
Public Perceptions of the Economic Impacts of Government Funded Events

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Lucy Batchy Gabriel Puem (Corresponding Author)

Faculty of Business and Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: lucybatchy@uitm.edu.my

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Faculty of Entrepreneurship and
Business, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan
Locked Bag 36, 16100 Pengkalan Chepa
Kota Bharu, Kelantan, Malaysia
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Ranee Atlas

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: ranee@uitm.edu.my

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Tina Stephen Enggong

Faculty of Accountancy
Universiti Teknologi MARA
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: stenia@uitm.edu.my

Nuraini Putit

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management
Universiti Teknologi MARA
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: nurainiputri@uitm.edu.my

Patrick Atan

Faculty of Accountancy
Universiti Teknologi MARA
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: patrickga@uitm.edu.my



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Abstract - National yearly events that are publicly funded often turn into large events that are appealing to the public and therefore need to benefit the community and society at large. While the government's role in organising or hosting public celebrations is to foster and enhance the spirit of patriotism, love for the country, strengthen unity and national integration among the people, others may argue that these celebrations are a waste of public funds which could be better spent on the economic development, repair and provision of infrastructure and improving social conditions in the state. This paper aims to examine public perceptions at the locality of the event and surroundings on the economic impact of these events. The study covered two major state events celebrated in Sarawak, the Governor's birthday and Malaysia Day, organised and funded by the State Protocol and Public Relations Unit of the Sarawak Chief Minister's Office. A self-administered questionnaire was developed to survey the attendees of two celebratory events via convenience

sampling. The findings from the survey found that the public perceived these events could positively support the locality in gaining temporary employment, support local trade, revive the local economy, increase hotel occupancy, and provide opportunities for future employment. However, the study further found that such events failed to create permanent employment and extending shopping hours in the event locality. Overall, it was shown that while national celebrations are perceived as events that benefit the public economically, there are concerns regarding the funding of infrastructure, which could alter the public's perception in gaining a higher overall positive perception score.

Keywords: Event; economic impact celebration; perception

1. Introduction

Malaysia Day and the State Governor's birthday celebrations are among the six major yearly events held in Sarawak celebrated at the state level in different locations or divisions across the country. Malaysia Day is a national celebration held on the 16th September each year to commemorate the Malaysian federation's historical establishment under the unification of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak, and Singapore in forming Malaysia in 1963, except for Singapore.

Nowadays, the auspicious annual events (i.e. Malaysia Day and the State Governor's birthday) are organised jointly by the federal and state governments (Borneo Post Online, 2019). Sarawak hosted the celebrations in 2017 and 2019. The Governor's birthday is a state-level event celebrating the Sarawak Head of State's official birthday, usually held on the 2nd week of September or October each year, only in Sarawak. The grand national or state level celebration is normally held for one to three days involving activities to nurture the Malaysia spirit of love and unity in the multi-racial society and bestow tribute and appreciation to the state. Further, it is always celebrated with colourful and meaningful formal events, such as a mammoth parade and rally, concert, and welfare aid presentation to the underprivileged. During the Sarawak-level celebrations, State and Federal dignitaries are often present (Borneo Post Online, 2017, 2019; New Sarawak Tribune Online, 2019).

These grand celebrations involve a large sum of government expenditure, and the events must run smoothly to achieve the objectives set for the events. The provision of public funds, which are quite substantial, result from several political and administrative decisions for the two celebrations (Jiménez-Naranjo et al., 2016), in financing the grand parade, rally, "Konsert Rakyat" and cultural performances that reflect the different races, religions, and background of the community in Sarawak (New Sarawak Tribune, 2019; Borneo Post Online, 2019).

Many people from all walks of life are attracted to join the celebrations (New Straits Times, 2019, Sarawak Dayak Daily, 2019), which intangibly benefit the local community and country. From a tangible perspective, the celebrations benefit local communities economically by providing employment opportunities, developing new local facilities, including trade and business opportunities (Borneo Post Online, 2017). It is also a significant opportunity to showcase the State's culture and heritage before the world when international tourists attend the celebrations since the events are broadcasted nationwide.

The government's role in organising or hosting national or state-level celebrations is to nurture and enhance the spirit of patriotism, love for the country, and strengthen unity and integration among the people at a national level (Borneo Post Online, 2019, New Sarawak Tribune Online, 2019). However, some people and often via public opinion suggest that

these celebrations are a waste of public money that could be better spent on the economic development, repair and provision of infrastructure and improving social conditions (Malay Mail, June 2019).

According to Dwyer et al. (2015), governments were often asked to provide financial support for special events, including allocating capital to upgrade the required facilities in holding a special event. Since the hosting of special events is often dependent on the financial or in-kind support of the public sector, justifications on the significant amount of public funds spent on such celebrations are necessary to demonstrate their contribution and impact to the host community.

Therefore, this study aims to present insights into public perceptions regarding the economic impact of government-funded events. The key objectives of this study are to explore the following issues: (1) to determine the perceptions of the community toward the economic impacts of national or state celebrations, and (2) to determine whether residents with various social backgrounds have different opinions or views toward the economic impacts of national or state celebrations.

This paper is organised into five sections. Section 1 presents the introduction and background to the study. Section 2 presents the literature review exploring the expected impacts of events and festivals and perceptions of the communities towards such impacts. Section 3 presents the methodology employed for empirical purposes, followed by Section 4, which presents the main results of the empirical study and discussion on the results. Lastly, Section 5 presents the main conclusions, which include policy recommendations, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Events

There is no single universally accepted definition of an event (Oklobžija, 2015) since it can suit different situations (Skoultos, Sofoklis & Tsartas, Paris, 2009). According to Fredline, Liz. et al. (2006), within the tourism field, the term 'event' is used to describe a wide range of event categories ranging from the Olympic Games as a mega-event to smaller events such as regional festivals, which have somewhat diverse characteristics. As stated by Janeczko, Ben et al. (2002), "...as the size of these events increases so to do their potential attendance, media coverage, and potential costs and benefits, including economic impacts". State Protocol and Public Relations UPPAN categorised Malaysia Day and the Governor's birthday celebrations as among the Major Six annual events held each year in Sarawak. According to Oklobdžija (2015), a major event is a large-scale event, having strong public interest and media coverage, attracting large numbers of visitors, and helping the organisers achieve good economic results. These two celebrations have been reported to attract more than 10,000 people in addition to hundreds of contingents and thousands of participants attending and involved in the grand parade and rally. In conjunction with the 2019 Malaysia Day celebration, a 24-hour non-stop live telecast was held, "The Longest Non-Stop Live National Telecast in Various Languages" produced by the National News Agency (Bernama). The telecast provided numerous programmes and useful information, featured interviews with politicians, corporate figures, athletes, and celebrities, including local news coverage (Malaysiakini, 16th September 2019). These two events can be placed under the category of 'Special' events following the description given in Etiosa (2012), "special events

have been described as specific rituals, presentations, performances or celebrations that are well planned and carried out to mark special occasions or achieve particular social, cultural or corporate goals and objectives. These special events range from national days and celebrations, important civic occasions, unique cultural performances, major sporting fixtures, corporate functions, trade promotions and product launches.”

2.2 Perceived Positive and Negative Economic Impacts of Events

According to Lucia (2013), given the forty years of international literature in this field, many studies have examined the economic impact of events. Economic impact is derived by the additional expenditure that is directly attributable to an event (Diedering, & Kwiatkowski 2015), which “relates only to new money injected into an economy by visitors, media, vendors, exhibitors, volunteers, sponsors, external government entities, or banks and investors from outside the community” (Crompton, 2006). Moreover, it seeks to estimate changes in regional spending, output, income, and/or employment associated with tourist policy, events, facilities, or destinations (Tyrrell & Johnston, 2006). The impacts will usually be most significant on the local area economy, less on the state economy, and the least on the national economy (Dwyer et al., 2005). Moreover, such events' economic impacts are normally generated through tourism (expenditure of tourists) occurring during the event itself and are only temporary (Arnegger & Herz 2016). However, hosting events and festivals positively and negatively impacts the host community and the host city (Düşmezkalender, E. et al., 2019; Janeczko, Ben et al., 2002; Ritchie, Brent et al., 2009).

2.3 Positive Impacts

Festivals and special events serving as important attractors for destinations provide unique experiences for visitors (Kim & Uysal, 2003), staying power to keep visitors in the area longer (Al Myles, 2012), and ultimately increase the opportunities for attracting new expenditure within a host region (Dwyer et al., 2015). Spending by the events and festivals themselves, including visitors, provides significant economic benefits to the host, boosting the local economy both within the festival site and externally generating revenue for the community (Susan, 2016). The positive economic impacts of festivals and special events included stimulating business activity and opportunities, helps to generate income and create additional job opportunities in the short-term (Patience Machisa et al., 2018; Gozini, & Tseane-Gumbi, 2017; Dwyer et al., 2015; Andereck et al., 2005) and the attraction of investments (Negruşa et al., 2016). However, according to Delpy & Li (1998), special events are unlikely to generate ongoing employment opportunities and effects due to their ‘one-off’ or short-term nature (Dwyer et al., 2000). The local people and suppliers are involved in providing services, food, beverages, and attractions, the greater the economic benefit to the region. Local vendors, artisans, craftspeople, restaurateurs, hoteliers, and innkeepers may incur a large proportion of their annual income from such events (Irshad, 2011) compared to ordinary residents (Gozini, & Tseane-Gumbi, 2017). Special events are unlikely to generate ongoing employment opportunities given their ‘one-off’ or short-term nature (Delpy and Li 1998). As such, the use of employment multipliers based on input-output tables is problematic. However, a broad indication of the (full-time equivalent) employment impact due to a special event can be calculated by dividing the economic impact by average weekly earnings.

2.4 Negative Impacts

Having discussed the positive impacts in the preceding section, negative consequences are also produced that impact the local economy, besides generating positive economic impacts (Chirieleison & Montrone, 2013; Janeczko, Ben et al., 2002). For instance, events increase the price of items such as food and transport (Patience Machisa et al., 2018); "...the high cost of accommodation. Hoteliers are hard-pressed to offer sponsorship or discounted rooms when they can be making top-dollar – high season-low inventory" (Susan Lewis, 30th March 2016).

2.5 Justification of Public Expenditure on Events

Hosting and organising events such as national or state celebrations incur expenses, and public funds are often limited to meet such outlays (Dwyer et al., 2015). Funds are needed to finance all the costs incurred in guaranteeing that the event will run smoothly, such as extra wages for policing and security, refuse collection, cleaning, assistance, and provide aid (Chirieleison, & Montrone 2013). Therefore, the results reflecting the economic impact of events provide a useful tool to estimate the influence of particular events on the economy, which may help developers and local politicians in justifying the use of public funds by citing the economic benefits for the community (Dwyer et al., 2005). Furthermore, the findings from Patience Machisa et al. (2018) and Gozini and L.A. Tseane-Gumbi (2017), found that residents had mixed views concerning the event, referred to as a waste of public money which should be spent on other things.

2.6 Socio-Demographics Differences in Economic Impacts

Socio-demographic variables were found to have a significant influence on residents' perceptions on the impact of events or mega-events that included the respondents' marital status, level of education, income earned, employment status, duration of the event, level of residents' involvement, attendance, and the perceived beneficiaries of the event (N. Gozini and L.A. Tseane-Gumbi 2017); Atçi et al., 2016) and Ritchie Brent et al., 2009). According to Negruşa, A. et al. (2016), the perceptions surrounding the economic effects of the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) were perceived similarly by all participants, regardless of their demographic characteristics or degree of loyalty. Further, the residents attending the TIFF for escapism, socialisation, and family togetherness perceived the festival's economic impact as being the most significant. Similarly, Ritchie Brent et al. (2009) suggested that single (unmarried) respondents were more likely to perceive negative impacts and transport issues, including the positive economic impacts than those who were married. In a separate study by Slabbert, Elmarie & Viviers, Pierre-Andre (2011), they concluded that demographic factors such as gender, qualification and occupation were not significant factors in influencing positive economic impacts, negative community impacts, positive community impacts, community opportunities and tourism impacts resulting from the festival on the community. Instead, the influencing factors included the number of times attended and the level of interest.

3. Methodology of Study

3.1 Sample selection

In this study, the sample population consisted of individuals who visited two celebration locations. A convenience sampling technique was employed in which a survey was

conducted via a self-administered face-to-face approach. A questionnaire was created in English to gather public perceptions of the events' economic impact and information on respondents' demographic profile. A total of 1,592 usable questionnaires were collected from both events.

3.2 *Questionnaire Design*

All questions or variables in the questionnaire were adapted from other surveys or studies (Gerda Lill, 2015; Prayag G. Alders T. 2012; Sandy C. Chen, 2011; Wang Yanli, 2015; Laurentina et al., 2015; Atçı, Dilek et al., 2016; Stephen, 2015; Üngüren E., 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Zhou, Y., & Ap, J., 2009; Ben Janeczko, Ben et al., 2002). Given the reliability of the questionnaires from previous studies, it was decided that pilot testing was not required. The questionnaire was split into three sections. The first section sought basic information from the survey respondents; a total of seven questions referring to gender, age, marital status, the extent of education, occupation, monthly gross income, and place of residence. The second section asks about the survey respondents' awareness and their level of participation or involvement in the event. The third section sought information on the level of agreement towards the economic impacts of the Malaysia Day and Governor's birthday celebrations comprising 14 questions. A five-point Likert scale was used for this part of the questionnaire.

3.3 *Survey Method*

Given limitations associated with time, resources, and the survey respondents' motivation, this study employed convenience sampling. This consisted of 11 enumerators for the Sarawak Governor's birthday celebration held in Kuching (9th September 2017) and a further ten enumerators for the Malaysia Day celebration held in Sibü (11th September) in the same year. The enumerators were graduates with minimum Diploma qualification. Before the survey was conducted, the enumerators were taught how to understand the questionnaire, approach and select respondents, ask questions on the variables and how to exit/end the interviews. They were also instructed how to ask the person if he/she was interested in participating in the survey. If the answer was "no", the interviewers were instructed to approach the next person and ask the same question until an individual agreed to participate in the survey. Once agreeing, the purpose of the study was explained to the participant in detail before conducting the interview using the structured survey instrument. The interviewer asked each question, and the response was recorded (or tick) in the questionnaire. During the interview process, all researchers were present to help guide and supervise the interview sessions, provide support, and ensure the reliability of the data collected.

3.4 *Data Analysis*

The completed questionnaires were validated and analysed using IBM SPSS version 19. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were carried out to examine whether the identified variables satisfied the research objectives. The output from SPSS was then reprocessed using Microsoft Excel (2013) to generate a detailed and presentation of the results.

4. Result

This study covered two major state events celebrated in 2017 by the Sarawak State Government and organised by the State Protocol and Public Relations Unit (Unit Protokol dan Perhubungan Awam Negeri) of the Sarawak Chief Minister’s Office; the Governor’s birthday (Tuan Yang Terutama Yang di-Pertua Negeri’s Birthday) celebrated on 9th September in Kuching and Malaysia Day (Hari Malaysia) celebrated in Sibu on 16th September.

4.1 Demography

The respondents' demographic characteristics included gender, age, education level, ethnic, occupation, and places of residence, as presented in Table 1

Demographic Details	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	796	50.00
Female	796	50.00
Ethnic	Frequency	%
Malays	557	35
Chinese	330	20.7
Ibans	302	19
Melanau	244	15.3
Bidayuh	102	6.4
Orang Ulu	27	1.7
Others	30	1.9
Education Level	Frequency	%
Primary	88	5.5
Secondary	672	42.2
Certificate	191	12
Diploma	293	18.4
Bachelor’s degree	280	17.6
Master’s Degree	62	3.9
PhDs	6	0.4

Age	Frequency	%
13-15 years old	123	7.7
16-25 years old	388	24.4
26-35 years old	495	31.1
36-45 years old	186	11.7
46 -55 years old	309	19.4
56-65 years old	73	4.6
Above 65 years old	18	1.1
Occupation	Frequency	%
Students	347	21.8
Public Sector	474	29.8
Private Sector	395	24.8
Self-employed	148	9.3
Unemployed	189	11.9
Retirees	38	2.4
Place of Residence	Frequency	%
Sibu	788	49.5
Kuching	412	25.9
Mukah	72	4.5
Miri	59	3.7
Sarikei	46	2.9
Samarahan	45	2.8
Other parts of Sarawak	118	7.4
West Malaysia	48	3
Foreigners	5	0.3

Table 1: Profile of the respondents

A total of 1,592 usable questionnaires were obtained for both events; 1,544 obtained via face-to-face interviews, and 48 obtained via online surveys. There was an equal ratio of male to female respondents. The respondents aged between 26 and 35 years made up the largest proportion (31.1%), followed by those aged between 16 and 25 years (24.4%), those aged between 46 and 55 years (19.4%), aged between 36 and 45 years (11.7%), those aged

between 13 and 15 years (7.7%), those between 56 and 65 years (4.6%) and the remaining 1.1% aged 65 years and above. Regarding race, Malays represented the largest proportion (35.0%), followed by Chinese (20.6%), Ibans (19.0%), the Melanau's (15.3%), Bidayuhs (6.5%), the Orang Ulus (1.7%) and other races (1.9%). This breakdown was possibly due to the concentration pattern of respondents living within the event venues' vicinity. The education background of respondents ranged from Primary to PhD levels. The Secondary School level formed the largest proportion (42.3%), followed by Diploma holders (18.4%), Bachelor Degree holders (17.6%), Certificate holders (12.0%), Primary School level (5.5%), Master's Degree (3.9%), and PhD (0.4 %). The respondents represented various working categories with most from the Public Sector (29.8%), followed by the Private Sector (24.7%), Students (21.7%), Unemployed (11.9%), Entrepreneurs or Self-employed (9.3%) and Retirees (2.4%). The working pattern of the participants could also be due to those taking advantage of the opportunity to relax and enjoy both public holidays. In addition, the higher responses from working-class participants could also be seen as the 'norm' given they tended to be more knowledgeable and exposed to this type of experience; hence more willing to be interviewed. The respondents' location [recidence] ranged from Sarawak, Sabah, West Malaysia, and others. Those residing in Sibu made up the largest proportion (49.4%), followed by Kuching (25.9%), Mukah (4.3%), Miri (3.6%), Sarikei (2.8%), Samarahan (2.7%), other parts of Sarawak (7.2%), West Malaysia (2.9%), and others (0.1%).

4.2 Perception on the Impacts of the Event

The respondents' perceptions on the economic impact of the event were assessed using a five-point Likert scale: 1) Strongly Agree, 2) Agree, 3) Neutral, 4) Disagree and 5) Strongly Disagree. To ensure a balance [fairness] and avoid overzealous respondents from over-indulging in providing answers, some of the questions were phrased with a negative tone. The answers later were reverted positively to be consistent with other positive-toned questions in the overall responses. The scores related to the criteria in signifying the economic impact, 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' scales were then summed to assess the overall positive perceptions of the impacts or level of satisfaction of the respondents toward the event organised by the state agency.

4.3 Economic Impacts

The economic impacts of the events within the scope of this study were employment opportunities, trade, and business opportunities. The perceptions of respondents on the above criteria are depicted in Table 2.

Variables	Perception of economic impacts					
	Strongly Agree (A)	Agree (B)	Total Agree (A+B)	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Provide temporary job opportunities	36.43%	47.36%	83.79%	12.31%	3.58%	0.31%
Support local trade	30.90%	52.64%	83.54%	14.82%	1.57%	0.06%
Revive local economy	23.18%	59.42%	82.60%	13.57%	3.64%	0.19%
Increasing in hotel occupancy rate	38.44%	43.97%	82.41%	13.44%	3.83%	0.31%
Provide new area of employment	22.17%	54.46%	76.63%	15.70%	6.78%	0.88%
Provide permanent job opportunities	7.04%	36.24%	43.28%	28.45%	23.43%	4.84%

Variables	Perception of economic impacts					
	Strongly Agree (A)	Agree (B)	Total Agree (A+B)	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The event will lead to extended shopping hours in the event area	7.85%	25.63%	33.48%	22.24%	36.31%	7.98%
I feel that the use of public funds in support of the event is acceptable	16.9%	41.96%	58.86%	17.4%	15.45%	8.29%
Overall	23.72%	45.67%	69.39%	17.22%	11.31%	2.08%

Table 2. Perception of economic impacts

The overall scores as presented in the table of the respondents' perceptions regarding the economic impacts resulting from the events were 23.72% "Strongly Agree", 45.67% "Agree", 17.22% "Neutral", 11.31% "Disagree" and 2.08% "Strongly Disagree". The total of the perception "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" (69.39%) was compared to (11.39%) from "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree" indicating that the events organised were beneficial to the public economically. The respondents' perception of the event having an economic impact was positive with a score of more than 50% for "Strongly Agree" and "Agree".

Any total scores below 50% were considered a negative perception. The positively perceived criteria were for the provision of temporary job opportunities with a score of 83.79%, support local trade scores (83.54%), reviving local economy (82.6%), increasing hotel occupancy rate (82.41%), and providing a new area of employment (76.63%). In contrast, the negatively perceived scores related to providing permanent job opportunities (43.28%) and the extension of shopping hours in the host area (33.48%). Approximately 36.43% of respondents answered that they "Strongly Agree" that the economic impact of the event would provide temporary job opportunities, while (47.35%) "Agree", (12.31%) remained "Neutral", (3.58%) "Disagree" and (0.31%) "Strongly Disagree". In supporting the local trade, (30.90%) "Strongly Agree" that the event has an economic impact, (52.64%) "Agree", (14.82%) "Neutral", (1.57%) "Disagree" and (0.06%) "Strongly Disagree". The majority of respondents perceived that the event held by government agencies could help to revive the local economy, (23.18%) "Strongly Agree" and (59.42%) "Agree", representing (82.60%) of respondents agreeing that the event provides a positive economic impact to the host location. Of the remaining respondents, (13.57%) were neutral, (3.64%) "Disagree" and (0.19%) "Strongly Disagree". Likewise, the event's positive economic impact by increasing the hotel occupancy rate in total was (82.41%). Those who perceived this positively based on the criteria was (38.44%) "Strongly Agree" and (43.97%) "Agree", (13.44%) were neutral while (3.83%) "Disagree" and (0.19%) "Strongly Disagree".

Besides providing temporary employment, the event in providing a new area of employment, (76.63%) perceived it positively, with (22.17%) "Strongly Agree" and (54.46%) "Agree". Those who answered neutrally, (15.7%), "Disagree", (6.78 %) and (0.88%) who "Strongly Disagree". Meanwhile, (58.86%) of respondents agreed with the statement "I feel that the use of public funds in support of the event is acceptable". Despite having many positive economic impacts, the events did not have strong support in providing permanent employment opportunities. For instance, only (43.28%) of respondents perceived this positively, showing (7.04%) who "Strongly Agree" and (36.24%) who "Agree" that the event would provide permanent job opportunities. Around (28.45%) of respondents perceived it neutrally, (23.43%) "Disagree" and with (4.84%) who "Strongly Disagree". Even though large crowds attended the event, the respondents perceived that the event would not extend the shopping hours in the surrounding areas. Here, (33.48%) perceived it

positively where only (7.85%) “Strongly Agree” and (25.63%) “Agree” while (44.29%) “disagree” and (22.24%) were “neutral” in their perception.

5. Conclusion

The findings from the study indicated that the events organised by government agencies have a positive economic impact in providing temporary job opportunities, supporting local trade, reviving the local economy, increasing hotel occupancy rate, and providing a new area of employment. The public also perceived that the spending on government-funded events was acceptable and was wasting public funds. However, it does not indicate a strong impact in other areas, such as providing permanent job opportunities and the extension of shopping hours in the event area. Lastly, since the study was only conducted in Sarawak's two major towns, it is recommended that similar studies be undertaken in other major towns throughout Sarawak to obtain conclusive findings.

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