

# Research Report

## Arts Community Resilience in Malaysia during the Time of COVID-19: Five Arts Centre's Open House Initiative

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Published online: 30 September 2024

**To cite this article:** Ali Alasri and Simon Soon. 2024. Arts community resilience in Malaysia during the time of COVID-19: Five Arts Centre's Open House Initiative. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 23: 112–124. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2024.23.10>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2024.23.10>

### ABSTRACT

*The intrusion of COVID-19 in Malaysia had resulted in the disruption of many art projects for the whole year of 2020. Due to the country's countermeasures to combat the disease's ongoing spread, several art groups and art projects were facing mass postponements, cancellations, and uncertainty—arts communities were vulnerable to economic losses, social and environmental limitations during the volatile period. However, there were few art groups that managed to adapt their practices and work around the pandemic constraints they've encountered. Five Arts Centre arts collective was sampled and interviewed for this year-long study which looks at the preliminary impacts and responses of COVID-19 on the arts communities in Kuala Lumpur. The results indicate Malaysian arts communities were able to remain resilient against the pandemic mostly due to their social connectedness across the arts practitioners and institutions within the arts ecosystem. Added with their intuitive instrumentalisation of existing resources to meet the environmental limitations that the COVID-19 presented. The research findings are analysed through the utilisation of an adapted resilience framework to help explain the sampled art groups' experiences through the pandemic period.*

**Keywords:** *resilience, art communities, vulnerability, adaptive capacities, COVID-19*

### INTRODUCTION

Like many cultural organisations in Malaysia, Five Arts Centre (FAC)'s experience during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic has not entirely been a smooth one. This essay follows FAC's journey in contemplating the impact of COVID-19 and the collective's motivations behind initiating the Open House initiative to support others in the arts even as the organisation was beset by many challenges of its own. The essay begins with a brief overview of FAC's history and influential junctures in their collective practice. Later, it will reflect upon FAC's experience in having to respond to pandemic limitations and challenges to sustain collective resilience and adapt their operations against mass sector closure. Their adaptive capacities and resources will be discussed to consider the severity of COVID-19's impact and its implication for their collective practice to better understand how arts organisations can envision a future beyond the pandemic.

This research acknowledges its limitations given the scope and context in which this study was carried out. More thorough and in-depth research needs to be done within the arts communities, their ecosystem and their resilience capacity. This study was written in the time of the pandemic itself, it was developed within an academic context and may not affect real policy change. However, surveys that were organised during the

first year of the pandemic period did result in support for the arts. Continued development of the support and optimisation of resource distribution mechanisms, needs to be researched and nurtured by change agents in the arts ecosystem, i.e., arts collectives, institutions, cultural funding organisations, tertiary education institutions, government agencies, etc. This research does not constitute a thorough community resilience study; a deeper and more contextualised research design is needed to be held by critical parties within the industry. This study only focused on one year of the pandemic period and the experiences of art groups and projects as samples of the arts communities. Further to this, the sample groups were mostly from Kuala Lumpur and do not represent all art communities' experiences in Malaysia.

## FAC AND THE OPEN HOUSE INITIATIVE



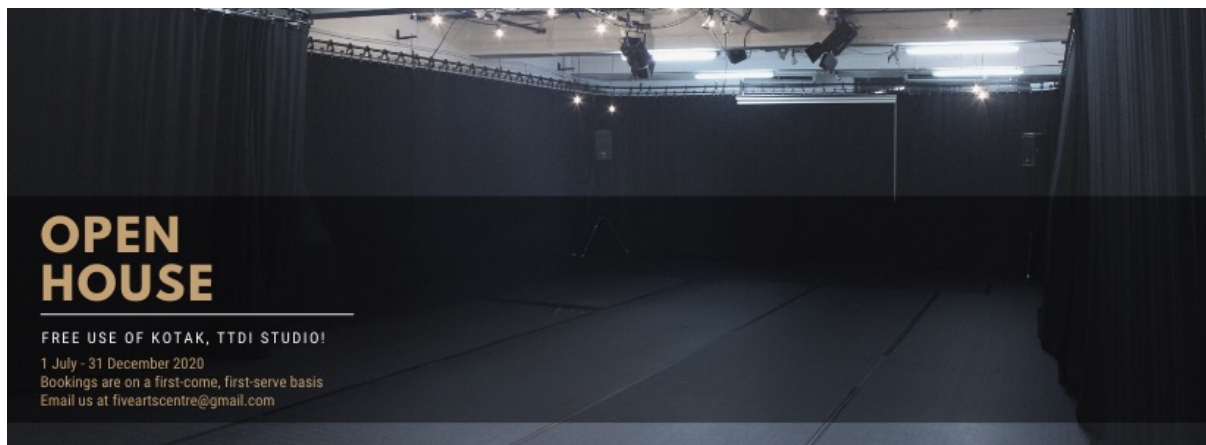
**Figure 1** Five Arts Centre logo.  
Source: Web image (FAC 2021a).

Since its formation in 1984, Five Arts Centre has been injecting contemporary social, cultural, and political issues into the contexts of exhibitions, projects, performances, and workshops that they held in diverse places, including theatres, galleries, schools, and on the streets. (Nur Hanim 2012)

FAC was founded by five established artists of different artistic disciplines, such as the likes of theatre directors Krishen Jit and Chin San Sooi, dancer-choreographer Marion D'Cruz, and later was joined by playwright K. S. Maniam and visual artist Redza Piyadasa. As Marion recalls, the meaning of “Five” in their collective’s name, is representative of their collective’s logo embodied by an open palm (Figure 1); the shared value amongst these five different practitioners, lies within their shared love and openness for the arts (Yong et al. 2016, 75–122). Their gathering seeded decades of alternative art practices within Kuala Lumpur. Consequent of its egalitarian nature, FAC active member Mark Teh, had informed that “open-endedness” had taken over all other “five” elements of the arts that FAC was initially identified for—from considering the collective based on five of its digits, to appreciating the possibilities they invite with an open palm.

The philosophical roots of Five Arts Centre (1984) began as a transcending notion of five genres—theatre, dance, visual, arts, and literature and a genre that was left “open-ended.” An experimental theatre-performance art, it is a loose collective, located in a shop lot in the affluent neighbourhood of Taman Tun Dr. Ismail (TTDI). The collective shifts and morphs the reading of what “Five Arts” equate to. Sometimes the “five” shifted to young people’s theatre and music. Adding to their identity is a mix of elements including research, artistic expression, education, collaborative creation, and advocacy. (Lee et al. 2021)

On 1 July 2020, FAC’s Open House initiative was announced on their social media, to last until 31 December 2020 (Figure 2). A pandemic initiative, FAC publicly offered their studio (Kotak) at TTDI to be booked by other artists who needed to use a physical space to develop their creative work, for free. The decision came with the recognition that artists were affected by the social isolation and financial constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. Artists and art groups that had applied to the initiative, were made up of theatre practitioners, playwrights, dancers, musicians, community engaged arts practitioners, and education advocacy groups. Applicants are encouraged to use the studio to develop artwork, not showcase them. Activities such



**Figure 2** Banner image of the Open House initiative launch.

Source: Facebook cover photo (FAC 2020a).

as rehearsals, small group meetings, discussions, screenings, and forums were encouraged, for a maximum of 30 people. The only criteria for the kind of event allowed to book the space for free, must not be charging others for payments to join their sessions at Kotak (Toh 2020). Keeping in line with COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), users of the space had to register themselves when entering the studio and after their session finishes, they are expected to clean the space to ensure safe use for future users, and community solidarity through exchanges of domestic services as opposed to money.

After running for almost a month, FAC decided to invite those who participate in the Open House initiative together for a sharing session at Kotak studio. The invitation was framed by FAC, as an opportunity for artists to find out about each other's work, stimulate potential collaborations. The sharing session saw performing arts groups utilising FAC's studio to run art workshops, theatre rehearsals and production meetings. The sharing sessions revealed several interesting responses by artists during the pandemic, given the opportunity to respond and explore using FAC's studio. As it highlighted the significance of having a physical site for practitioners to meet, discuss, create, experiment, fail, and recover, it had also juxtaposed the digital adaptive trends across the arts and positioned artistic and cultural practices at the centre of its pandemic support initiatives.

## FAC'S RESILIENT OUTCOME

### Pre-Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic was not planned by FAC for 2020, as the year prior they had been focusing on the development and touring of one of their member's theatre performances. *A Notional History* (2019) a documentary-lecture performance, was scheduled to tour to Saitama Triennial, in Japan, and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, in Belgium (FAC 2021b). Developed from late 2018 to 2019, the show has been performed in front of a live audience in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Yokohama. Produced by June Tan and directed by Mark Teh with a multidisciplinary ensemble of three performers and two technical team members. The eight-men production team was on a touring streak, as they restaged and rehearsed tirelessly back in 2018 leading up to its 2020s touring. The critically acclaimed play responds directly to Malaysia's history and considers the state narration of the nation's past and its shortcomings (Kumar 2023). Each time the production team toured, the ensemble had to constantly readapt their staging strategies according to the conditions of the designated performance spaces that were provided by each hosting country they toured. Nevertheless, all the time invested to rehearse the play prior to its touring was disregarded by the call for the closure of national borders globally following COVID-19's recognition as a global pandemic.

## During Crisis

It is a big blow of course. But as the work of creating, producing, managing, organising, coordinating, etc. gets disrupted, we are in complete solidarity with our friends in Saitama during this uncertain, precarious & changing situation. Our work in performance often requires a group of people to gather together in a room to give attention to a smaller group of people. To make something absent present. (Teh 2020a)

Following the cancellation of their tour, FAC collectively decided to halt their operations and allow them some time to process the pandemic crisis. In March, with the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and closure of spaces for public gatherings, these pandemic countermeasures further left their yearly studio bookings cancelled. Financially, FAC loses both potential performance fees and rental fees for the year. The major disruption brought by the state measures prompted FAC to discontinue their current operations and communicate with their funders, both Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD) and the Cultural Economic Development Agency (CENDANA), that they would need a timeline extension to meet their agreed deliverables. Although FAC had withdrawn its plans, its individual members continued developing their own artistic practices. June Tan had been in active conversations with activist group ReformARTsi, Mark Teh was working on online projects during months of the pandemic, and even Janet Pillai herself was occupied with Arts-ED's Community Engaged Arts (CEA) workshop (*Arts-ED* 2020; ReformARTsi 2020). It was as though FAC as a company had to pause their operations, but as individual artists in a collective, art goes on.

“How do we remain working? What kind of work have we been doing?” (Tan 2020). These were the questions that the FAC collective had been collectively pondering during the pandemic that had inspired them to eventually launch the Open House initiative. In the middle of the year, from June to July onwards, COVID-19 cases in Malaysia began to dwindle and Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) and the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) were enforced across specific areas. Cultural venues were allowed to open as long as they abide by COVID-19 SOPs (Birruntha 2020). The possibility of a pandemic-free environment felt near, and the collective realised that their studio was empty. To FAC, it felt timely for the arts to re-open. As Mark recalls, a member, June Tan, spontaneously suggested to the collective to allow for their studio to be open for public use, free of charge—as they had already received some pandemic support funds to help them mitigate their overhead costs throughout the pandemic period (Teh 2021).

It felt like the performing arts was the last to ‘resume’ operations and we were still stuck, feeling like we were going to remain closed, being in limbo. We just got tired of that feeling. (Toh 2020)

The announcement of the initiative was primarily promoted through the collective's social media and a press release from *The Star*, indicating the space was open for bookings by any artist or art groups for a maximum of 40 hours, for free. In launching the initiative, they managed to gather bookings from 20 arts groups, and all of a sudden, their studio bookings were full again. As they knew it was impossible for any art groups or companies to pay rental fees during the financially restrictive pandemic season, the initiative itself also felt like FAC's own #KitaJagaKita movement (we take care of us)—a parallel grassroots movement that was targeted to provide food, accommodation, counselling, and financial aid to the less fortunate during the pandemic (*kitajagakita.com* 2020).

Whilst the Open House initiative was ongoing, FAC recognised there were multiple levels of abuse in the arts. In the interview, Mark Teh recalled how a recently aired comedy show *Rumah No. 107* on Astro Warna, had included rape jokes and discrimination against women (Teoh 2021). This caught FAC's collective attention. In letting their space be shared for free with the public, some of the members discussed and considered what if these instances of abuse had occurred within the premise of FAC itself. It saw them developing the “Code of Conduct: Five Arts Centre & Kotak TTDI” (FAC 2020b). The document was derived from other examples of codes of conduct applied by performing arts organisations and was peer-reviewed by FAC members who had knowledge of advocacy and activism. On 22 July 2020, the FAC three-page document was emailed out to all Open House initiative guests—those who had booked FAC's Kotak throughout the initiative's period. The newly developed code of conduct focused on discrimination, harassment, workplace bullying and FAC's own complaint procedures, should any aforementioned instances occur within FAC's premises. In time, the document was later adapted by local filmmakers in response to the insensitive fiasco aired by Astro (Chua 2021).

On 12 August 2020, an invitation to gather for an impromptu meeting was given out by FAC to those who had participated in the Open House initiative. The meeting, set on 25 August 2020, 6–8 pm, at Kotak, saw 13 confirmed art group attendees, including the researcher. Prior to the sharing session itself, FAC had also provided a rough sequence to facilitate the agenda of the evening session. With snacks and drinks provided, the email invitation also prompted the invitees who could attend, to prepare a 6-minute presentation of the work the artists and groups have been working on in Kotak (FAC 2020c).

The session began with a brief introduction by June Tan to welcome everyone. In a sentence, she hinted at the thought process behind FAC's decision to organise the mini-initiative, "We have a space, we know it can be rented, why don't we put it up?" She further elaborated that part of the importance of the Open House initiative is that it reminds the collective that money isn't the only currency in the arts and that the arts are derived from human relationships with one another (Tan 2020).

The presentations that followed indicated the importance of having a site for practice across multiple artistic disciplines. Two notable groups from the first half of the sharing had emerged parallel to the pandemic, such as the likes of the Tulis Group and Panas Panas Theatre. The Tulis Group, established in 2019, was made up of emerging playwrights who needed to develop a collaborative space to write and brainstorm together, the objective of the group was to help each member complete their scripts and showcase a stage reading with the public to further develop and promote their writing. Not expecting the pandemic, the group had to work online and postpone their stage readings. The Open House initiative, gave the group the opportunity to organise their stage readings physically. Panas Panas Theatre was a theatre company established during the pandemic, they managed to organise monthly Zoom calls to carry out script readings online, via their programme Main Baca. They discovered that the physical sessions held in Kotak, albeit intimate, gave them very limited access to new readers, given their online readings saw participation from international participants and non-practitioners who shared similar interests in the art form.

Three dancers used the space to experiment and exercise their dance practices. Lee Ren Xin, a member of FAC, used the space to organise her dance project with her collaborators. Whereas, dancers Summer Gan and Alisya Razman who both had returned to Malaysia from studying overseas, had utilised Kotak to explore each other's body of work. Moving after, was presenter Calvin Tan from Education Advocacy Group. Calvin was once a fellow at Teach for Malaysia, and with his network of collaborators, they held Education Advocacy Group meetings, to discuss the ramification of COVID-19 and the lockdown towards children's education in schools. Right after, it was the researcher's presentation on Arts-ED's CEA workshop and how the studio space hosted the planning phase of the programme (*Arts-ED* 2020). The last presenter was visual artist Rupa Subramaniam, her sharing highlighted that the MCO had significantly challenged her work as an artist. To her, it isn't as simple as having an idea and putting it online.

We have to acknowledge that online space isn't the same as theatre space, there's a difference between online space and physical space. When I stand here in front of you, I can make a connection with each one of you, therefore, I command your attention, and therefore, when I walk towards you, you feel it in your body. (Subramaniam 2020)

Rupa further elaborates that there is a lot of preparation involved when going to a physical space, via appearance and clothing, transportation, and confirmation of location, whereas online, it may not necessarily require the aforementioned preparations, thus resulting in the lack of mental preparation given to the engagement brought by online meetings. She even goes further to argue that one can't actually see the online space, it is a virtual space. Even though most art exhibitions are resorting to going online during the pandemic, there were some of her collaborators still mentioned "there's something missing in this whole picture" (Subramaniam 2020). The sharing session closed with a brief closing speech by Mark Teh. He began by thanking everyone who participated in the sharing session. Attendees had shared personal artistic concerns to considering their work within a larger community. He added that FAC had made a conscious decision to not do any work for the rest of the pandemic year, to cautiously take the time to reflect and pause. FAC also noted that despite the lockdown, there were more performances, festivals, exhibitions, music, and more people in the arts. Hence, it seemed pertinent for them to share their studio and help other artists who needed space to "think" and "collaborate" (Teh 2020b).

## Post-Crisis

Despite FAC's initiative to provide a kind of shelter for the arts in Kuala Lumpur, the COVID-19 crisis did not subside nor did the challenges faced by the collective, as the third wave of the pandemic takes centre stage in the last quarter of 2020.

Due to the triple-digit spikes in COVID-19 cases over the last 5 days, we are not taking any further bookings for the rest of October 2020 to ensure the health, safety and well-being of everyone. We will monitor the situation closely and will provide updates on when we'll be taking bookings again for the free use of Kotak TTDI. (FAC 2020d)

Following the third wave of the COVID-19 crisis from Sabah, the growing cases caused the government to further announce the extension for the CMCO in Kuala Lumpur areas. In Klang Valley, the news sprouted confusion amongst arts venues and companies that had planned live performances for the late quarter of the year. It resulted in another wave of postponement, cancellation, and disruption for the arts community (Toh and Maganathan 2020). Consequently, FAC suspended their Open House initiative. FAC faced continued disruption as during the researcher's interview with Mark Teh, he informed that FAC had received a notice that their lease to the TTDI shop lot will not be renewed by their landlord.

After 23 years, they will be required to leave their collective home. FAC has a prudent financial plan, and as part of the collective practice, they have established a financial model that looks to preserve enough funds to cover at least two years of their operation for the future. Members also had their personal jobs and were open to contributing to the collective's funds. Thus, it wasn't a matter of affording to continue to pay rent, but it was the landlord's own decision to sell the property to a higher buyer in light of the economic constraints the landlord faced. This mismatch of needs officially ushered FAC's exit from the TTDI shop lot. A meeting was held amongst the collective to discuss the impending loss of their physical space. In the collective meeting, a question was put out to the members: "What kind of space do we need?" For the older members, they felt the need to have an office space to store their files and production equipment and materials. Other members felt a possibility for the collective to scale down and just rent a few office rooms, rather than the current shop lot they had. Yet, there were also members who argued that they can work from home. The older members iterated that the loss of their physical space would also translate to the loss of having an organic space to collectively create (Teh 2021).



Figure 3 Poster of FAC's *Oppy & Professor Communitas* (2021).

Source: Instagram photo (FAC 2021c).



**Figure 4** FAC members congregating virtually on Zoom.

Source: Instagram photo (FAC 2021d).

The more abstract thing of having a space that can be used for brainstorming, meeting, rehearsal, experimenting, borak, lepak...that is super important, and if you don't have the ability to say "Hey, let's call people over! Let's try something out! Let's whatever..." then you begin to lose something lah! (Teh 2021)

Amidst the new challenge, it was also an opportunity for FAC to see themselves moving into a new "home." Before FAC moves out, their landlord had allowed them to operate on a monthly basis until the landlord had managed to confirm a buyer for the shop lot. In April 2021, a FAC theatre production was staged within their TTDI shop lot, marking the last performance in Kotak. The work was developed with a past collaborator of theirs from the late 80s, playwright Leow Puay Tin. *Oppy & Professor Communitas* (2021), was an online performance that officially opened its doors to the public, virtually through CloudTheatre (Figure 3).

Following 5 May 2021, FAC in their Instagram handle, posted an image of all 14 members meeting virtually (Figure 4), each one smiling. The Instagram post's caption was titled "FACING CHALLENGES & CHANGES" and within the post, FAC had indicated their transition as a collective.

Hi. We hope you've been keeping as well and safe as possible during this difficult, tumultuous year. Like all of you, we continue to navigate the unpredictable waves brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic individually and collectively - struggling and working through cancellations and postponements, anxieties and vulnerabilities, social distancing and societal digitalisation, false dawns and failures. We've missed gathering with people at performances. The empathy, telepathy and also sense of difference that is ignited between audiences and performers sharing a time and space together. We've missed being present with you. And yet, as COVID-19 infections escalate again in Malaysia, we know it is unsafe to gather at the moment. Until we are able to gather together again, please stay safe everyone. We're reminded that community and *communitas* - with all the complexity they entail - are at the centre of our work. You are receiving this message because you are connected to some, one, or all of us, either personally or professionally. We wanted to let you know that Five Arts Centre is



undergoing some changes, and this includes looking for a new home after 23 years in Taman Tun Dr Ismail. This is a little sad, but also quite exciting - it poses the challenge of learning, unlearning and relearning again to us. We'd love to renew our friendship with you as we begin this new chapter. (FAC 2021d)

The unforeseen disruptions brought by the pandemic had caused FAC to lose its physical asset, Kotak studio and the collective's office space. The Open House initiative was the last major initiative for the shop lot, aside from being featured digitally in the last play staged virtually. Having said goodbye to their home, the collective was now in a position to either falter or preserve their collective artistic practices since 1984. When push comes to shove, in 2022, FAC managed were fortunate to find a new space to locate the collective's operations, at a level nine lot in GMBB mall, situated at Jalan Robertson, Kuala Lumpur. Within the context of GMBB mall, they managed to officiate the new space with their original play that could not tour in 2020, a play about the nation's history, restaged.

### **FAC'S ADAPTIVE CAPACITIES AND RESOURCE ROBUSTNESS**

FAC's response to the pandemic can be understood in relation to Longstaff et al.'s (2010) notion of adaptive capacities in communities via institutional memory, innovative learning and connectedness. FAC's resilience, albeit the major infrastructural challenges faced, was consequent of their utilisation of the existing resources they have, via their private and government funds, their physical studio (Kotak), and their network of members and collaborators. FAC's adaptive responses to overcome the volatile adversities presented by the pandemic crisis were made possible given the privileged resources they had. Yet, the prolonged adversity posed by the pandemic had resulted in the collective having to cancel their pandemic initiative, relocate their physical headquarters, and re-examine their collective practices. Although the following adaptive capacity attribute is discussed separately, each of the attributes are interrelated and its synergy was integral in allowing FAC to adapt through the pandemic crisis.

#### **Institutional Memory**

As Longstaff et al. (2010) points out, institutional memory is "the accumulation of experiences shared by the community throughout their known existence." FAC's collective ability to absorb and adapt through COVID-19's varying adversities was made possible given the dense history and shared experience inherent in FAC members. For one, they did not necessarily face major economic risks given their two-year "future" financial planning they have developed as their company's financial practice. The collective financial strategy practised since their founding years, gave them the confidence to face economic adversity. It also adds to FAC's repertoire to be able to access varied financial resources from other sources (YSD and CENDANA). This has allowed them room to sustain their physical infrastructures and absorb production losses, despite sector closure. Aside from financial preparedness, their ability to pivot their studio space as a resource to support artists during the pandemic via the Open House initiative comes with years of experience supporting other artists and collaborators that they have worked with in the past.

Yeah, but I guess the question is which organisation opens the space up for free. So it's like, you know, it's like a little kita-jaga-kita kind of initiative on our side, you know, like, we have space that was not used, and, you know, artists will know what to do with space if space is provided. In a way, we've always been sharing space. Also, for us, it's not like anything new, to be honest, I don't feel like we learn new things about sharing space, but maybe it just reinforces that space is important. (Teh 2021)

The decision to offer their studio space for free to the public was cognizant of their past experience of running public workshops, organising arts festivals and public talks. In having to cancel their tour and losing a performative space themselves, the collective move to provide venue support to artist communities was not new to them.

It's a space for people to meet, to play, to f\*ck around, you know, to have chats, do all that sort of stuff. Of course, in this current climate, it becomes super important! (Teh 2021)



Nevertheless, the “climate” had somewhat overridden the collective’s pandemic efforts, as they found themselves withdrawing their Open House initiative, and also having to find a new space to “home” their collective given their landlord’s economic constraints. This prompted several reflecting and unlearning on the collective behalf, having to re-examine what the TTDI shop lot meant to them and their artistic practices. The re-examining has allowed them to recall on how they’ve obtained the studio, as the shop lot was recommended by their past funding partners ASTRO—the collective didn’t necessarily find the place. The collective reflection of their founding in the past, gave them a kind of critical distance to the nostalgia of space. Yet, it took them more than a year to eventually secure a working space and collectively move forward post-pandemic.

### **Innovative Learning**

Like I said, the main rationale was really spontaneity, responding to the situation and recognizing that, you know, some of our artist friends were struggling with not having space to work which also led to some kind of sense of like, you know, personal but also societal depression, right? (Teh 2021)

The collective indicated high levels of innovative learning given their ability to remain cognizant of the pandemic situation, to take careful decisions to negotiate the pandemic struggles they encountered. The implementation of their pandemic initiatives and responses was driven by the kind of artistic questions that the collective was comprehending amidst the COVID-19 turmoil.

The role of the artist in COVID-19, instead of moving online, on a practical level, is to pay attention deeply to how COVID-19 is affecting ourselves, society and the social function of art. Quoting Rustam Barucha... “In a way I have to put my theory away as it interrupts the practice,” and it’s in the “making” is where we figure it out. (Teh 2021)

FAC’s experience of the COVID-19 impacts was mostly experienced through the loss of space, whether material space for performance or the more abstract space where artists may “figure it out.” A practice-based concern as opposed to a production one. The Open House initiative, its sharing session, and FAC’s code of conduct were reflective of the kind of practice-based concerns the collective face as artists. Hence, even when their Open House initiative was launched mid-pandemic, FAC initiated it having learnt and deployed the many COVID-19 SOPs developed during the period and applying these SOPs during the Open House initiative. This demonstrates FAC’s collective ability to remain resilient throughout the pandemic period by deeply thinking about the impact of the pandemic period as artists and as a collective.

Specific to the arts, we’re all going through different degrees of life or different levels of grief. Right, in the sense of like, you know, loss of projects for some people, for a lot of people loss of income, loss of direction, loss of their plans for the year or one and a half years or two years, right? And of course, loss of meaning, right, kind of like, people felt rudderless, right? (Teh 2021)

### **Connectedness**

FAC managed to maintain a high level of connectedness amongst their collective members and also the wider arts communities, despite the pandemic constraints. Their access to resources and awareness of the COVID-19 mitigation plans allowed them to initiate a support effort for the arts communities. The capability for FAC to “open up” their space to the public was not free, it was made possible with the relationship with both of its funders YSD and CENDANA. Actively proposing the shift of their deliverables and funding plans for the year to their funders, not only bought time for them to comprehend the loss of their projects, but also to initiate new projects that were more relevant to the needs of the community.

There’s the Five Arts as a collective of people and a larger pool of community members (Friends of Five Arts) that includes people like you (the researcher), but then there’s also the physical space, right? So the physical space is like a very real thing. (Teh 2021)

“Space” is seen as an integral component in ensuring social connectedness amongst the arts communities, if not collective. It allows artists to meet, connect and explore creative opportunities. FAC’s connectedness to the art communities can be read from the Open House initiative and its sharing session. For playwrights and actors, the pandemic was a time that allowed them to integrate their practices online. For theatre performers and dancers who did not share the same privilege, the Open House initiative was a physical haven to shelter their practices. For the more education-oriented groups, the studio became a place to convene and organise research. These artistic congregations in the face of the pandemic reinforce the importance of “space” as a catalyst to harness social support systems.

When the spatial dimension of our lives is so constricted, then the possibility of sharing it or opening it kind of allows other people to kind of benefit from it lah, you know, it’s the whole like, parasite, right? The way people get recharged, basically, you know, it’s like a multi-extension plug. (Teh 2021)

### **Resource Robustness**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts have severely impacted FAC’s environmental resources. It began with the loss of their opportunities to perform overseas, to be unable to operate their production and business locally due to sector closure, to finally having to move out from their collective’s 23-year-old home. Despite the pandemic impacts encountered by the pandemic, FAC have managed to instrumentalise their economic and social resources to help them remain resilient. Economically, FAC had a very diverse and redundant economic resource. Firstly, FAC had internal financial mechanisms that future-proof their operations for two years. Second, due to their interorganisational credibility, they are able to secure funding from varied network of cultural institutions. Lastly, each of the collective members was not reliant on the collective’s company to generate profit, as each of the members is employed within their own personal careers. The social resources which FAC has amongst its members, arts communities, and cultural institutions, had placed the collective as a kind of intermediary or mediator of artistic resources. The ability to rearrange their agreements with funders, and re-purpose their physical infrastructure to support the arts communities, came with being able to activate their diverse network. Although the pandemic disruption had caused the cancellation of their initiatives and loss of studio space, FAC’s ability to remain resilient over time had enabled them to leverage their social and economic resources to find themselves a new space at GMBB mall.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has illustrated the art communities’ experiences and resiliency amidst the volatile COVID-19 pandemic, having to negotiate with various Malaysian government mitigation plans to combat the virus. The study walked through a brief history of FAC as an arts collective, the context of their discipline, their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, FAC’s responses and resilience outcome. These state sanctions attempts and failures to combat COVID-19 had affected the FAC’s artistic directions from having to cancel their tour, to share their studio space for free, and finally finding themselves having to eventually move out from their collective’s 23-year-old home.

The abrupt impact of the pandemic was primarily felt by the art groups’ loss of environmental resources, via spaces of performances, studio spaces, and arts venues to conduct their artistic practices. This was heavily amplified by the state sanctions to gain control over the virus outbreak. From travel bans, movement control orders, business closures, social isolation, sanitary procedures and national emergency, these pandemic mitigation strategies had overbearing consequences for the arts communities. From FAC’s case study, it is seen that the arts communities faced fund limitations, cancellations, postponements, heightened digitisation, production uncertainty, disappointments, creative frustrations, and the need for artistic solidarity.

Despite the challenges presented, FAC was able to take a step back and strategically activate their physical infrastructure, social networks, and collective funds to aid artist communities. The collective’s Open House initiative is a response to having felt the cancellation of their collective plans was made possible given the diverse financial pool and collaborators connected to FAC throughout their years of existence. Their continued existence albeit the turbulent COVID-19 year indicates the resiliency of FAC collective, and the possibility to share this artistic wisdom among practitioners of the local arts ecosystem.

At the heart of it, the FAC’s ability to remain resilient throughout the pandemic period was their reliance on the social resource that was available. This study recognises the inherent social resources

demonstrated by the connectedness of the art group and their project sampled for this research as a core element in contributing to groups' resilience throughout the pandemic. This research believes in supporting artistic sites and programmes which promote friendship or circular model approaches within art community's stakeholders to ensure the arts ecosystem's resiliency in light of future crisis. It can be supporting initiatives as informal as Friends of Five Arts, or Anak Alam's concept of *setia kawan* (loyal friend), and even as practical as *zakat bakat* (donation of talents) based projects (Mohd Jayzuan 2022). The idea is to develop and strengthen social support systems across stakeholders of the arts ecosystem. Malaysia's arts and cultural sectors need to develop crisis response mechanisms to mitigate future sector crisis, such initiatives involve different stakeholders (artists, collectives, public, funders, government, etc.) tied to the arts communities are required to invest and take an active role in these responses—it must extend beyond project-based relationships to ensure sustained community resilience in the future.

The community resilience concepts applied for this study, albeit its limited usage, provides an alternative lens to comprehend COVID-19 influence on the arts. The utilisation of an adapted version of the community resilience theories for this study, suggests there is a potential and a need to apply resilience studies to the arts communities to better understand the inherent strengths and vulnerabilities of these groups, so as to ensure their long-term sustainability. However, this study is aware that a more comprehensive and inclusive approach is required to truly understand and leverage the local arts communities' resiliency. Extensive resilience studies for the arts would need involvement and support from policy makers, practitioners, and the public, from all across the countries' states, the absence of which will consistently result in a fragmented view of the local arts ecosystem.

What this study reveals are that the COVID-19 impacts on the Malaysian arts communities during the virus's first year in the country had inevitably changed the conditions of which the arts communities may mobilise their practices. Added with restrictive state countermeasures, the fluctuating period of the COVID-19 outbreak presented repeated unforeseen disruptions to the arts communities' production planning and initiatives. There were mass cancellations and postponements; few artists and arts groups continued to adapt their practice against the pandemic and managed to remain resilient throughout the restrictive year. This was made possible by the inherent connectedness that exists within the art communities' social capital, which was integral in ensuring the economic and environmental resources were utilised and distributed optimally across community members to meet the haphazard challenges presented by the pandemic. Thus, within the context of the existing short-term financial support for the arts, the study argues to also highlight the social and environmental support mechanism to inform a more holistic and long-term approach to supporting the Malaysian arts communities. The disregard of the contributing factors to the arts communities' inherent resiliency may result in the production of irrelevant state interventions, support mechanisms, resource wastage, and/or long-term deterioration of the arts ecosystem.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research project was funded by the Hubs for Good research programme initiated by British Council, Yayasan Sime Darby and Universiti Malaya (2018–2020).

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