

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Festival and Urban Identity: A Case Study of the Malang Flower Carnival in Yogyakarta

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ABSTRACT

Cultural festivals, often called carnivals, events, or celebrations, have become prominent showcases across Indonesia, particularly in the post-New Order period. These festivals serve two main objectives: promoting tourism and reviving regionalism as well as traditional identities in response to past centralization policies. This study examines the Malang Flower Carnival (MFC) in Malang City, East Java, which has been a key feature of the city's cultural landscape since 2010. In 2022, the MFC deviated from its tradition by participating in the Jogja Fashion Carnival in Yogyakarta instead of holding its own event in Malang. This shift provides a unique opportunity to analyze how Malang's cultural identity is represented to an audience in another city. The findings suggest that while the MFC captivated visitors with its elaborate costumes, it struggled to convey the intended narrative of Malang's cultural identity. This difficulty stems from the complexity of representing Malang's multiple identities—rooted in its historical legacy, contemporary identity as the “City of Flowers,” and broader regional narratives. The themes of bravery and heroism, although recognized, were often disconnected from Malang's broader historical and cultural context.

Keywords: *Malang Festival Carnival; festival; carnival; regional; identity*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural festivals, often referred to as carnivals, events, or celebrations, are integral aspects of community life in various cities across Indonesia. These festivals represent a form of community cultural activity that can be distinguished from everyday culture, that is, as an expression of ‘culture in the form of celebrations or performances’ (cultural performances) (Lewis, 2013, pp. 4-5) that take place at specific locations and times as special events (Getz, 1989). The tradition of hosting festivals is deeply ingrained in Indonesian society, such as celebrating harvests, traditional and religious holidays, or national independence. During the New Order regime, particularly before the 2000s, cultural festivals began to proliferate across Indonesia, often taking the form of parades, designed to showcase the state's development achievements to the broader public (Anoegrajekti et al., 2018: 2).



Since the late 20th century, two main agendas have shaped cultural festivals in various Indonesian cities. First, these festivals were established to bolster the tourism industry, particularly cultural tourism, which has seen significant growth in Indonesia over the last few decades (Kumoro, 2021; Salazar, 2012). Second, they became platforms for regionalism and the revival of local identities, countering the previous centralized policies of the New Order regime (Davidson & Henley, 2007; Jones, 2015; Sulistiyanto & Erb, 2005). This is evident in prominent festivals such as the Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival, the Batik Solo Carnival, and the Sandalwood Horse and Sumba Weaving Festival in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). These festivals, which gained prominence in the mid-2000s, showcase the unique cultural heritage of their respective regions, while also serving as tourist attractions, illustrating a broader trend in how Indonesian cities use cultural festivals to express their local identities.

Similarly, the Malang Flower Carnival (MFC), as the focus of this research, reflects this broader trend. Based in Malang, East Java, the MFC showcases the city's identity as the "City of Flowers" (*Malang Kota Bunga*) while contributing significantly to the tourism sector. Malang was chosen for this study due to its significant role in Indonesia's tourism industry. In 2019, Malang attracted over 4 million domestic and international tourists, contributing substantially to the local economy and solidifying its status as a key player in Indonesia's tourism sector (Malang's Central Agency of Statistics, 2019). Malang's tourism revenue is supported by its rich array of attractions, including historical sites, natural landscapes, and cultural events. The designation of the city as a Special Economic Zone (*Kawasan Ekonomi Khusus*) (KEK Singhasari, n.d.) underscores its national importance in the tourism sector. As a tourism destination, in many ways, the existence of festivals is significant; in addition to being a form of tourist attraction itself, festivals also reinforce the image and identity of the city (Lim, 2016).

Although there are several cultural festivals in Malang such as the Malang Tempo Doeloe, Topeng Dance, and Kampung Cempluk, the MFC stands out as a case study due to its status as arguably the largest and most iconic festival in Malang City. Held annually since 2010, the MFC is also considered the largest flower-themed festival in Indonesia besides the Tomohon International Flower Festival (TIFF) in North Sulawesi. The festival attracts approximately 10,000 visitors each year, including both national and international attendees, with over 500 participants showcasing elaborate flower-themed costumes (Nadila, 2021). The festival, held every September on Malang's iconic Ijen Boulevard, is a flower-themed fashion carnival that has significantly enhanced Malang's image as a tourist city. The "Beautiful Malang" tagline, part of a new city branding strategy, was launched at the MFC in 2015. Both the festival's founders and the municipal government have strategically positioned the MFC as a key medium to revitalize Malang's identity as the City of Flowers (Sunandar & Dharsono, 2020).

In 2022, the festival was canceled due to the Kanjuruhan tragedy in October, where hundreds of football supporters at the Kanjuruhan Stadium Malang died from a stampede, leaving the entire city of Malang in a state of mourning. Nevertheless, the MFC boards decided to delegate their costumed dancers to a fashion festival in Yogyakarta, a tourism city in Central Java, at the time of the Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) festival in mid-October. For us, the change in plan was quite interesting because it was in line with the objectives of this research, which examines the extent to which tourism interests and the discourse of urban identity are reflected in the MFC performance. While the festival's audience in Malang is likely to easily associate with the flower

symbols in the MFC, how would the performance be perceived in a city where these symbols might not be as familiar? To what extent would the Malang Flower Carnival's (MFC) performance in Yogyakarta influence the perception of Malang's cultural identity? Which symbols would be most prominently featured throughout the performance?

Theoretically, this research positions festivals as *cultural performances* (Lewis, 2013; Lim, 2016) within the framework of regional and urban identities construction. Lono Simatupang (2013: 11) argues that cultural performances differ from daily life because they involve several prerequisites: (1) an event deliberately displayed as a spectacle, featuring a performer and a subject who watches as a spectator; (2) nuances of extraordinariness that serves as the main attraction, including the arrangement of space, time, sound, motion, objects, light, and other features that have extraordinary qualities; and (3) a combination of the first and second conditions, where the performer's intent to perform and the audience's expectation of an 'extraordinary' experience come together. These extraordinary aspects serve as a means to convey message, such as those expressed through costumes in the context of the MFC.

In terms of Malang's identity in its intersection with the MFC in Jogja Fashion Carnival, Lynch (Suprayoga, 2008) argues that urban identity is the uniqueness of a city that distinguishes it from other cities. The identity of a city plays an essential role for both locals and visitors in different contexts, ranging from the social ties of its inhabitants to the economic interests of tourism. The identity of a city can be constructed through various physical and non-physical means. Festivals or carnivals are one of the non-physical means that experts consider to have an influential role in reconstructing the image and identity of a community or region (Addo, 2009; Frost, 2016; Quinn, 2009; Raj, 2004).

Bernadette Quinn (2005) in "*Arts Festival and the City*" adds that cultural arts festivals in the era of globalization now play a role in reconstructing a positive image of a city despite the various problems that exist,

"The festival, with its connotations of sociability, playfulness, joviality, and community provides a ready-made set of positive images on which to base a reconstruction of a less-than-perfect city image. Add the 'arts' dimension to the festival, and another series of positive images are available for manipulation according to the positioning requirements of the city. It is not surprising, therefore, that many cities have seen in festivals a sort of 'quick-fix' solution to their image problems." (Quinn, 2005:14).

This research examines how the Malang Flower Carnival (MFC), from its historical roots to its participation in the Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) in 2022, navigates the challenges of maintaining Malang's local identity while adapting to a new context. Specifically, the relocation of the festival to Yogyakarta introduces a new dimension to this context, raising questions about how effectively the MFC can continue to reconstruct and convey Malang's identity outside its original setting, reflecting the complexities of cultural representation in a different locale.

METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach, utilizing multiple data collection techniques. First, a literature study was conducted to trace the historical context of the Malang

Flower Carnival (MFC). Fieldwork was then carried out at the Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) 2022 in Malioboro, Yogyakarta, with participant observation as the primary method. The research was conducted over one week, during which the researcher observed the MFC performance, interacted with spectators, and documented the event. A total of 20 informants, including 10 tourists, 5 MFC team members, and 5 JFC organizers, were interviewed to gather diverse perspectives. The term "urban tour ethnography" (Pink, 2008) was initially considered; since the researcher will bring out all the senses to observe, take notes, and take photos of relevant things. However, the research methods align more closely with structured observation and participant interaction, making observation a more accurate description.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Malang Fashion Carnival: An overview

The MFC Festival is the largest flower-themed carnival in Indonesia and is a routine tourism event in Malang City, East Java. At the beginning of its existence, the birth of the MFC was motivated by the Jember Fashion Carnival which was created by renowned designer Dynand Fariz in Jember in 2003, to preserve Indonesian culture by selectively lifting elements of local wisdom and translating them into modern fashion design. Similarly, the MFC adopted these concepts, incorporating local cultural elements into its unique flower-themed performances.

This carnival is routinely conducted every year, and in 2022, it is entering its 11th year. Every year, more than 500 participants (costumed dancers) from various regions in Indonesia (and occasionally international performers) participate in this festival, attracting thousands of local, national, and international audiences. Furthermore, it should be noted that outside of the festival, the MFC is a costume dance group that has represented Indonesia 38 times in international cultural and tourism performances in various countries (Kumparan.com, 2022). The MFC, both as a festival and a costumed dance group primarily founded by the Fashion Department of Malang State University, with support from the Malang City Arts and Culture Activist Community and the Malang Municipal Government. Initially, the MFC's participants were students from the university, but over time, participants from the public across Indonesia started joining. The MFC festival showcases both traditional and contemporary elements through its annual themes, entertainment line-up, and musical background. Although the theme changes each year, the core concept remains the introduction of unique flowers from the archipelago. For instance, in 2019, the theme was *Padma Nusa* (Indonesian lotus), which prominently featured in the participants' costumes, highlighting the beauty of Indonesia's native flowers alongside renowned flowers like tulips and lavender.

The main event of the Malang Flower Carnival is a costume competition (fashion show) performed by participants in front of the public along Ijen Boulevard, the most iconic landmark in Malang. Thousands of spectators typically gather to watch the participants as they parade through the city. The Malang municipal government views this influx of spectators from both Malang and other regions as a boost to the local economy (BeritaSatu.com, 2019). While Indonesia has similar festivals, such as the Jember Fashion Carnival and the Solo Batik Carnival, the Malang Flower Carnival stands out for its emphasis on environmentally friendly floral costumes. In 2018, the festival introduced a rule requiring participants to use recycled materials in their costumes



Figure 1. Malang Fashion Carnival 2017. **Source:** Jawa Pos, 2017

as part of a broader campaign for environmental conservation.

Since its establishment in 2010, the MFC has achieved various national and international recognitions. In 2012, the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Industries awarded it as the best flower carnival organizer in Indonesia. The MFC also represented Indonesia at the International Culture and Tourism Festival in Russia, Japan, China, and Hong Kong in 2014, 2015, and 2016, when it also won the award for best performance in the Carnival and Traditional Arts category in 2014.

From the outset, the founders of the MFC aimed to create a festival that would strengthen Malang City's image as a tourist destination. Malang has long been known as the "City of Flowers," a reputation stemming from the extensive flower cultivation in the region, particularly around Malang and Batu since the late 19th century. While other cities use carnivals to promote their identity—such as Solo with its Batik Fashion Carnival and Yogyakarta with its Jogja Fashion Carnival—the MFC chose flowers as the most intrinsic identity of Malang. According to the MFC group members, a flower-themed festival serves as a "positioning instrument" in comparison to similar festivals in other Indonesian cities. Agus Sunandar, also known as Sam Suga, one of the MFC founders, emphasized that flowers are one of Malang's main characteristics, every element of the flower including leaves and branches is an integral part of the MFC's identity. "What is clear is that, at that time, we said Malang is the city of flowers, as in flowers as a whole. So not only the flowers, but also the leaves, sticks, and all the elements from the tree where the flowers grow from," said Agus.

Nevertheless, the members of the MFC group later recognized that MFC had become a well-established brand, so they no longer felt the need to make flowers the sole element of their performances. "The Malang Flower Carnival has now become the brand of this festival, which still leads to carnival costumes following the theme, although flowers are not always the focus," said Agus. This shift began in 2019 after the festival has been running for nine years. From 2010 to 2019, the MFC consistently promoted an image closely tied to Malang, with a flower theme

for eight consecutive years. The motivation behind this change was the MFC group's desire to highlight other aspects of Malang, particularly its rich history and cultural traditions. According to Agus, the shift aims to showcase that Malang's identity extends beyond flowers to include a wealth of history, traditions, and culture which are equally compelling themes for the MFC carnival costumes. Since 2020, the MFC group has started exploring Malang's historical and cultural values as themes for the carnival, such as the mythological figure Garudheya, which will be discussed further below.

Currently, the MFC group has around 180 members. Not all of them are from Malang; some come from nearby regions such as Blitar, Surabaya, and Sidoarjo. The majority of the members are artists with a keen interest in fashion design, which are divided into two roles: costume designers and performers who showcase the costumes. During the annual festival in Malang, the MFC group also recruits additional volunteers to form the organizing committee.

As a community that has evolved into a recognized carnival event brand, the MFC now considers itself a professional costume festival dancer group. They also believe they have met the expectations of their members. One indicator of this success is the group's participation in both national and international carnival performances. As Agus Sunandar expressed:

“ We used to wonder if the MFC festival could become an international event or if the MFC group could go global. Over time, we received awards from the Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy for three consecutive years. Since 2018, we have participated in national and international tourism events. In our view, this achievement has surpassed our initial goal, which was simply to express our interest in fashion” (Interview with Agus Sunandar, October 21st, 2022).

According to its members, the MFC has participated in numerous shows across various countries, including the United States, Russia, France, Italy, and the UK. Additionally, it has represented Indonesia in several prestigious festivals, earning multiple awards in fashion competitions worldwide. In every international competition, the MFC almost always promotes flowers as the main icon, but with different themes each time.

“The MFC has represented Indonesia almost every month in various countries abroad. We won first place in carnival events in Russia, Taiwan, and Kuala Lumpur. At that time, we still incorporated floral elements, but each event had a distinct theme. For example, one of the themes was the traditional legend of Putri Kendedes. So, while the fashion was floral, it was always infused with specific themes we wanted to express.” (Interview Agus Sunandar, October 21st, 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, it was challenging for the MFC to maintain its presence. Fashion carnival events at national and international levels were either scaled back or canceled. Consequently, the MFC could not hold its usual carnival in the center of Malang City. However, in 2020, the Malang Flower Carnival was held virtually, featuring the theme “Garudheya Nusantara,” which continued to be the central theme in 2021 and 2022. In 2021, the Malang Flower Carnival was organized in a hybrid format, both online and offline, with the offline event held behind closed doors at Gajayana Stadium and broadcast via YouTube. Only about 100 participants were involved, with strict health protocols in place.

This section highlights how the Malang Flower Carnival (MFC) plays a crucial role in reinforcing Malang's cultural identity while adapting to broader themes and challenges. It examines the festival's evolution and resilience held by the MFC, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in maintaining its significance both locally and internationally.

MFC at the Jogja Fashion Carnival: Garudheya in the form of costumes

After a two-year absence, the 2022 festival was anticipated as it would mark the MFC's return to the public in Malang City, similar to pre-pandemic years. However, this comeback was not realized. The MFC event, scheduled for October 2022 in Malang, was canceled due to a tragedy at Kanjuruhan Stadium where hundreds of Arema football club supporters died in a stampede in early October. This incident, which drew national and international attention, deeply affected the people of Malang. In response, the MFC committee canceled the festival out of respect for the grieving community. Instead, the MFC group participated in the Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) on October 15th, 2022, in Yogyakarta, where they were one of several delegations, including the Solo Batik Carnival and Jember Fashion Carnival.

The Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) is an event organized by the Yogyakarta Special Region Tourism Office, held along Malioboro Street and Vredeburg Fort in Yogyakarta. The 2022 event, themed "Abiwada Arsana," or cheerful excitement, featured 21 costume carnival groups from various regions in Indonesia. The JFC 2022 highlighted three fashion themes: educational, historical, and cultural. The festival aimed to revive tourism in Yogyakarta, which had declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, and to commemorate National Batik Day while supporting creativity in the fashion carnival sector and preserving arts and culture in Yogyakarta. According to Agus Sunandar, the MFC's participation in the event was in response to an invitation from the JFC committee, as the MFC has always been invited to participate. "We always perform at the JFC, even though it is not held regularly every year. Whenever the JFC is organized, the MFC is always invited directly by the Yogyakarta Provincial Tourism Office, not as a competing participant, but as a guest star," said Agus.

As in previous performances in Malang and other cities, the MFC group at the JFC 2022 presented a theme that promoted the cultural identity of Malang, known as "Malangness," through the theme "Garudheya Nusantara." This theme was inspired by the figure of Garudheya, depicted in the reliefs at the base of Kidal Temple in Tumpang, Malang. Garudheya, also known as Garuda, is a mythological riding bird of Lord Vishnu. Ancient Javanese literature often portrays Garudheya as a symbol of heroism and courage, particularly in the tale of saving his mother from slavery by Dewi Kadru through the redemption of the holy *amerta* water.

The "Garudheya Nusantara" theme first highlighted the historical and cultural richness of Malang City, drawing from the existence of Kidal Temple, a significant cultural heritage site. This temple, a legacy of the Singasari kingdom during the reign of King Anusapati, is emblematic of Malang's historical prominence. Second, the Garudheya character embodies a symbolic narrative that the MFC group sought to convey. In the performance, Garudheya was not only depicted through bird-shaped costumes but also through the narrative of heroism and bravery inherent in the myth. During their JFC performance, the MFC group conveyed that, like Garudheya, Malang is the "land of the brave" (*tanah dari orang-orang pemberani*).

In translating the narrative of bravery and heroism into carnival costumes, the MFC reused

costumes from previous years' MFC carnivals, only repairing those that were damaged. According to Agus, preparation for the JFC 2022 was relatively short, taking approximately two weeks. The MFC specifically designed several Garudheya costumes to convey the heroic and brave values depicted in the Garudheya war story, which was divided into three phases: struggle, sacrifice, and victory.

“In the Garudheya story, we designed costumes to represent the three phases: the struggle, the sacrifice, and the victory. In the victory phase, Garudheya faces many challenges and obstacles, one of which is from a beastly figure. So, the costumes were created to reflect these figures,” (Interview with Agus Sunandar, October 21st, 2022).

We observed that the facades and ornaments found in Kidal Temple also influenced the costumes displayed by the MFC at the JFC 2022. Like any Hindu temple, Kidal Temple features a main hall and niches. The left niche contains a statue of Mahakala, a fierce form of Lord Shiva with a giant face, sword, and mace, while the right niche holds a statue of Nandiswara, Shiva's vehicle, an ox armed with a trident. The motifs and elements from the temple's reliefs, including animal figures, weapons, and grotesque designs, inspired the MFC costumes.

The MFC costume performance group at the JFC 2022 included 13 performers, comprising both senior and junior talents. Three performers wore golden-winged, bird-shaped costumes symbolizing the figure of Garudheya. Five female performers, dressed in costumes armed with tridents, represented Garudheya's bodyguards. Additionally, three performers wore costumes resembling giants to depict animal figures. The MFC costumes featured a 'dark' accent, dominated by black and brown colors, which evoke the look of superhero costumes in Hollywood movies.

The last two performers wore costumes that appeared unrelated to Garudheya's narrative—purple and green floral outfits. The MFC team recognized the contrast between the cheerful floral costumes and the 'gothic' ones, understanding that the primary identity of their carnival is flower-themed. Therefore, the inclusion of floral costumes was intended to maintain a connection with the MFC brand. Additionally, the presence of flower costumes was meant to prevent any misunderstandings among the audience, who might still associate the carnival primarily with flowers.



Figure 2. Malang Flower Carnival costume performance group at the Jogja Fashion Carnival 2022

The MFC performers wore costumes that were quite heavy. Putri, one of the MFC performers, mentioned that her Garudheya costume, as the main mascot, weighed approximately 20 kilograms. The “full flower” costume weighed approximately 14 kilograms, while the other costumes had an average weight of 10 kilograms each. Given the weight of these costumes, combined with the demands of dancing and walking throughout the carnival, it seems that only trained performers can successfully execute this performance.

The MFC’s appearance at the Jogja Fashion Carnival with the “Garudheya Nusantara” costume theme aimed to present Malang not just as the “City of Flowers” but also as a city of bravery. This new identity is conveyed through more masculine, dark, and gothic nuances, in contrast to colorful floral costumes. The Kidal Temple and its historical background served as a resource to construct this new narrative of Malang’s identity from the MFC, which the carnival sought to introduce through its costumes.

Between costume and the city: An incongruent narrative of identity

The JFC 2022 took place on Malioboro Street in the mid-afternoon, but the MFC performers had been busy applying makeup and dressing in their respective costumes since the morning. The MFC group arrived in Yogyakarta a day earlier to prepare the costumes and other equipment. According to the MFC members, they were not only portraying the Garudheya Nusantara story through their costumes but also provided an oral narrative of the story, which was delivered by the host on stage during their performance. Before the carnival, the MFC team gave the JFC committee a synopsis of each costume’s story.

The main stage of the JFC was located in front of the Yogyakarta Provincial Parliament building, in the center of Malioboro Street. From there, hosts and invited guests watched as each team of performers walked from the starting point at the main stage to the finish line in front of Vredeburg Fort, with a distance of approximately 1 kilometer. Malioboro Street, a leading tourist destination in Yogyakarta, attracted thousands of tourists who gathered to watch the JFC performance.

In the afternoon, the JFC 2022 began with performances from several opening carnival participants, including carnival teams from Jogja, Solo, and Jember, and representatives from Yogyakarta State University (UNY). When it was the MFC’s turn, the host enthusiastically introduced them with the following greeting;

“And now, it’s time for the performers from the land of Arema, the land of the brave!
The land of Arema, *Arek Malang* [people of Malang], the land of the brave. The Malang Fashion Carnival presents the story of Garudheya Nusantara, the brave hero from Bumi Arema.”

Afterward, the host narrated the story of Garudheya Nusantara, highlighting the values embodied in the costumes worn by the MFC performers. As the host spoke, the MFC talents walked across the stage, moving back and forth, from right to left, showcasing their costumes. The talents danced lightly, with circular movements in front of the stage, while holding their costumes and making hand gestures to display the details to the audience. The talents also switched places with one another during the performance. Essentially, their act involved dancing in costumes, accompanied by music and the host’s narration.

The JFC event held along Malioboro Street attracted significant enthusiasm from tourists, even though not all were initially aware of the event. Many tourists who were simply strolling around Malioboro ended up gathering at the JFC venue. Many watched with excitement, applauding, cheering, and taking pictures of the performers with their cell phones. The crowd was particularly enthusiastic about the MFC's performance. Despite being a guest star at the JFC 2022, the team stood out with its unique and stunning costumes and makeup. We interviewed some of the JFC 2022 audience members about their impressions of the MFC performance, and they shared similar sentiments, using words like “awesome” (*keren*), “unique” (*unik*), and “brave” (*berani*). Sarah, a 26-year-old woman from West Java, remarked, “The costumes were really unique, and the performance characters were quite strong, making it an interesting spectacle.” Another visitor, Feni, a 34-year-old woman from Central Java, commented, “The group from Malang was really cool. The character was strong—so brave it almost scared me.”

Visitors of Malioboro who watched the MFC performance expressed different levels of knowledge and memories about Malang City. These may either be reinforced or challenged by the MFC's costume and narrative performance at the JFC 2022. Among visitors randomly selected to be interviewed, many associated Malang with tourism. When asked about Malang, they frequently mentioned popular tourist destinations like Jatim Park, Museum Angkut, Kampung Wisata Warnawarni, or Mount Bromo. For these informants, the narrative of Malang's rich cultural history—such as Singosari, Kidal Temple, the Garudheya Myth, or the image as the “city of the brave”—was less prominent in their memories. For example, Sudiro, a 45-year-old food entrepreneur from Surakarta on his vacation in Yogyakarta, stated that he only learned about Malang's cultural history from the MFC performance.

“I previously knew Malang because I had vacationed there several times. All I knew was that Malang is a tourist city, with places like Batu or Bromo. But after seeing this performance, I realized, ‘Oh, Malang is unique too,’ with its own culture and history.”
(Interview with informant Sudiro, October 21st, 2022)

The MFC conveyed its narrative through costumes, performances, and storytelling but it is not always fully grasped by the visitors. While some audience members, like Ardi, a 50-year-old teacher from Sleman, Yogyakarta, mentioned that the performance made him aware of Malang's rich cultural history, others focused mainly on the visual appeal. Rina, a 28-year-old student from Bandung, West Java, described the costumes as “captivating and unique,” but did not explore her understanding of the underlying narrative. Similarly, Hendra, a 35-year-old local entrepreneur, noted the “bravery” depicted in the characters, but he associated it more with the dramatic costume design rather than with Malang's cultural identity.

This suggests that while the MFC successfully communicated the themes of “bravery” and “beauty” through its visual presentation, the deeper cultural narrative connecting these themes to Malang City was less effectively conveyed. The audience's reception highlights a gap between the intended narrative and the public's interpretation, where the emphasis on visual spectacle overshadowed the cultural storytelling. This could be attributed to the audience's varying levels of familiarity with Malang's history or a general preference for the aesthetic aspects of the performance over the narrative content.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of cultural festivals like the MFC in communicating local identity

relies not only on the visual elements but also on how well these elements are contextualized by the audience. In this case, while the performance was visually impressive, its success in reinforcing Malang's identity as a "city of the brave" was limited by the audience's focus on aesthetics rather than the deeper narrative.

The excitement of visitors watching the parade at the JFC was concentrated mainly around the main stage. Visitors, along with professional photographers, eagerly scrambled to capture photos of the performers. However, once the performers passed the main stage and proceeded down Malioboro Street towards Vredenburg Fort, the atmosphere became less festive. The crowd's enthusiasm seemed to diminish as the parade moved away from the main stage. Some visitors remained on the roadside to watch the parade, but many others chose to engage in typical Malioboro activities such as shopping, sightseeing, or sitting on roadside benches. It wasn't until the parade reached the finish point at the fort that visitors once again gathered around the performers, eager to take photos and interact with the carnival participants.

The MFC performers, having completed their performance, rested on the balcony of Fort Vredenburg. Their faces showed happiness and relief, despite their tired appearances. "Well, it's finally done" (*Wah, akhire mari ya*), "Hey, take off your costume first, it's heavy, right?" (*Sini-sini, kostumnya dilepas dulu biar nggak berat*), "No need to take off your costume, you're a man, don't be weak" (*Wis ta lah gak usah dicopot ae punyamu, arek lanang kok lemah*), were some of the playful exchanges we overheard, reflecting their relief that the carnival walk was over. The performers' joy and relief were not just about the ability to remove their heavy costumes, but also about the completion of the heavy responsibility of promoting the symbols and identity of their hometown in front of an audience from another city.

CONCLUSION

In the post-New Order period, characterized by the decentralization of power and the rise of regional identities, cultural festivals flourished in Indonesia's major cities, including Malang. Decentralization enabled regional governments with stronger authorities and greater financial resources, allowing them to promote their cultural heritage. Simultaneously, the rise of regional identities created a renewed interest in showcasing and celebrating local culture and traditions. These festivals have become key tools for reinforcing local identities. In this context, the Malang Flower Carnival (MFC), established in 2010, plays a crucial role in promoting Malang as the "City of Flowers." However, the Kanjuruhan tragedy in October 2022 led to the cancellation of the MFC in Malang and its transformation into a costume group performance at the Jogja Fashion Carnival (JFC) in Yogyakarta. This shift from a city-centered festival to a performance in another city altered the MFC's role, moving it from a festival that solidified Malang's identity to one that represents Malang within a broader context. The theme for the JFC 2022, "Garudheya Nusantara," aimed to evoke Malang's deep historical and cultural roots, particularly the legacy of the Singosari Kingdom and values of heroism and bravery. While the theme was well-received for its unique and striking costumes, it failed to fully convey Malang's identity as intended. Audience members associated the performance more with the visual spectacle than with Malang's cultural and historical narrative.

This case study highlights the challenges of representing Malang's multifaceted identities, which include its historical significance, its contemporary identity as a creative city, and its

regional role within East Java. The transition from a local festival to an out-of-town performance diluted these layered identities, emphasizing spectacle over substance. This demonstrates the complexities of cultural representation in a post-New Order Indonesia, where regional identities are simultaneously celebrated and contested, with the strongest narratives being those that are most effectively communicated.

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