"It's Okay to be Slow:" Witnessing the Articulation of Connected Practices by Creative Collectives in Indonesia and Malaysia

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Abstract

This article focuses on the everyday responses of the local creatives in dealing with the problematic single narrative of creative cities. Aiming to understand the everyday creative and media practices of individuals in the creative collectives that are situated in emerging creative cities in Southeast Asia, the research specifically addresses key contemporary debates within the field of urban media and communication studies. The article gives priority to the voices of the city dwellers from a bottom-up approach, looking at the material and embodied practices in their everyday life. Empirically, this article seeks the alternative voices raised by the members of selected creative collectives - four collectives in Bandung, Indonesia, and four others in George Town, Malaysia - in articulating the meaning of creativity, the media practices involved within, and the organic ways of organizing urban collectives. Drawing insights from the notion of articulation and media practice, and by employing both ethnographic and visual methodology approaches, in particular the use of the photo-documentation method, there are three key thematic findings elaborated here. These themes are (1) social settings in media-related practices, (2) material objects and sensitive affection, and (3) the labor of love. The ways in which these are discussed, using a combination of ethnographic vignettes and photo collages, foreground the importance of cultural identity articulation practiced by the creative collectives in both cities. Thus, the interlinkage between mediated experiences, spatial practices, and visual contexts is also a key significant aspect in the analysis of these bottom-up, organic urban creativities.

Keywords

creative collective; ethnography; media practice; urban creativity; visual method

Introduction

On one afternoon in the rainy season of 2017, the author was engaged in a lengthy conversation with Rani, the co-founder, and owner of Kineruku, an alternative library, café, and bookshop in Bandung, Indonesia. She enthusiastically told the author about the new changes happening in this collective. We met and talked one year before, at the very same place, and she can recall the way she told the author about the life journey of Kineruku since its establishment. On the second time we met, she proudly showed the author the new renovation of the discussion room in the backyard, some small changes in the menu of

its kitchen service, newly purchased items for their vintage shop, and most importantly, the involvement of more people as Kineruku's crews. All these happened in a particular corner of a recognized creative city, Bandung, renowned as part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network or UCCN under the category of City of Design (UNESCO, 2015).

The follow-up after this global recognition of Bandung by the UCCN shows a dominant discourse of creative cities that extends beyond the place itself, while the variety of creativity in the city is rarely investigated. The way this dominant view is talked about, inscribed into the city's policies and program, and

influencing creative practices in different domains, is explicit in the city's developments from day to day. However, for Rani, and many other members of the independent creative collectives in Bandung and other inscribed creative cities in Southeast Asia, the everyday creative practices – such as a detailed daily scene aforementioned – are very important and meaningful achievement for them, beyond the official policies, and program initiated by the state or the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in their cities.

The top-down, dominant discourse and its practices imposed by the local and national government, or international cultural agencies, are basically not the only way of doing creativity in the city (Gauntlett, 2018; Gu et al., 2020; Löfgren, 2007). The members of these collectives experience other ways of making creative products in the city, and share these more varied experiences with other collectives in Bandung and other cities in the region of Southeast Asia. These are the local actors, quietly engaging with alternative creative practices and dwelling in local communities in cities to which have been rebranded as creative cities – a policy and political economic drive that has pushed Bandung and other similar cities into a kind of urban revitalization formula. Alongside this dichotomy between the strong supporters and critics, there are other individuals in the city that avoid the either-or polarization. These individuals work together in a loose grouping, referred to here as creative collectives.

Many cities around the world draw on creativity, mainly following the formula proposed by Florida (2012) on creative class and global creativity index, building their cities using idealized place branding, with creativity as the main core of its brand, to boost the urban and national economy. Thus, the discourse of creative city becomes a global phenomenon whereby many city officials and urban planners design, plan and run their respective city to reach such a creative label within the interlinked global economy. Such a city branding approach can also be found in relation to heritage cities, with dominant discourses arising from various global cultural agencies, including UNESCO.

However, living and doing creative works in UNESCO-inscribed creative cities, such as Bandung in Indonesia and also George Town in Malaysia, are always a struggle for the independent creative collectives who have been dwelling in the city and working as the creatives beyond any official city program. Bandung and George Town are the main sites and become the focus of this research due to the ethnographic uniqueness articulated by the local creatives in responding to the cities' official efforts to be recognized internationally as a creative city or heritage city that incorporates creative-based programs respectively. These independent creative collectives become the counter culture to a Floridaian notion of creative class and creative city formula. The noisy discourse and, mostly, the top-down approaches and official main narrative of becoming a creative city are not something to be in line with the visions and the ways many creative communities live and work in their everyday life (Santos, 2020; Shin, 2020; Wu, 2020). This problematic social situation shows exactly the bigger picture that illustrates the importance of understanding everyday creative and media practices in creative cities, such as the ethnographic details mentioned earlier in the beginning of this introduction.

This article aims to understand the everyday creative and media practices of individuals in creative collectives that are situated in emerging UNESCO creative and heritage cities in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia. The research enriches academic discussions on media practice, everyday life, culture and the city, within the field of urban media and communication studies. This

article gives priority to the voices of the city dwellers from a bottom-up approach, looking at their material and embodied practices. Their voices, bodies and material conditions, as the local creatives in the city offer an alternative perspective than the top down, state-led and global strategic initiatives for the branding of Bandung and George Town as UNESCO-inscribed cities.

The key objective of the research is to foreground the idea that the alternative voices in creative cities matter, and in so doing, it should get more attention in both scholarly works and urban policies. Specifically, this research objective is addressed by tracing the impacts of this notion of creative city as a global phenomenon in localized contexts of the two studied cities in Southeast Asia, critically examining alternative voices within creative collectives in these local urban contexts. This article contextualizes the dominant discourses of creative city branding as shaping the urban space and the ways particular groups of city dwellers respond to such place branding to articulate their identities, their way of life. It is these individuals and their creative collectives who are often unnoticed within the official narratives, which form the focus of this research.

This article argues that alternative voices are an important aspect of the lived city, needing to be recognized and considered through the connected practices as an articulation of their cultural identities, particularly in Southeast Asian creative cities. This article proposes this argument by firstly discussing the interrelation of contemporary key debates within the field of urban media and communication and theoretical explanation on the notion of articulation, cultural identity and media practice. Then, after a brief elaboration of the research methods, this article discusses the key significant findings in elaborating the alternative voices in creative cities through a combination of ethnographic vignettes, critical

visual methodology in the form of photo-documentation, and theoretically-informed methodological reflections.

From Media in the City to Articulation and Cultural Identity: A Literature Review

Research on urban living in various geographical and cultural contexts is significant as global trends show that "the world continues to urbanize" and 55 percent of the world's population in 2018 live in urban areas; the figure is forecast to reach 68 percent by 2050 (UN-DESA, 2018). Beyond these general figures, communication becomes "a central dimension of modern and postmodern urbanity" while, at the same time, "the material, spatial and historical articulation of media in cities" are also prominent elements to understand the city as a "meaningful space, poly-sectoral composite, contested terrain and practiced routine" (Krajina & Stevenson, 2020, pp. 1-2). Under the umbrella term of urban media and communication, Krajina and Stevenson (2020) propose a dynamic, ongoing and holistic field of study, consisting of variants of research within and across media and the city, mediated city, media city, communicative city, urban communication and urban media studies.

Research on media, culture and the city in particular has various theoretical and methodological standpoints, including cultural representations or symbolic images of the city in the media (Georgiou, 2013; Highmore, 2005), referring to representations of cities. Others focus on a related aspect of urban communication (Aiello & Tosoni, 2016) and mediated urbanism (Ridell & Zeller, 2013), referring to urban culture as dependent upon processes of mediation. On the aspects of technology and digital infrastructure, there are studies on techno-social infrastructures and materialities of the city (Caldwell et al., 2016), referring to material histories of networked cities, for example through urban media archaeology (Mattern, 2015). Much of these

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studies have a macro or meso perspective, whether focusing on institutional levels or on policy and political economy, rather than exploring the variety of cultural, material and symbolic aspects of people living in cities.

As the city is "always multidimensional: material, symbolic, affective" (Krajina & Stevenson, 2020, p. 5) – or, in another context it is formulated that the city is constituted of the materials, the imaginaries (or, the visions) and the lived cultures (or, the social interactions and the symbolic meanings) – looking at the everyday practices of micro actors in cities is also important. This is because the practices of these micro actors contribute to the lived, the imagined as well as the material city. In this article, this is done by examining everyday creative and media practices of the collectives. Such everyday practices enable us to understand both the collectives and their experiences of the city, that is how they actively shape and reshape the city through their creative and media practices.

To do so, this article also combines such an understanding of studying the city in media/communication contexts with the notion of articulation. Hall (2019a) proposes the "theory of articulation" that is useful in approaching the meaning of identity articulation in this article. Before embarking to a further elaboration of this theory of articulation, it is important to note here that in this article the quotes that the author uses is taken from Hall's posthumously re-published collected essays, especially the two-volume books edited and contextualized further by David Morley (2019) entitled *Stuart Hall - Essential Essays*, and other relevant works written by either Hall's former students, colleagues, or critics. Hall begins his explanation of this theory as a "response to the problem of analyzing social formations" (Clarke, 2015, p. 276), arguing that overdetermination on formative structure – e.g., class, power – that leads to a unity of ideology and therefore positions

socio-cultural (and also political) subjects in a fixed manner should be questioned. To him, social formations are not defined by a given ideology, but constructed by many elements that, interestingly, are not always connected in a fixed situation. According to Hall (2019b):

> In England, the term [articulation] has a nice double meaning because 'articulate' means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of *language*-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry [truck]: a lorry where the front [cab] and back [trailer] can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all the time. (Hall, 2019b, pp. 234-235)

The use of articulation in this article substantially follows these two-meaning definitions. First, it means the way in which the informants "utter, to speak forth, to be articulate" to express their own 'voice' on various issues that matter to them. Second, articulation refers to the processes and conceptualization of connected practices these informants do in their everyday life under certain conditions, at particular periods in time: these linkages are connected, loosened and sometimes broken, as we shall see in the analytical sections. Furthermore, articulation is a rich concept to approach identity in the making. As Gray (2003) explains:

> Articulation is a useful way of thinking about both the complexity of contemporary societies and cultures and what it is like to inhabit them as a social subject. Developed by Laclau and elaborated by Stuart

Hall for cultural studies, it provides an anti-essentialist and anti-reductionist method of complicating the relationship between individual action (subjectivity) and the broader social (determining) structure. (Gray, 2003, p. 32)

How do articulations – both in the meaning of articulating voice and articulation of connected practices – relate to the construction of the informants' cultural identities in this research? The articulation processes in this research are interpreted through the ways the creative collectives and their members voice their subjective expressions, values and meaning-making productions in regard to media, spaces, and everyday practices. All these three aspects are the very site where identity – as part of social formations – can be traced as a site of analysis. Cultural identity is understood as an outcome of the interaction between individuals and their social contexts. The main focus here is on the interplay between self and society; the subjects are "formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds 'outside' and the identities which they offer" (Hall, 1992, p. 276). In other words, cultural identity is formed by a network of tensions: between individual and collective, local and global, sameness and difference. To make sense of these whole processes as the construction of cultural identity, then, the theory of articulation enables the analysis of creative collectives and their connected practices in the context of their cities.

Thus, the theoretical explanations of key concepts in this article – articulation and cultural identities – are also complemented with the practice theory in understanding media. In particular, the notion of media practice. In general, media practice derives from a question: what people actually *make of* and *do* with media? (Postill, 2010). This perspective shifts the questions from focusing on media technology or media platform and media text to the people and the way in which they do with media. Hobart (2014a) proposes an approach he calls media-related practice. The author agrees with Hobart's proposition since it is useful to study "situated practices" (Hobart, 2014a, p. 428), especially in understanding media as "assemblage of practices of production, distribution, engagement and use by different people in different situations" (Hobart, 2014b, p. 510). All these three notions become the theoretical framework on which this article relies upon, from media-related practice and articulation to cultural identity.

Methods

The research was conducted through two methodological approaches: ethnography (Bengtsson, 2014) and critical visual methodology (Heng, 2017; Rose, 2016). The latter was particularly in the form of a photo-documentation method (Rose, 2016). The field research was conducted in 2016 and 2017 in back-to-back strategy, then complemented with a continuation of remotely digital observation in 2018-2020 as part of the digital ethnographic method in this research. The field research took place in two creative cities in Southeast Asia, they are Bandung in Indonesia and George Town in Malaysia, focusing mainly on the everyday practices of the independent creative collectives in both cities. Bandung and George Town were selected as the main sites and the focus of this study not only due to both cities have successfully obtained the UNESCO recognition and become member cities of the Southeast Asian Creative Cities Network (SACCN), but also because of their rich empirical materials in terms of the people's responses toward the official narrative happened in their city.

In George Town, the studied creative collectives are (1) Pokothings that runs a wooden craft workshop, (2) Grafikdistrict Solutions that creates an open forum for young graphic designers and illustrators, (3) Weez

Concept (KIWE) that manages a handmade craft studio and accessories store, and (4) Hin Bus Depot that regularly organizes a pop-up independent market, art exhibitions and social gathering for creative collectives. In Bandung, the studied creative collectives are not located in one place like in George Town, but reside in their respective places. There are four studied creative collectives in Bandung: (1) Tobucil, a craft collective; (2) Kineruku, an alternative library, café, and open space; (3) Omuniuum, a support system for the independent music scene; and (4) Omnispace, an art collective.

There are several techniques used for collecting the data, ranging from ethnographic observation and interview (Gray, 2003), photo-documentation (Heng, 2017; Rose, 2016), to both field and digital observation on the informants' social media practice (Miller et al., 2016; Pink et al., 2016). In doing so, the collected data are also varied, dealing with multimodalities of empirical materials. These include recorded interviews, ethnographic field notes, digital photographs, and bookmarked and screenshot of the informants' social media posts, especially on Instagram. Analytically, the process follows the principle of "holistic contextualization" in ethnographic tradition (Miller et al., 2016) where all collected materials in this research support and dialogue with each other in the analytical process. The relation between the visible and the social (Rose, 2016, p. 328) is fully analyzed; the organization and categorization of the collected information in this study follows the ethnographic process once the saturated moment is achieved, i.e., when repeated information, a kind of social and cultural pattern, can be detected. The interpretation process itself is done in reflexive ways by re-visiting the different types of collected information: the verbal, the written and the visual materials. This process has become what Gray (2003, p. 147) calls "a process of continuous interpretation" in qualitative research. The presentation of the analyses is based on the very characteristic of this research itself, mixing the ethnographic written explanation and the "unorthodox forms of research dissemination" (Pink et al., 2016) by employing photographs to co-narrate the analyses. Both ethnographic vignettes and photo collages build the narrative of this article, combining the discussions on empirical findings with the methodological reflections.

Results

The main findings elaborated here deal with three key themes, these are social settings in media-related practices, material objects and sensitive affection, and the labor of love that will be discussed in the following subsections. The ways in which these findings are presented and elaborated in this article are intentionally written and structured as a cohesive ethnographic narrative in order to build the scholarly argument (Bengtsson, 2014; Gray, 2003) by narrating the variety of empirical materials as a combination of ethnographic vignettes (Harper, 2003), photo collages of the visual observation and photo-documentation method (Heng, 2017; Rose, 2016), and the elaborative written dialogue between the empirical, the conceptual and the theoretical aspects.

Social Settings in Media-Related Practices

Several in-depth conversational interviews between the author and Rani, the co-founder and owner of Kineruku, during the field research in Bandung were usually interrupted a few times by phone calls, greetings to guests she knew, calls from the staff in the kitchen, and questions by staff in the reception desk or their social media content management. Rani and her husband Budi, who co-organize this collective together, have an office on another level, but prefer to be on the same floor with all Kineruku's main activities.

Rani continued her story for a while until it was interrupted again by one of Kineruku's crew, asking for advice on creating

**Figure 1.
The Social Setting in Media Practice**

Source: photographs by the author and the image in the upper left corner is a screenshot of Kineruku's Instagram account, @kineruku, posted on 11th September 2017

an Instagram post (Figure 1). The sequential shots as shown above are documented stage by stage in the preparation-and-taking-shots; what is of note beyond the technical aspects is the social process. The making of a single Instagram post reiterated the importance of social settings in the everyday practices of all the studied creative collectives. Their media-related practices cannot be understood thoroughly without considering the way they engage with and build from the social relations among each other, and all aspects in their social settings. At this point, media-related practice has become the very site for investigating the "assemblage of practices of production, distribution, engagement and use by different people in different situations" (Hobart, 2014b, p. 510), here specifically on everyday creativities within the collectives.

In Tobucil, for example, the prominence of social settings in the daily practices of creating Instagram posts are also apparent. Having different types of collective's activities than Kineruku, the social settings in Tobucil are formed through the mix of activities and encounters of regular members, friends and acquaintances who stop by the place, and workshop with participants. The character of social media posts by Tobucil is a combination between pragmatic ways of using resources around them (e.g., garage as the shooting place, personal collection of vase or plants as ornamental properties, or friends, to help) and people's involvement in their social activities.

Speaking of Instagram, all informants speak in a similar pattern. They basically use the social media platform due to its popularity. Even though they have signed up for various platforms already, they tend to be more active in using Instagram in recent years. As one informant explains:

> We see that the characteristics of our targeted audiences are now in Instagram. Facebook is now as a mirror only. We use an app to forward any information we post in Instagram, so it would be automatically linked to Twitter, as well Facebook. We no longer use Facebook as our main social media. […] It means we won't be busy with comments. So, we can simply ignore all irrelevant comments in Instagram. In Facebook it's hard to avoid and ignore such comments. (Tarlen, 45, female [F], bookbinder, event programmer and co-founder)

Boit, a co-founder of another collective named Omuniuum, does the similar thing. All creative collectives tend to have these pragmatic tactics in the way they optimize the availability of social media platforms:

> We use many media, and now Instagram for the main, then link the contents to other social media.

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Figure 2.
The Assemblage of Practices
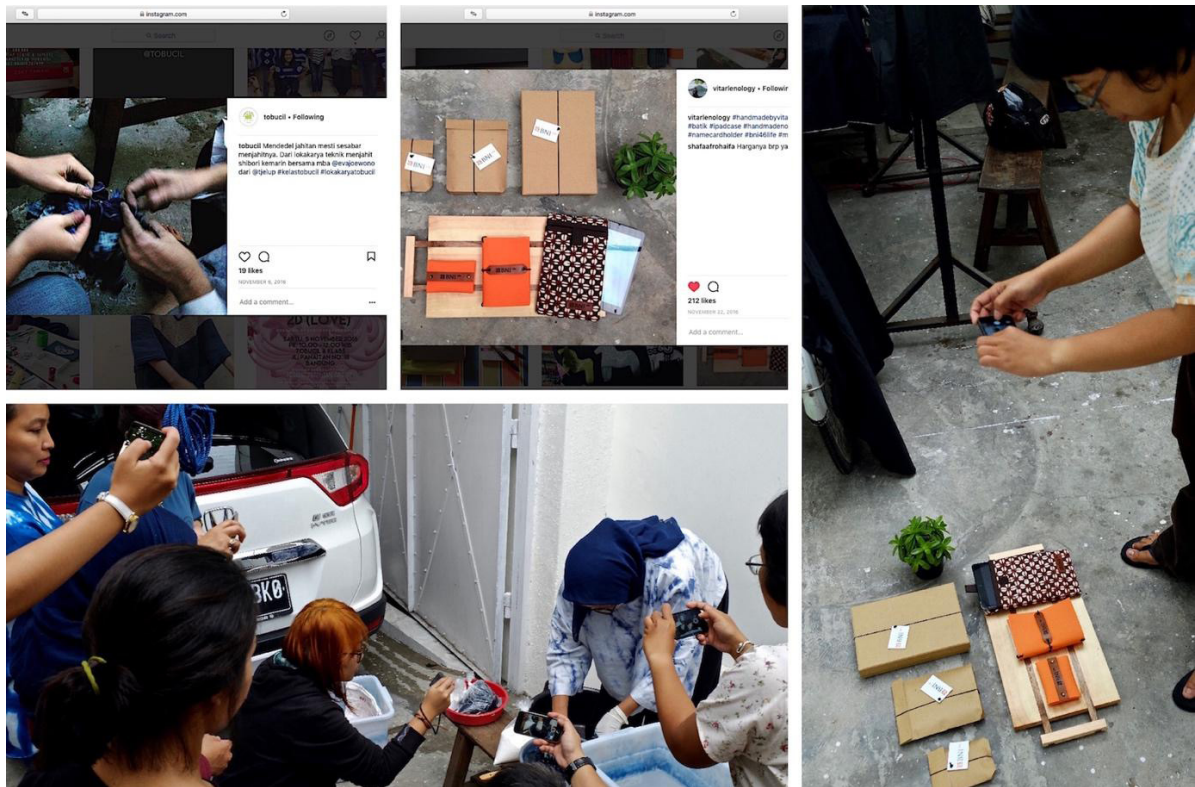
Source: photographs by the author and two images at the top are screenshots of Instagram posts made and posted by @tobucil and @vitarlenology on the 6th and 22nd November 2016 respectively

We use Flickr for the products catalog only. The current motivation to use Instagram more is to make sure that people could continually communicate with us without complicating them or us in the store.

(Boit, 43, F, merchandiser and co-founder)

Choosing media platforms becomes something organic and also pragmatic to all these creative collectives. They also put energy into people's participation in their activities. As Ewing, a visual artist, realizes that perhaps his collective might no longer exist or stay the same in the future. But, to him, he is more than happy to see their collective's ideas and alternative approaches in doing art are known and continued by other people. He ensures:

The uniqueness of Omni[space] is… this is the place where everyone can make mistakes. Yes, actually, it is like that! 'While we are here, let's make as many mistakes as possible!' Because in some places, making mistakes is somehow impossible. So here we feel freer, also we have pleasant experiences and joys in doing things […] Maybe in the future Omni[space] won't have any more [physical] space. Maybe we have to hunt for a new one. We don't know. Of course, as a collective we want to have a long life, because – as some friends have said to us – a space like this shows that there is still hope! If we and other similar spaces are gone, the hope for all of us and for the future artists will also be gone.

(Ewing, 41, male [M], visual artist and co-founder of the art collective)

Material Objects and Sensitive Affection

Beyond the social settings in media practices, the significance of friendship and continuous social relations using particular material objects plays a significant factor in these creative collectives. In doing ethnography it is significant to think about "accepted/expected" appropriate behavior, and the researcher's appearance can potentially lead the field research either into a smooth process or become a failure from the beginning (Gray, 2003; Miller et al., 2016). Having been introduced informally by members of the creative milieu in Hin Bus Depot compound in George Town to their fellow members and networks, the author felt that he was no longer a total stranger in this group during the series of fieldworks. In the first visit, the author had a more difficult situation. Aside from knowing fewer key persons in this place, in the second visit the author also just learnt from the experience before about the importance of appearance in starting to get in touch with groups we are about to study.

One example about such an appearance aspect is the use of a fabric tote bag. The first time the author came to Hin Bus Depot compound in George Town, the author had not met Khing and Wanida yet, the Event Manager and Gallery Manager respectively in Hin Bus Depot who were known by almost everyone else in the whole compound. After two days of mingling, and not succeeding in getting any contacts or information, the author realized that the appearance – including the daily outfit – were too different from the common look of the people gathered in this creative hub. This includes the noticeable student backpack the author wore, not a fabric tote bag like the rest of the people usually wear in this place.

This kind of fabric tote bag was used almost by everyone in this compound. Having

met and talked to some people – e.g., visual artists, yoga instructor, dancer, comedian, foreign students who decided to run an organic farm workshop here – the author's early encounters in this creative hub note the different things people do in this compound, from crafts to arts, from yoga to organic kefir and soap making. But one thing that links them and these various activities is ecological friendly values and practices. Though such a universal value currently tends to be mainstreaming in a global discourse, it is not a common view in George Town. Outside the Hin Bus Depot compound, that kind of view and attitude is still considered as a new, foreign-import value and practice. While here, a fabric tote bag, for instance, is considered as an eco-friendlier object than a plastic bag and polyester or oil-based synthetic materials of a backpack.

The common use of fabric tote bags is fully embraced in this place in the sense of both embracing such an ecological-concerned view and practicing a commonality of cultural identification. Some tote bags were also part of merchandise of previous art events, results of a screen-printing workshop, with personalized, and sometimes also political, messages. The fabric tote bag for the people in this organic creative hub, then, becomes a material object that represents symbolic meaning of shared values, communal practices, and sometimes a political aspiration. The use of tote bags here is also a borrowed 'lingo' from a current universal discourse and practice that is combined with their own vernacular expressions of social relations, sense of taste and local issues or aspirations.

As Miller et al. (2016, p. 31) note about the importance of a researcher's appearance in an ethnographic fieldwork, the author agrees that it is not the most significant factor in doing successful ethnography but it still plays a key role. Even though managing our own appearance sounds like a trivial thing, the author experienced that a good understanding

Figure 3.
The 'Tote Bag Cue' and Other Sensitive Objects

Source: photographs by the author

of the informants' everyday practices and their social environments can benefit any field researcher with relevant cues and deeper insights. Here the tote bag becomes a sensitive object in the research process of sensitizing observations. Similar to the kind of 'tote bag cue' the author found in George Town, other material objects can be detected in the creative collectives in Bandung. Basically, these material objects have elevated their symbolic meanings from a simply functional tool or thing to a sensitive, affective object (Löfgren, 2016) within the studied groups. Understanding these material objects in such a way is a significant aspect of gaining access to more individuals or their groups, and understanding layers of emotions surrounding everyday practices.

In Bandung, apart from tote bags and vintage suitcases, the leather case of the author's camera became an entry 'lingo' that made the research introduction in Tobucil run smoother. For these craftspeople, the personal story behind every handmade product is somehow more important than the product itself. In another collective, Omnispace, building an ecosystem through an alternative auction named "*Getok Tular*" is not less important than the making of artwork by the artists themselves. Alongside the tote bag, vintage suitcase and leather handmade items, the author found out that

postcards are part of everyday practices of one member of Tobucil. Tarlen, the bookbinder in this collective, usually uploads an image of the postcards she received from her closest friends who traveled overseas or other islands in the country on her Instagram. The author also saw Tarlen's postcard collection in person, hanging in one wall of her working studio in Tobucil. She told the author every story beneath each postcard: about the person who had sent it out, her/his travel to the place where the postcard came from, the story about the postcard itself, and other stories that might not so related to the postcard but somehow connect to the person's life stories. It is clear that Tarlen perceives these postcards beyond their material and functional meanings. The postcard is one of her sensitive and affective objects (Löfgren, 2016) that leads her to connect with her friends, their life journeys and experiences, and at the same time connect to her own reflections about her life journeys and experiences. She also has a regular practice to buy and send postcards to her friends back every time she has a chance to go somewhere outside her routine work or family travels.

The postcard becomes another sensitive object to some individuals in these creative collectives. Here the practice of sending a postcard, including the one done by the author to the informants, seems to speak more than

simply a tool to maintain the researcher's presence and participation from a remote distance. This methodological step can also help the author to dig into a deeper layer of feelings the informants have experienced, and can give further advantage in the analytical stages. Studying experience is basically "about what it is like for other people to 'be' in the world, and how we know and learn about this beyond words" (Pink et al., 2016, p. 39). The way the author tries to understand the use of particular material objects these informants have feelings attached to it, the use of tote bags or unique postcards for instance, might help in building the connection with the people we study and, also, have become part of ethnographic research thoroughly.

Material objects, with their sensitive and affective meanings, within the everyday practices of these creative collectives, have helped the author to navigate the balance between the notion of "closeness" and "distance" in ethnographic work (Bengtsson, 2014). As closeness is "related to intimacy and understanding [...] emphasizing an insight perspective [...] to take part in everyday life, share the 'little' moments" (Bengtsson, 2014, p. 867), the author gained much better understanding of the informants' everyday lives by getting involved in perceiving and using particular objects they share distinctive values and meanings within. In that sense, the tote bag, vintage suitcase, postcard, self-roasted coffee, yarns, knitting needles and crochet hook, bookbinding and wooden-craft tools, physical notebooks for the daily working scheduling and note taking have their symbolic meanings in constructing the sense of identity, building relations among each other and maintaining social cohesion within each collective.

Labor of Love

In one occasion at Tobucil, the author had an in-depth conversation with Palupi, the knitter and yarn manager:

Palupi : Overall, to me Tobucil has two meanings. First, since now I focus on the yarn business, Tobucil has become my very place for the learning processes about how to manage this business.

Author : A process to become, or perhaps has been, an entrepreneur?

Palupi : Ah, not really. Entrepreneur...? Not really. Because, I do many things actually. [Chuckled]. I do the business, but also teaching [on knitting] as my way to share what I know and what I can to others.

Author : I see. How about the second meaning then?

Palupi : The other one is when I can teach people about knitting, then they can create their own knitting business and do good in their business, that satisfies me more. I can see the real impact of my teaching. This is also what Tobucil's role is actually about. Because this does not happen in the Knitting and Crochet Class only, similar situations come up from other classes and workshops too. The participants create their own brands, for example, or they become trainers in other places. From the Feature Writing Workshop and the Photo Story Workshop, a few participants eventually work as journalists or their works are published in the media after joining the activities [in Tobucil].

Such a conversational interview indicates another key significant finding that resonates the main insights, guiding the author for connecting-the-dots amongst all entangled practices in these creative collectives. For instance, the understanding of their connected practices in relation to examining the articulation of their identities as part of the social formations

(Hall, 2019a) that take place in this particular context of the city. Also, the formation of their organic spaces through making, interacting, and networking. Additionally, the type of observation and interview the author conducted has led to the understanding of the patterns of everyday routines, the collectives' organizing structure and the inter-connection of people, places, or objects. The role of each member in every collective is clearly defined, yet there is a flexibility when it comes to the everyday practices. Collaboration among each other and with a wider network gives more influence in forming the daily practices, all these happen in an organic way.

Flexibility in dealing with various spaces is another key finding. But, flexibility in work and social interaction takes its toll; the creatives sometimes also feel tired, bored, or lose inspiration. Their everyday work is, indeed, a labor of love in whatever fields they involve themselves with. But boredom and tiresome feelings are also part of their everyday life. At Tobucil, all the members sometimes take a

Figure 4.
The Connected Practices as the Articulation of 'Labor of Love'

Source: photographs by the author

break. Most of the craftspeople in this collective rely on their income based on a purchase-order (PO) system submitted by their customers via Instagram; on some occasions these makers stop the feature to contact them, meaning they are in temporary pause of production. Elsewhere, the creative collectives never close their physical store, library, studio, or gallery outside the regular closing time, but they sometimes create distance within their daily routines. Kineruku closes on Tuesday, and the intentional reason is, as follows:

> People from other cities usually come here when they don't need to go to work. So, we are open during the weekend. But we had to have one day off from everything. Since most places, like museums or galleries, are usually closed on Monday, we keep them open on Monday. If we also close on the day, people would have more limited places to go then. So, Kineruku is closed every Tuesday. Apparently, in Javanese [Budi himself belongs to this ethnic group], *Selasa* [Tuesday] means *sela-selaning manungsa* [when people have free times], so we shouldn't work either. [Smiled].
> (Budi, 42, M, the collective's librarian and director)

Taking a break or deciding on a closing day, is a means of creating distance; modifying activities to sustain their labor of love approach to work and life. While the forms of such tactics vary from one person to another, and from a collective to another, the functions remain the same. They try to sustain their creative collectives not only in its financial and social aspects, but also the emotional aspect of everyday labor to which have to be in line with the common values and interests they build together. In Pokothings, a wooden-craft collective in George Town, the slow process is more important as opposed to the mass production system of assembly line and furniture productions. Alex, one of the designers and key figures in this collective, enjoys his slow process in working with his

Figure 5.
Deliberately Choosing the Uncommon Way of Doing and Creating Things
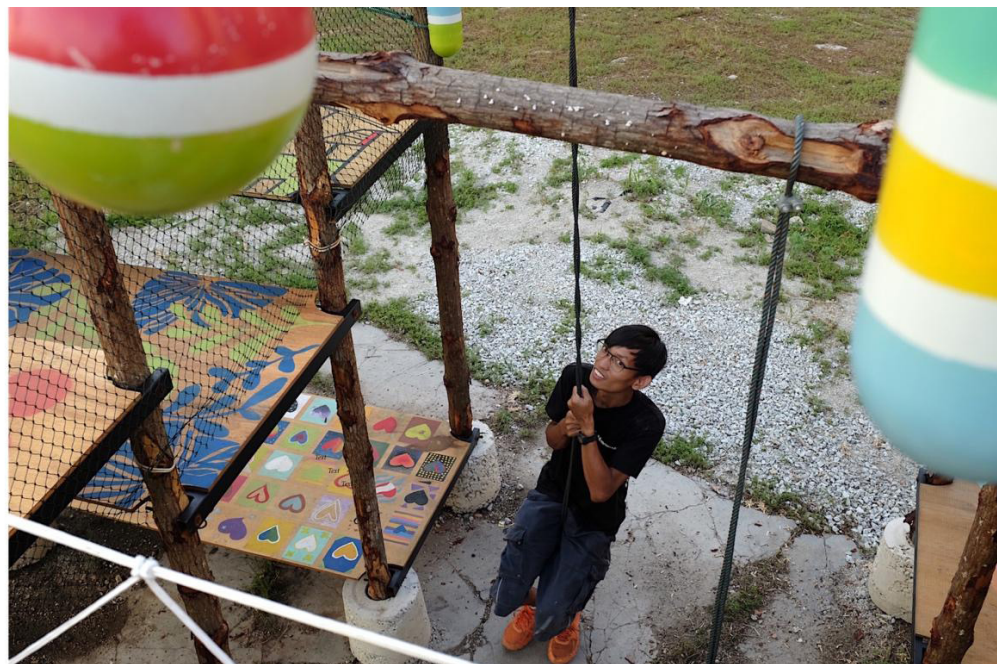
"It's okay to be slow."

Source: photograph by the author

fellow designers and the collective's manager. For them, this slowness not only deals with the production processes, but also the slow process in enjoying the works they have created either big or small projects.

Alex contemplates his daily practices as he says, "For us, making is easy; the hardest part is how to make others 'buy' the idea we offer." He realizes it is not an easy task to make other people appreciate his works and the way he and his collective work in different styles than the common practices of the traditional wood-craft makers in the city. That is, those who mostly work at a quick speed, using an industrious way. Whereas, for Alex, "It's okay to be slow."

In Bandung, Tarlen thinks about her life journey, that is her labor of love as a creative self, through the way she develops her fan-relations with her favorite band, Pearl Jam. As for her, "I like Pearl Jam, their songs, but mostly, because I can relate to their life stories." "My life journey," Tarlen continues, "somehow shares similar cycles with theirs [Pearl Jam band]. I learned from them how ups and downs can strike us, but eventually we keep the values that we should fight for."

Discussion

This article investigates the lived cultures of the individuals within particular groups, namely creative collectives, in Southeast Asian urban contexts. Geographically, the research focuses on the region of Southeast Asia and case studies of two cities, they are Bandung in Indonesia and George Town in Malaysia. For cities around the globe, including contemporary Southeast Asian cities, the emerging creative city is a new direction in planning, managing and presenting the city as an outward-looking model within a networked global economy (Knox, 2022; Löfgren, 2014; McGuigan, 2009). Thus, the creative economy is a new lucrative framework in socio-economic development of several Southeast Asian cities. This is perceived

by proposing the "inclusively creative strategy" to increase the regional and national economy through the agencies of new media, the city program and designated creative hubs (BEKRAF, 2018; British-Council-Indonesia, n.d.; Sudrajat & Siregar, 2017). Each selected city in this study has also been shaped by these global discourses. The conceptual scope of this article, however, departs from a different perspective. Rather than understanding this discursive notion from policy studies, political economy of urban studies, textual or media representations, the research focuses on everyday creative and media-related practices of the local creatives who have been dwelling and working in these cities and share their alternative views in doing creativity and perceiving the notion of creative city.

The research uses ethnographic and photographic methods to identify creative collectives that are absent, or peripheral, from the official branding and strategic initiatives of UNESCO cities and yet are present and active within these urban environments. These collectives have been consistently working and networking within the creative scene in these cities, embedded in the histories and communities of these places, and yet their existence and work remains obscured, at times silenced and hidden, by the mainstream global and local discourses of creative hubs, cultural heritage, or political economy of creative industries. Thus, this research has paid attention and listened to their articulation of themselves as creative individuals within a collective, and their tactics for disrupting strategic policies and values in their cities. Having said this, the three thematic findings elaborated in the Results section above are actually the very articulation of these studied creative collectives in performing their alternative views through particular everyday creative and media practices.

The use of a photo collage works beyond its visual illustrative function, gaining its role

as an additional empirical material to visually build the narrative of this articulation, along with other materials such as the ethnographic interview quotes and ethnographic vignettes. Here the photo collage as part of the analytical form plays its significant role as well, particularly as part of critical visual methodology that provides a more situated context in studying the subject matter from the intimate and street-level analysis, while considering the spatial and visual contexts as an important aspect of urban creative collectives.

The variety of both the modalities of empirical findings and the contextual narratives built from the connected practices of these creatives in two cities indicate a resonance with a few other scholarly works that explore the implications of creative city discourses and practices toward the people and the urban societies. One of these is the recent work by Gu et al. (2020) who compile and edit a volume that specifically engages with various responses on creative city policies and cultural practices in Asian cities. Most of the contributions in this volume focus on the critical studies of the impacts of creative city programs in many Asian creative cities, either the impacts to the built environment, the urban policy, the social formation, and the local culture. Some discussions also include the ways in which different approaches are practiced in several communities around the continent in responding to the so-called neo-liberal and cultural industry strategies that in practice always in line with the aggressiveness of financial and labor capital in a market-driven determination, the high-speed production of cultural products, and the logic of mass production in creative industry. Although, the outlook of creative cities especially in Asia is not always in despair, as some evidence in the volume also show potential new approaches, different practices and lessons learnt (Gu et al., 2020).

As mentioned earlier in this article, thus, the slow process of creating crafts, artwork, or events and the organic way of managing the

collectives can be perceived as part of these new practices and approaches that should be understood to create substantially more creative initiatives yet hospitable and humanist creative cities. Such an alternative view is also a key aspect in articulating these creatives' cultural identities in urban contexts, particularly in contemporary Southeast Asia. Returning back to the story of Tarlen's favorite song, "In My Tree" by Pearl Jam, she confidently said that she can relate to the lyrics and experiences of the band further. Because, for her and metaphorically also for many of the creative collectives, the nourishment of themselves and their collectives should be organically grown slowly like a tree, surviving in an environment that might be challenging or even trying to bring them down. For all the studied creative collectives, keeping up the values they stand for is their primary concern in sustaining their collectives, and themselves, in their respective city.

Conclusion

The global discourse of creative city has become a single approach, offering a kind of top-down formula around the globe including in emerging creative cities in Southeast Asia. Such a tendency has received various critical responses, particularly from the city dwellers themselves, which have shown specific efforts in looking for different approaches to urban creativity and urban cultural intervention. The voices raised by the members of the studied creative collectives in this article is an important articulation to be heard. It is not only due to its role in articulating their cultural identities, but also offers an alternative view against the single, top-down approach to imagining and designing creative cities.

To sum up, having discussed the empirical findings through a combination of ethnographic narratives and photo collages, this article shows the importance of an alternative voice in regional and global discourses of creative

cities. Analytically, this is achieved through the discussion of the three key thematic findings. These themes are (1) social settings in media-related practices, (2) material objects and sensitive affection, and (3) the labor of love. The ways in which these three themes are discussed resonate to the sites of articulations of cultural identities practiced by these creative collectives in both cities, providing a situated and nuanced context for everyday practices and street-level investigation, while also analyzing how spatial and visual contexts are significant aspects of these bottom-up, organic urban creativities. Following the insights articulated by the members of these creative collectives, it is clear that the slow process of creating crafts, artwork, or events, and the organic way of managing the collectives are other key aspects in articulating their cultural identities within the urban spaces they live in. These are their connected practices which are meaningful not only for themselves, but also, to other fellow city dwellers, providing the essential meaning of being creative, sharing affections with one another, and offering livable urban spaces for many people.

The way these creative collectives maintain their spaces, either as physical, social, or digitally mediated spaces, is analyzed here as the formation of alternative spaces in their respective city, and the formation of their identities as collectives. The ethnographic writings and visual form of the analysis are the key ways to present and discuss the findings. The analysis signifies the creative and media-related practices by the researched subjects as the poetics of their everyday lives, and the voices, bodies, and material aspects of the subjects are part of the politics of living and working in these urban environments.

Regarding further recommendation, it is clear that the cultural details informed by the creative collectives – ranging from the material objects they use, the craftsmanship, the everyday media-related practice, the local friendship group, the feeling of commonality, to the community and familial mood – are specific to the studied collectives in each respective city. However, most of these cultural details also indicate universal values. The everyday practices performed by the studied creative collectives demonstrate distinctive values and ethics, yet these can be traced in other local or even global contexts of creative city initiatives. Practiced against the backdrop of the dominant discourse of creative cities, the articulation of connected practices by these creative collectives is the everyday tactics for them to find their own ways of making do – creating and sustaining organic spaces, for instance – through the flexibilities of work, networking, resourcefulness, and survival kits living in cities. These are things that urban policymakers, urban communication specialists or media professionals, urban-focused scholars, and many communities in other cities might learn from as well.

Acknowledgements

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