simply move their bodies. They also become cultural communicators who have to be sensitive to the diversity of their audience. In Marinis' semiotics, this dimension includes interactive codes that directly relate the classic performative text itself to the audience, creating situational meaning.

Airport spaces are highly dynamic (with ever-changing crowds), informal atmospheres, and spontaneous interactions. The dancers know that energy and consistency are the hallmarks of a great performance. Within the Marinis framework, these conditions have a real-time effect on the performance text, as the dancers move

in response to their rhythm and energy, adapting to the audience's situation. This experience has personal meaning for the dancers. Each performance is a new opportunity to build a positive cultural impression with an international audience.

For the dancers, performing at the airport means being cultural ambassadors, embodying deeply held national beliefs and identities to the world. *"Dancing in the public area of the airport feels like being cultural ambassadors. We all have our own heritage and promote our culture through dance and music."* (Interview with D2 as KLIA dancer, June 12, 2025). This aligns with the concept of performance as cultural representation (performance semiotics), which relates to how dancers negotiate their personal identities with the collective identity they wish to convey to a global audience. The performance can be viewed as a symbolic site for demonstrating Malaysia's multiculturalism. Thus, in the current study, the dancers are regarded not only as institutional performers but also as agents whose task is to perform the nation's multiculturalism and bring it to life.

The dancers' self-identification as cultural ambassadors needs to be understood within Malaysia Airports' institutional framework for the Rentak@KUL dance

program. As performers and cultural intermediaries, the dancers represent the multi-cultural identity of Malaysia to its international audience. This institutional context shapes how the dancers understand their role, as their bodies, movements, costumes, expressions, and interactions are expected to convey the image of Malaysia as a diverse, welcoming, and open nation. In other words, dancers cannot be reduced to mere performance tools in Malaysia Airports. Dancers can be considered cultural ambassadors, as they can convey institutional narratives through their physical presence and direct interaction with visitors. The concept of dancers as cultural ambassadors shows the relationship between their subjective identities and the institutional context in which they operate.

Analysis of the Meaning of the Performance for Audiences

Performances are considered as “performance texts” that are created by means of the semiotic system. All elements of performances, such as body language, facial expressions, costumes, music, lighting, and audience interaction with performers, are signs that can be read and interpreted. The meaning of a performance arises from the combination of these layered signs. The audience and dancers read these signs according to their social, cultural, and psychological backgrounds (Kumar et al., 2026; Marinis, 1993)

The audience for dance performances at KLIA consists of visitors from various countries, so how they read and understand the signs for the performance elements will differ depending on their social and cultural backgrounds (Blichfeldt et al., 2017). Based on this, the meaning of the performance for visitors lies not only in its text but also in the effects it produces on the audience.

Audience responses to the Rentak@KUL performance need to be understood within the context of the airport as a heterogeneous and dynamic public space. Unlike audiences at performances held in conventional venues, those at the airport

may not have come specifically to watch the performance. Therefore, their level of engagement with the performance cannot be understood uniformly.

Based on observational notes, audience engagement occurred along a spectrum. Some simply glanced at the performance briefly while continuing to walk toward their destination. Others slowed their pace, taking in the movements, costumes, and musical accompaniment for a moment, but did not stop completely. Still others stopped to take photos or videos, smiled, responded bodily, interacted with the dancers, or even participated in the performative atmosphere created by the performance. This spectrum demonstrates that audience experiences at the airport are fluid, temporary, and dependent on individual travel circumstances.

A performance is an interactive and communicative event that allows the audience to experience something special and different from everyday life, thus making meaning relational, situational, and embodied. Performance as art object and a form of communication at the same time. Dancers convey cultural messages through their bodies and symbols, the audience interprets and responds, and collective meaning is formed. Performance also functions as a medium for the production and reproduction of cultural identity. The following table presents the meanings of dance performances at KLIA for the audience, based on visitor satisfaction survey data and direct observation, using Marinis’ concept. Marinis (1993) divides these effects into three main dimensions, namely cognitive, energetic, and psychological effects (see Table 4).

Audience responses to the Rentak@KUL performance need to be understood within the context of the airport as a heterogeneous and dynamic public space. Unlike audiences in conventional performance spaces, airport audiences do not always attend with the specific intention of watching the performance. Therefore, their level of engagement with the performance cannot be understood uniformly.

Table 4. Analysis of the Meaning of Dance Performances for the Audience

Effect Type (Marco de Marinis)	Visitor Response (Survey Data)	Observation Data	Meaning Formed
Cognitive Effect The audience gained new insights into Malaysian culture.	<i>"Tariannya bagus menggabungkan semua suku Malaysia, sangat edukasi dan juga menghibur"</i> (V1, July 2024) (Translation: "The dance is great combining all the Malaysian tribes, very educational and also entertaining") <i>"Helped me connect with my cultural dance and I love it."</i> (V2, November 2024)	Visitors pause to watch the performance even though they are just passing through. Some visitors asks to the staff about the performances	The performance provides a learning experience about Malaysian culture, both directly and through documentation, thereby strengthening the sense of embodiment of Malaysian culture.
Energetic Effect The performance energized the audience and stirred their emotions.	<i>"Very natural and full of energy. Such a joy watching the performance."</i> (V3, December 2024) <i>"All dancers are very energetic."</i> (V4, July 2024)	Some visitors dance along with the dancers Give a big round of applause after the performance.	The dancers' energy is contagious, creating an enthusiastic atmosphere and actively engaging the audience, making the performance feel lively and entertaining.
Psychological Effect Performances provide aesthetic satisfaction, evoke positive emotions, nostalgia, or pride.	<i>"Persembahan yang memukau"</i> . (V5, November 2024) (Translation: "A stunning performance"). <i>"Hiburan sebelum berlepas ke Jakarta, teringat zaman muda dulu"</i> . (V6, Juli 2024). (Translation: "Entertainment before leaving for Jakarta, reminds me of my youth")	Visitors look happy, take photos with the dancers. Record the performance to share on social media.	The performances evoked happiness, nostalgia, and cultural pride. Documentation and social media uploads became a means of cultural branding for Malaysia.

Performance's effect on the audience can be analyzed by how the audience experienced it. Visitors who dance along with the dancers demonstrate embodied participation. Based on field notes, there were moments when the dancers invited visitors to join in, creating a more lively atmosphere and attracting more attention from passersby. Visitors directly followed the dancers' movements in step with the rhythm of the music. This made the performance a more participatory experience and gave the audience deeper meaning. According to Marinis, the meaning of a performance is not only derived from its text but also from its effects on the audience. This direct interaction shows that the audience was an active participant in the event, experiencing the performance and internalizing the rhythms of the Malaysian community's cultural movement into their own bodies. In this way, they truly experi-

ence the culture, rather than just seeing it. This represents a concrete form of cultural embodiment. So, this research contributes to the idea that visitors are active agents in meaning-making. As Marinis stated, the audience actively interprets the performance through their responses (Marinis, 1993; Pan, 2025).

The audience's acts of stopping, watching, filming, clapping, taking photos, and joining in the dance suggest that meaning is produced laterally rather than passively received. In some cases, they also extend their cultural engagement beyond the airport through social media and informal cultural ambassadorial activities based on their personal experiences. From this perspective, the meaning of KLIA's dance does not lie only in what it signifies or expresses linguistically, whether in its use by this airport or as part of a collective performance forum. Instead, it operates at

the level of bodily engagement and ways to make a shared public experience beautiful and memorable. Hence, this research argues that airport dance performance serves as a cultural embodiment in public space, whereby visitors become not only passive recipients of national culture but also actors in its embodied, sensorily and affectively mediated social reproduction.

Cultural performance diplomacy became one of the main factors shaping its impact. It left a lasting impression and a positive cultural brand that visitors took home. This warm engagement between the audience and the dancers created an all-embracing ambiance that reiterated Malaysia's identity as an open, multicultural nation. Cultural performance diplomacy became one of the main factors shaping its impact. It left a lasting impression and a positive cultural brand that travelers took home, reinforcing Malaysia's positive cultural messaging on the world stage. The findings provide a fresh perspective on airport audiences, showing them as corporeal beings whose reactions actively shape the cultural significance of performances encountered in transit environments. The findings offer a new understanding of airport audiences as physical bodies whose response actively contributes to the formation of the cultural significance of the performances encountered in airport transit.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the dance performances at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) constitute a cultural program strategically designed, scheduled, and sustained by Malaysia Airports to welcome passengers and introduce Malaysia's multi-ethnic identity from the moment they enter the country. Themes of dances, dance movements, music, costumes, stage floor design, and interaction formats correspond to cultural holidays and events on the airport calendar. The stage is created using the waiting area; therefore, the airport transit space is transformed into a cultural performance site that at-

tracts attention and stimulates spontaneous participation. Therefore, the goal set by the researcher to map performance practices has been achieved. The performances at KLIA proved not to be incidental spectacles but rather a "welcome dance" integral to the airport experience (a memorable airport experience) and aligned with the destination's cultural branding strategy.

Regarding the meanings generated by performances in relation to the two main subjects involved in this cultural dialogue, it was confirmed by the findings that the body of a dancer plays a crucial role in this cultural communication process because it serves as a medium used for expressing various cultural codes (movement, expression, costume, music). In addition to executing the choreographic actions, dancers should be considered cultural ambassadors and co-authors of the meaning who should ensure interaction and quality of energy exchange in each session of performance. As far as tourists are concerned, the meaning was generated by means of three layers of performance effects (Marinis), namely cognitive (increased knowledge about Malaysia's diversity), energetic (enthusiasm and engagement, through watching, clapping, dancing along), and psychological or aesthetic (feelings of joy, nostalgia, pride). In many cases, these impressions were also captured in photos and videos and actively disseminated to organically promote Malaysia's culture beyond the airport perimeter. As these impacts were situational and relational, the meaning was both seen and embodied.

Theoretically, these results confirm the semiotics of performance by demonstrating that performance texts (pure and meaningful movements, music, multicultural costumes, and interaction formats) are intertwined with context (airports as transitional public spaces) to create meaning through readings and experiencing. Also, the study makes another important contribution to cultural embodiment research. Evidently, embodiment can occur in public spaces and even global transit spaces like airports; it does not have to be

restricted to ritual or performance venues. With regard to the findings related to dance performances at KLIA, the body of the dancer serves as a means of representing cultural identity through movement in the context of passengers' global mobility. Consequently, the embodiment in transit spaces is ephemeral, relational, and intercultural, created during the momentary encounter between the dancer's body and the stream of visitors' mobility, and within the institutional environment of the airport as a gateway to national culture.

In practice, the implications suggest that airports can incorporate curated arts programs that reflect multi-ethnicity, and that performance indicators should include not only functionality but also the value of cultural experience (exposure, engagement, visual word-of-mouth). Thus, dance performances at KLIA serve a dual purpose: as a public service that enriches the passenger experience and as an instrument of cultural diplomacy that strengthens the image of "Malaysia Truly Asia" as a country-branding concept on the international stage. For the future, the program management should be optimized through systematic collection of feedback from the audience, interaction with cross-ethnic arts communities, and creating a themed narrative relevant to the tourism agenda (e.g., Visit Malaysia 2026), so that the reach of cultural branding through transit spaces becomes more inclusive, sustainable, and impactful.

Despite its contributions, this study has several **limitations** and offers opportunities for **further research**. First, the study focuses on dance performances at KLIA, so its results are not generalizable to other forms of airport-based cultural performance or to transit spaces. Future research could conduct comparative studies across airports, both within Malaysia and in other countries, such as Singapore Changi or Bangkok Suvarnabhumi, to examine how differences in institutions, spaces, and cultural policies influence the representation of cultural identity through performance. Second, the observations were conducted

over a specific period, thus not fully capturing the variations in performance dynamics during festival seasons, holidays, or major celebrations in Malaysia. Therefore, longitudinal observation is important to understand changes in dance performance practices in airport spaces over time. Third, this study is limited by the inability to conduct direct interviews with visitors to explore deeper meanings. Future research could benefit from direct audience interviews or focus groups to more deeply capture the nuances of visitor affect and their long-term cultural recall.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers would like to thank the Research and Community Service Institute, Universitas Negeri Semarang, for funding this research through the Collaborative Research scheme with Contract Number 288.14.3/UN37/PPK.11/2025. The researchers would also like to thank the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, for its willingness to partner with them in this research. Furthermore, the researchers would like to thank Malaysia Airport for granting permission to collect data and all the informants involved.

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