



Communication Dialectics of Street Musicians in Ungaran, Semarang District

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Article Info

Received : June

Approved : July

Published : July

Keywords:

dialectics, communication, traffic lights, street musicians, Semarang

Abstract

Street music has become a widespread social phenomenon in almost every major city worldwide, including Indonesia. Street musicians often belong to marginalized group amidst urban growth in Indonesia, particularly in Ungaran City, Semarang Regency. These musicians occupy public spaces such as intersections, traffic lights, public transport, cafes, and restaurants scattered throughout the city. This research employed qualitative method with musical ethnography approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of the communication dialectics among street musicians in public spaces. It aimed to analyze data related to the communication dialectics among street musicians occurring at traffic lights in Ungaran, including verbal, non-verbal, and musical communication. The findings are expected to provide insight into the communication dynamics during street musicians' performances in public spaces, particularly at traffic lights, and to offer new perspectives for policymakers on maximizing public space utilization for the benefit of residents.

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ISSN 2503-2585

INTRODUCTION

Street musicians are performers who play music in public spaces, such as streets, pedestrian areas, and city parks. They use various musical instruments to engage with others who also use these public spaces. In these environments, street musicians interact with the community, expressing themselves through music while earning a livelihood. Their performances typically involve playing instruments, singing, and sometimes dancing. Street musicians often play a variety of instruments like guitar, violin, traditional instruments like kendang, and tambourines. Due to economic constraints, they sometimes create makeshift instruments, such as cutting car tires into strips and stretching them over wooden resonators to produce sounds that accompany their singing. In addition, some street musicians use modern technology, such as loop pedals or electronic equipment, to create complex sounds.

The locations of street performances vary widely among street musicians. Some travel from house to house, shop to shop, or store to store, while others stay in specific spots. These locations often include busy areas such as traffic lights, intersections, market squares like the New Johar Market and the Old Town. Wherever there is a crowd, street musicians are likely to be found, as their primary goal is to earn a livelihood. Location plays a crucial role in attracting public attention, and non-verbal cues from broader culture are significant in engaging individuals during performances (Akkuzu, 2021).

According to Beqaj, cities as urban areas, especially their public spaces, serve as venues for fun, love, work, reading, trading, debating, arguing, and policymaking. In general, the city and its public spaces are intended to fulfill the emotional, social, and physical needs of both residents and visitors (Beqaj, 2016). This means that urban spaces are viewed as areas for enjoyment, affection, work, commerce, debate, and decision-making. Therefore, cities and public spaces should meet the emotional, social, and physical needs of everyone. Furthermore, Andrew Carlin's research

highlights the significance of street music performances in public spaces. One key aspect of enhancing public spaces for emotional needs is street music. Street musicians use musical expression, along with verbal and nonverbal communication, to interact with and engage their audience. They seek strategic locations, such as intersections, traffic lights, and other busy areas, to reach a larger crowd (Carlin, 2014).

Street musician performances are often spontaneous and not bound by strict rules or schedules. Street music plays an important role in society as an agent of cultural and social change. Wallin, Merker, and Brown (2000) noted that music is one of the oldest forms of expression present in every culture over time. (Shaleha, 2019).

Music is one of the most widely known communication mediums and can be enjoyed by people from various backgrounds (Cahya & Sukendro, 2022). Street musicians are individuals who live on the fringes of society, and street music serves as their medium of expression, which allows them to communicate and share their experiences with the world. Through their music, street musicians create aesthetic adaptations of daily performances and develop their own means of communication as marginalized individuals who must share space with other public area users. One way street musicians build social interaction in public spaces is by using their verbal, non-verbal, and musical expressions, and using instruments they have mastered. In practice, street musicians play music daily by blending traditional musical elements with modern influences. They often combine traditional instruments with contemporary ones or use unconventional instruments, such as cans or buckets, to create unique sounds. This enriches musical diversity and leads to new and interesting sound combinations. In addition, street musicians reflect their daily realities through the lyrics and themes of their music. They write songs about their life experiences, the challenges they face, and their hopes for the future. Street music often serves as a tool to voice social injustices,

economic inequalities, and political tensions. By conveying these messages through music and lyrics, street musicians strive to bring about change and touch the hearts of those around them. They also influence fashion and lifestyle (Setiawan, 2012). Their distinctive appearance and unique clothing reflect their identity and express an alternative lifestyle. According to Hendariningrum and Susilo, an alternative lifestyle is a movement that seems to return to nature and simplicity, embodying a longing for one's hometown (Hendariningrum & Susilo, 2008). People inspired by street musicians often adopt these elements into their own fashion and create new trends and styles that diverge from the mainstream. Furthermore, street musicians contribute to the development of street art and graffiti. They often accompany their musical performances with dance, painting, or other visual acts, which enrich the overall aesthetic experience of their music. Street art becomes a platform to convey social messages, advocate for change, and showcase beauty in often overlooked urban environments. The role of street musicians in creating cultural identity, public experience, and social dynamics in public spaces is significant (Gemci & Ferah, 2020).

Street musicians have established a cultural identity within urban communities and fostered social dynamics across every city (Kartono, 2018). Street music performances significantly enhance people's perceptions and evaluations of these public spaces. This highlights the importance of recognizing and facilitating street music activities when designing public areas that are more enjoyable and inviting for community participation (Ho & Au, 2021). Overall, street musicians contribute positively to public communication and the perception of street music.

METHOD

This study used qualitative research with musical ethnography approach to investigate the forms of communication that occurred during street musicians' interactions with the community in public

spaces (Wibisono & Kartono, 2018). The researchers engaged directly with the street musician community in Ungaran, and actively observed and documented the musical practices of groups performing at traffic lights throughout the city. To obtain accurate and comprehensive data, the researchers fostered familial communication not only with the street musicians but also with passersby who enjoyed or did not enjoy the street performances. The researchers studied the interactions among street musicians during their performances, including verbal exchanges and communication with the audience (Mulyawati, 2012). Moreover, this research examined the processes of non-verbal communication and musical communication, considering the social context, values, traditions, and meanings associated with the music. To delve deeper, methods such as participant observation, interviews, field notes, and content analysis were employed to gain a thorough understanding of the communication dynamics among street musicians at the traffic lights in Ungaran, Semarang regency, within a broader cultural context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Street musicians play an important role and have distinctive characteristics in building their own communication through music and their interactions with the community. They create their unique communication style through sounds and artistic expressions that reflect their life experiences, convey social messages, and respond to cultural changes around them. In the process, they inspire people to adopt alternative lifestyles, enrich culture and fashion, and provide new insights into their often-overlooked realities within the urban social structure. One of the most urgent components across various fields is society, which includes social, economic, cultural, and other domains. Urban communities are considered advanced societies, supported by adequate technology, information, and communication. In contrast, local rural communities maintain their simplicity.

When discussing society, Emile Durkheim notes that urban communities often exhibit low collective solidarity due to their transient populations. In contrast, rural communities are relatively dominant as original societies, characterized by strong solidarity, mutual support, and cooperation (Pasaribu, 2020). Furthermore, according to Max Weber, urban societies are driven by a capitalist spirit that compels individuals to continuously seek wealth, competing in the pursuit of financial success. Street musicians in Ungaran come from various social backgrounds, including both rural areas and the outskirts of Semarang, as well as groups from within the city. As a marginalized group, they are united in building solidarity, sharing resources, protecting one another, and offering support when any member faces hardship. The diverse backgrounds also influence how they communicate with other community groups while performing music at the traffic lights in Ungaran, Semarang regency. These street musicians, who play the traditional instrument called *angklung* accompanied by *kendang*, *tambourine*, and *icik-icik*, often perform at traffic lights, adding vibrancy to the atmosphere. Their traditional music performances are lively and creative. The researchers note that playing music is not as easy as it seems; these musicians must have undergone musical learning experiences, such as listening to music, singing, playing instruments, and moving to the rhythm, which is referred to as music education (Hidayatullah, 2020). Music education includes at least two key ideas: 1) serving as a means to enhance musical skills (education in music), and 2) instilling positive values within a social framework (education through music). The street performances of these musicians reflect their unique methods of musical communication. Alongside verbal and non-verbal communication, musical expression signifies the positive values demonstrated by street musicians. These values include hard work, perseverance, patience, and the ability to adapt to the

complexities and challenges of public spaces as a minority group. This minority group is often described as marginalized and oppressed within the broader urban society.

Economic development in the current era has led to a significant increase in the cost of living. The economic crisis has been deeply felt by many lower and middle-class individuals in large cities. This is also the case for a street musician near the traffic lights named Mas Putra. He performs with several instruments, including a *tambourine*, *kendang*, and *angklung* as his melody. Assisted by two friends, he plays the *kendang*. The primary reason he busks is economic; he lost his job during the COVID-19 pandemic when the place he worked at went bankrupt. After his performances, he also works part-time helping to park motorcycles. He has a performance schedule, playing from 6 to 8 in the morning and from 4 to 8 in the evening. He does not own his own musical instruments but uses those of his friends. The melody is played on the *angklung*, while the *kendang* and *tambourine* provide accompaniment. These street musicians at the traffic lights lack formal music training; they rely on imitation, copying viral songs. Their musical skills are driven by strong determination, which allows them to create performances that closely resemble the originals. The instruments used by these street musicians combine traditional and modern music, which certainly captures the attention of passersby at the traffic lights.

Some other musicians appear with simple setups, both in terms of their instruments and performance style. Simple musical instruments include homemade rattles made from bottle caps nailed to wood, which produce a creaking sound when shaken. Alternatively, they may also use empty plastic water bottles filled with rice. *Kendang* are crafted from water gallon jugs, either filled with water or left empty, creating different sounds. These are played by being struck with hands or occasionally hit with sticks.

Street musicians typically rely on the natural sound of their instruments, played manually without amplifiers. However, many also use speakers powered by batteries or car batteries to attract the audience's attention (Tri Laksana, 2014). Amplifying their sound with microphones is a strategy to enhance communication through their choice of musical equipment and song selection. Verbal communication occurs when street musicians interact with listeners through conversation before, during, and after their performances. This includes greetings in the local dialect of Semarang. They often use trendy phrases that resonate with the community to establish direct communication with their audience. Typically, these interactions are brief but convey clear messages. Sometimes, they also offer prayers for the safety of those who take a moment to enjoy their music. In addition, street musicians often explain the stories behind their songs or invite audience participation, although this can be challenging in the busy setting of traffic lights. Nonverbal communication also plays a significant role in their interaction with the audience. They employ varied, spontaneous, and symbolic techniques, using friendly body movements, cheerful facial expressions, enjoyable eye contact, and body language to enhance their musical communication. Using gestures or nonverbal signs to engage with listeners has proven effective in capturing the attention of passersby who have limited time to enjoy the performances at traffic lights in Ungaran, Semarang.

Each street musician has a unique style in building a musical communication dialectic, whether during performances or while interacting socially with the audience in public spaces, such as at traffic lights. Their musical skills are based on elements like melody, rhythm, and improvisation, often inspired by music streaming applications on their phones. Through these musical elements, street musicians express their feelings, joy, sadness, and specific messages to their audience in. The messages that capture

attention amid the dynamic interactions are often very brief, especially at traffic lights. Performing in such settings requires a special strategy for communicating with a passing audience, who have limited time to engage due to the short duration dictated by the traffic signals at each intersection.

CONCLUSION

The dialectic communication performed by street musicians during their performances at the traffic lights in Ungaran City allows them to connect with listeners using their own musical language. They achieve this by playing original music and showcasing their unique musical aesthetics, which create emotional bonds with the dynamic and diverse users of public spaces. This ongoing interaction presents a unique and constantly evolving dialectic that varies daily during street music performances at the city's traffic lights.

A deeper understanding of this street dialectic communication could foster community appreciation for street musicians as integral parts of everyday life and support the Ungaran City government in formulating and implementing policies related to public space use.

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