Advances in Southeast Asian Studies

ASEAS

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Advances in Southeast Asian Studies (formerly, Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies)

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PUBLISHER
SEAS – Gesellschaft für Südostasienwissenschaften / Society for South-East Asian Studies
ZVR-Zahl 786121796, SEAS – Gudrunstrasse 104/3/41 – 1110 Wien – Austria

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ISSN: 2791-531X

ASEAS
17(2) 2024

Advances in Southeast Asian Studies

ASEAS
Advances in Southeast Asian Studies 17(2), 2024

ASEAS 17(2) presents a thematically open collection of articles, marking the second issue under our new publication scheme. The contributions span three overarching themes: (Sustainable) Tourism and Material Culture Studies; Social and Political Activism; and International and Interregional Political and Economic Intersections (Historical and Contemporary). Geographically, the articles cover a range of countries including Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. China, while not part of Southeast Asia, is also discussed in the context of its expanding political and economic influence in the region.

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Editorial: Sustainability, Socio-Political Activism, and International and Interregional Relations

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▸ Husa, L. C. (2024). Editorial: Sustainability, socio-political activism, and international and interregional relations. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 1-4.

This October issue of ASEAS presents a thematically open collection of articles, marking the second issue under our new publication scheme. The contributions span three overarching themes: (1) (Sustainable) Tourism and Material Culture Studies; (2) Social and Political Activism; and (3) International and Interregional Political and Economic Intersections (Historical and Contemporary). Geographically, the articles cover a range of countries including Vietnam, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. China, while not part of Southeast Asia, is also discussed in the context of its expanding political and economic influence in the region through the New Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013.

Related to the first theme, four articles deal with the topics of sustainable tourism and material culture from different perspectives. While the articles by Nguyen et al. (2024) and Rostami et al. (2024) explore guest-host interactions through the lenses of ethnicity and gender, with case studies from Vietnam and Malaysia respectively, Cornell et al. (2024) focus on the supply side of so-called 'ghost kitchens' in the Philippines. All three articles address challenges and opportunities in complex guest-host interactions: Nguyen et al. (2024) illustrate how attracting certain tourist groups can promote sustainability in ethnic tourism in northern Vietnam; Cornell et al. (2024) show the potential long-term prospects that 'ghost kitchens' create for young Filipinas; and Rostami et al. (2024) highlight the social and emotional challenges faced by solo female travelers in Malaysia. Singdee's (2024) article offers an examination of how uniforms of US soldiers during the Second Indochina War or the Vietnam War in the 1960s became coveted collector's items in Thailand, contributing to a kind of personalized culture of remembrance. This theme extends the focus of a previous special issue of *ASEAS* on tourism and the sustainable development goals in Southeast Asia (Trupp & Dolezal, 2020), contributing to the exploration of the intersections between tourism, sustainability, and cultural expressions.

The second category, 'Social and Political Activism', shifts the focus towards Indonesia. In their article, Duile and Ricardo (2024) provide an in-depth analysis of Indonesian atheists' practical and legal problems when speaking out in public. On the one hand, religious nationalism has been part of the Indonesian

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state philosophy since the country's independence from the Netherlands in 1949, and conservative tendencies permeate social institutions since the 2000s, also due to the growing influence of Salafi and Wahabi interpretations of Islam. On the other hand, public expressions of atheism seem to be becoming a more socially and politically acceptable counterpoint and are seen less as a threat to society. The second article by Lengauer (2024) is an interview with researcher, activist, and photographer Frans Ari Prasetyo, presenting a personal, informed account of the latest (student) protests in Indonesia against the revision of the regional election law, accompanied by visual material from Prasetyo himself. These articles stand in line with previous ASEAS publications on political resistance and state power (e.g., Einzenberger & Schaffer, 2018).

The third and final category, 'International and Interregional Political and Economic Intersections (Historical and Current)', features an article, in which Zara (2024) explores the historic relations between the Philippines and Indonesia during their respective independence movements in the mid-1940s. The focus here is how Indonesian politicians, intellectuals, and feminists used Philippine independence as a blueprint for shaping an independent Indonesian nation.

Together, these articles offer important insights into the political and economic entanglements that have shaped Southeast Asia, both in historical contexts and contemporary geopolitics.

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Segmentation of Ethnic Tourists and Their Interaction Outcomes with Hosts in the Central Highlands, Vietnam

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Received: 6 May 2024 / Accepted: 1 October 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Nguyen, K. T. T., Murphy, L., Chen, T. (2024). Segmentation of ethnic tourists and their interaction outcomes with hosts in the Central Highlands, Vietnam. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 105-133.

Emphasizing interactions with ethnic minority hosts, this paper segments domestic tourists visiting Vietnam's Central Highlands based on their travel motivation. Three PERSONAS summarize profiles of *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* based on their socio-demographic and trip characteristics, especially differences in host-tourist interactions and perceptions of ethnic tourism outcomes. Such data informs decisions about what type of tourists villagers want to serve to achieve community aspirations. *Explorers* and *Seekers* were identified as the most suitable target groups to attain better interaction outcomes and make positive contributions to the local community. Tourism marketers and policymakers can use PERSONAS to develop campaigns to attract the targeted segments.

Keywords: Ethnic Tourists; Host-tourist Interaction Outcomes; Personas; Segmentation; Vietnam's Central Highlands

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INTRODUCTION

The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2011) strongly suggests that no destination can establish a product development portfolio without an extensive system for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting visitor statistics, regular market research, and ad hoc studies into the scale, structure, profile, characteristics, and trends in major source markets. For successful destination management and planning, the destination management organization (DMO) needs to analyze markets, profile existing tourists, and identify potential tourists (Morrison, 2019).

Ethnic tourism is a vital tool to alleviate rural poverty (Lor et al., 2019) by helping to improve the local economy and assist in cultural heritage preservation and natural conservation (Sun et al., 2018; Yang, 2012; Yang & Wall, 2009). It also enhances social interaction between hosts and tourists by creating a space for mutual understanding (Su et al., 2014). Ethnic tourists play central roles in

minimizing negative cultural impacts and constructing a rewarding cross-cultural experience between themselves and ethnic minorities (Yang, 2012). However, positive outcomes only happen if tourists actively participate in on-site activities and are aware of cultural differences and how they respond to locals in different tourism settings (Fan et al., 2020a). Travel motivation is closely linked to tourist behaviors (MacInnes et al., 2022) and affects on-site experiences (Pearce, 2005). Therefore, tourist segmentation based on travel motivation helps local stakeholders understand what tourists seek and their preferences when prioritizing ethnic tourism markets (Yang, 2012).

Despite the rise of ethnic tourism in Asia, Cohen (2016) claims that existing studies of this topic are dominated by the Chinese context, while there is a lack of examination of ethnic tourism in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia – such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. The Central Highlands (*Tây Nguyên*) in the West and Southwest of Vietnam are well-known for their pristine natural resources and exotic ethnic culture but poor socioeconomic conditions. The region has been conventionally regarded as a 'remote', 'backward', or 'primitive' area (*vùng sâu vùng xa*) (Salemink, 2018). The percentage of ethnic minorities comprises 37.5% of the regional population, while within the Vietnamese population, ethnic minorities make up 14.6% (Government Electronic Information Portal, 2023). More specifically, this region has the highest diversity of ethnicities in Vietnam. However, there have been challenges in the region due to socio-political concerns since serious land and socio-economic conflicts between ethnic minority groups and Kinh people occurred after 1975 (*see* Dang & Nguyen, 2023). Diversity among ethnic minority groups is a core element of the *Master Plan for Tourism Development to 2020 with Vision to 2030* in the Central Highlands (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT), 2013), which aims to increase visitor numbers and preserve ethnic culture.

Recent research on ethnic tourism has focused on residents' perspectives to examine the process of (dis)empowerment between government, tourism developers, and villagers (Tian et al., 2021) or explore how ethnic communities respond to resilience in a tourism context (Tian et al., 2023). Most prior studies of host-tourist interactions have primarily concentrated on cultural differences between hosts and foreign tourists (Fan et al., 2020b; Loi & Pearce, 2015; Pearce et al., 1998; Reisinger & Turner, 1997, 2002). Reisinger and Turner (2003) argue that the degree of cultural difference between hosts and tourists varies from very little to extreme. In ethnic tourism, tourists interact with ethnic minorities who differ culturally, socially, or politically from the majority population (Cohen, 2001). Ethnic minority hosts and domestic tourists see each other as culturally different (Trupp, 2014). Furthermore, despite sharing a nation, hosts and domestic visitors from different subcultures may react differently to the same encounters (Loi & Pearce, 2015). Therefore, this study shifts attention to interactions between hosts and domestic tourists in ethnic tourism.

Domestic visitors dominate the Central Highlands' tourism market, accounting for 92.5% of all tourist arrivals (Departments of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022). After the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of domestic visitors made a remarkable recovery, with 8 million in 2022, nearly reaching the pre-pandemic level of 8.9 million recorded in 2019. The current state of the Central Highlands' tourism industry depends much on the domestic market. However, regional tourism is still

under-developed despite great potential (Duong et al., 2022). By profiling the existing domestic market, this study aims to identify ethnic tourist segments visiting the Central Highlands to inform decisions about the type of visitors villagers want to prioritize. In this vein, tourism marketers and local policymakers can design ethnic tourism products that best suit domestic market preferences and match the local community's capacity and aspirations. Two research questions drove the present study;

1. What travel motivation-based segments can be identified within the domestic ethnic tourist market to Vietnam's Central Highlands, and
2. Which segment(s) should be selected as target market(s) in developing ethnic tourism that contribute(s) to improved interaction outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethnic Tourists as the Other

Ethnic tourism is marketed as a form of tourism motivated by the search for 'quaint' customs and 'exotic' cultural experiences through interaction with a distinctive ethnic minority (Smith, 1989; Yang, 2012). Tourists expect to pursue tourism activities that bring them closer to the ethnic host's values (Lama & Sarkhel, 2022). However, Yang and Wall (2009) argue that ethnic tourists are not only traveling to observe and explore 'exotic' culture but that the category of ethnic tourists includes those who consume ethnic products and services at visitor attractions. Similarly, Moscardo and Pearce (1999) found that ethnic tourist groups behave differently at a destination regarding cross-cultural interactions and preferred tourism experiences.

According to the 'host gaze' concept, ethnic people gaze at tourists as the *Other* visiting their villages. There is always a distance between hosts and tourists due to their cultural backgrounds (Fan et al., 2017; Pearce et al., 1998). The distance influences how both groups gaze at each other and how they interact (Moufakkir & Reisinger, 2013; Tasci & Severt, 2017). For the scope of this study, information about tourist markets can be useful in portraying a full picture of the *Other* that helps the hosts answer: *"who are the Others visiting our village?"* As a result, the hosts may have a better understanding of which market segments to prioritize and which ethnic tourism products best meet the needs of these tourists, thus maximizing the benefits from ethnic tourism.

Internationally, a few studies present brief characteristics of ethnic tourists and their preferences and ethnic tourism satisfaction (Table 1), but the body of research is still limited. Earlier research (e.g., Moscardo & Pearce, 1999; Smith, 1989; Xie & Wall, 2002) showed that tourists seemed less interested in direct interactions with hosts, whereas later studies indicate an increase in tourist desire for interacting and participating in different ethnic tourism activities. However, some tourists are disappointed with those interactions, which were most likely caused by a mismatch between the information tourists received prior to arrival and what they encountered at the ethnic destination (Bott, 2018; Trupp, 2014). By focusing on host-tourist interactions, the current study attempts to understand how different tourist groups interact with the hosts in the ethnic tourism context and whether tourist experience outcomes

differ between these groups. Empirically, this study will assist both ethnic villagers and DMOs in better understanding the market in order to provide greater experience outcomes for both tourists and the destination community.

Year	**Author**	**Destination**	**Ethnic minority groups**	**Methodology**	**Ethnic tourist characteristics/profile**
1989	Smith	Alaskan Arctic	Eskimo	n/a	• Seldom demanding or critical • Few tourists have face-to-face interaction with Eskimos
1999	Moscardo and Pearce	Australia	Tjapukai Aboriginal people	Quantitative method (1,556 surveys)	• Four ethnic tourist groups: the *Ethnic Tourism Connection*, the *Passive Cultural Learning*, the *Ethnic Products and Activities*, and the *Low Ethnic Tourism* group of all ages; • Both international and domestic tourists; • High levels of interest in ethnic tourism products and experiences across all four groups; • Little interest in direct interaction with Aboriginal people.
2002	Xie and Wall	Hainan, China	Li	Quantitative method (586 surveys)	• Both international and domestic tourists: Over 95% of respondents are Han (from mainland China); • Mostly in package tours and pay most expenses prior to the trip, visit the folk village as a part of recreational programme; • Brief interaction with the hosts; • Interested in ethnic cultures but little knowledge of ethnicity.
2012	Yang	Yunnan, China	Mousuo	Qualitative (55 interviews) and quantitative (274 surveys) methods	• Only domestic tourists: 97.1% are Han Chinese; • Majority of tourists' ages ranged 20-40, 60.2 % married, 67.9% had university or higher degrees, almost all respondents stayed overnight in the area; • Cultural authenticity is not generally a concern for tourists who are mainly in search of enjoyment or relaxation; • High satisfaction rating for natural environment, ethnic villages, architecture, cultural shows and guesthouses/inns
2013	Pratt et al.	North East Fiji	Indigenous Fijians	Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews,	• Only international tourists; • Be adventurous, desire interaction, seek education and want authenticity; • Tourists experienced a unique in-

				personal observation, and review of personal travel blogs	sight into indigenous Fijian culture, feels life-changing, knew the difference between a *'need'* and a *'want'*.
2014	Trupp	Thailand	Akha and Karen	Qualitative: 28 villager interviews and participant observation	• Akha village (Jorpakha): • Entirely international tourists; • Most tourists participate organised tour, average length of visiting: 15 minutes; • Tourism activities: photographing, souvenir purchasing, excursion tour or tribal village tours. • Karen village (Muang Pham): • Both Thai tourists and international; • Average length of visiting of several hours; at least 90% of tourists stay overnight; • Tourism activities: elephant riding, bamboo rafting, visiting the caves, weaving products observing, homestay, multiple-day trekking or jungle tours.
2018	Bott	Sapa, Vietnam	Ethnic/ Indigenous women (e.g., Red Dao, Hmong)	Mixed methods: ethnographic fieldwork, review online publications, participant observation, semi-structured interviews (12 participants)	• Tourist market: domestic, Asian (predominantly Chinese) and Western tourists; • Tourism activities: handicraft purchasing, homestay, and trekking tours; • Tourists experienced disappointment because of the loss of 'authentic' lifestyles and behaviours of Indigenous women who were not faithfully replicating their portrayals as passive and innocent as in advertisements and guidebooks.
2023	Zhang and Xu	Yunnan, China	Naxi	Qualitative: in-depth interviews (42 participants) and on-site observation	• Tourist market: only domestic (Han) tourists • Ethnic tourism activities occurred at home businesses in Baisha Village: homestays, home restaurants, home visits. • Focusing on power dynamics in host-tourist interactions rather than tourist experiences. Role relationship between hosts and tourists varied in different settings: host-guest in the home setting, provider-consumer in the commercial setting, and insider-outsider in the ethnic culture setting.

Table 1. Selected studies about ethnic tourists. *Source*: Compiled by the authors

Travel Motivation

Motivation is fundamental in tourism studies and acts as a driving force behind all tourist behaviors (Pearce, 2019). Predicated on the premise that visitors have more than one level of travel motivation and that their motivational patterns will change with travel experience, Pearce and Lee (2005) developed the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) model. According to the concept of TCP, travel motivation encompasses three layers. The core motivation layer includes *novelty, escape/relaxation*, and strengthening *relationships*. The middle motivation layer is moderately important, including external (e.g., *nature* seeking and *host-site involvement*) and internal (e.g., *self-actualization*, *personal (self) development*, and *stimulation*) motivations. In the outer layer are the least important motivations; *romance, autonomy, security, recognition, isolation*, and *nostalgia*. It is noted in the TCP that tourists are driven to travel by multiple biological and socio-cultural motives, and the patterns of travel motivations shift within a layer and/or among layers as the travel experience increases (Pearce, 2005).

Travel motivation is linked to preferences for tourism activities, subsequently affecting destination choice and on-site visitor experiences (Li et al., 2021). In the ethnic tourism context, 'true' ethnic visitors are motivated to actively interact with locals and experience the local way of life (Xie & Wall, 2002), while other visitors may travel to enjoy local scenery, ethnic architecture, and local lodging (Yang, 2012). With multiple travel motivations, the order of importance influences how involved visitors interact with hosts at ethnic sites (Pearce, 2019; Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

Interacting with Hosts as Travel Motivation

Pearce (2005) showed that *host-site involvement* is one of four central motivation factors that can be understood as the 'skeleton' of travel motivation. Host-tourist interaction is a core element of ethnic tourism (Wong et al., 2019). Su et al.'s work (2014) indicated that an ethnic encounter is a primary motivation for tourists to visit an ethnic destination and contributes to a satisfactory on-site experience.

The interaction occurs in different physical settings with diverse content reflecting a range of intensity levels (de Kadt, 1979; Su et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2017). The greater the cultural distance, the more tourists are motivated to interact with the locals (Fan et al., 2017). Yet, the more contact tourists have, the more negative feelings can be generated due to interaction difficulties (Nguyen et al., 2023; Reisinger & Turner, 2003). While 'quaint' customs and 'exotic' culture may satisfy tourists' motivations of *novelty seeking* and *host-site involvement,* they can cause adverse outcomes in host-tourist interactions, thereby influencing tourists' attitudes as well as behavioral intentions towards the hosts and the destination.

A mismatch between ethnic resources and the targeted market has often been reported, leading to a gradual loss of authenticity in ethnic cultural resources, overcrowding, over-commercialization (Yang & Wall, 2009), and misunderstanding of ethnic resources being promoted (Wong et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying tourist segments based on travel motivations is necessary to better understand the extent of tourists' on-site experiences and outcomes among different segments. Concerning host-tourist interaction, motivation-based segmentation also helps to explore

whether there are differences in tourists' interaction outcomes between those who are motivated to interact with the locals and those who are not. Such information can be used by the villagers and DMOs to develop a market segmentation strategy that maximizes positive tourist experiences and minimizes negative tourism impacts on the hosts and the destination.

Segmentation

As Dolnicar stated, "tourists are not all the same" (2008, p. 129); therefore, the tourist market to an ethnic destination can and will be heterogeneous. Market segmentation is used as a strategic tool to better understand the characteristics of tourism market segments, whether they are labeled as geo-travelers (Boley & Nickerson, 2013), ecotourists, sustainable tourists, environmentally friendly tourists (Dolnicar et al., 2008), cultural tourists (McKercher, 2002), or ethnic tourists (Pearce & Moscardo, 1999). Without a clear understanding of the target markets' characteristics and their travel motivations to a particular destination, marketing efforts are less effective (Morrison, 2019).

There are two main categories of tourist market segmentation: a *priori* (common sense) and *posteriori* (post hoc, data-driven) (Formica & Uysal, 2001). According to Dolnicar (2008), a *priori* segmentation splits tourists into segments based on selected descriptors that are known in advance and can be driven by experience with the local market or practical considerations. By contrast, *post hoc* segmentation uses multivariate analyses to seek similar response rating patterns across a range of variables. Although a *priori* approach is the most common form of segmentation (Dolnicar, 2008), Haley (1995) criticizes this approach as being merely descriptive and common variables used (e.g., geographic, demographic) are poor predictors of behavior.

To date, research on tourist segmentation in the ethnic tourism context is still scarce, with the exception of Moscardo and Pearce's work (1999). By conducting *post hoc* segmentation, this study will classify different tourist groups on the basis of the importance they place on various motivations for visiting an ethnic destination, especially interacting with the locals. Furthermore, this study will explore whether tourist experience outcomes differ among these groups.

METHODOLOGY

The study applied a quantitative approach to collect data from domestic tourists visiting the Central Highlands via both on-site and online (QR code via Qualtrics platform) questionnaires. Apart from the introduction, the questionnaire consisted of four sections: general visit information (including travel motivation), characteristics of host-tourist interaction, evaluation of overall ethnic tourism experiences, and personal information. All items were adapted from relevant studies. More specifically, 13 items related to travel motivation of the general visitation information were adapted from the Travel Career Pattern (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Items regarding host-tourist interaction include physical settings (10 items) (Bott, 2018; Carneiro et al., 2018; Carneiro & Eusébio, 2012; Zhang et al., 2017), the content of interaction (21 items) (Bott, 2018; de Kadt, 1979; Fan et al., 2017; Su et al., 2014; Su & Wall, 2010; Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2013), interaction difficulties (32 items) (Loi & Pearce, 2015; Oktadiana et al., 2016;

Pearce et al., 1998; Pearce & Cronen, 1980), and quality of interaction (5 items) (Fan et al., 2017). Items regarding overall ethnic tourism experiences include tourists' attitudes and intentional behaviors (4 items) (Stylidis, 2020; Su & Wall, 2010; Wong et al., 2019) and their perceptions of long-term ethnic tourism outcomes (8 items) (Redicker & Reiser, 2017; Su & Wall, 2010; Xie & Wall, 2002; Yang et al., 2013).

The questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese to reach the target population. Back-translation was undertaken by two Vietnamese scholars to validate the questionnaire. The first author conducted a fieldtrip in Vietnam's Central Highlands from December 2020 to March 2021. The Central Highlands is a multiethnic region with a diverse culture and customs. Four ethnic places in the region (Kon Ko Tu, Buon Don, Lak, and Lac Duong) (Figure 1) were chosen based on their different ethnicities, levels of community participation in local tourism, and tourism development stages.

A convenience sampling method was employed by approaching domestic visitors in the four ethnic sites, specifically home-visits, homestays, local food and beverage establishments, gong venues, tourist attraction points, and public areas. All respondents were gifted a key chain with a unique ethnic culture design and a mini 'thank you' card. Respondents who could not undertake the on-site survey still received the key chain and a QR code to link to the online version of the questionnaire via Qualtrics platform for completion later. After approaching 520 domestic visitors, a total number of 474 questionnaires were collected, of which 438 (192 on-site and 246 via QR code) were valid and used for data analysis.

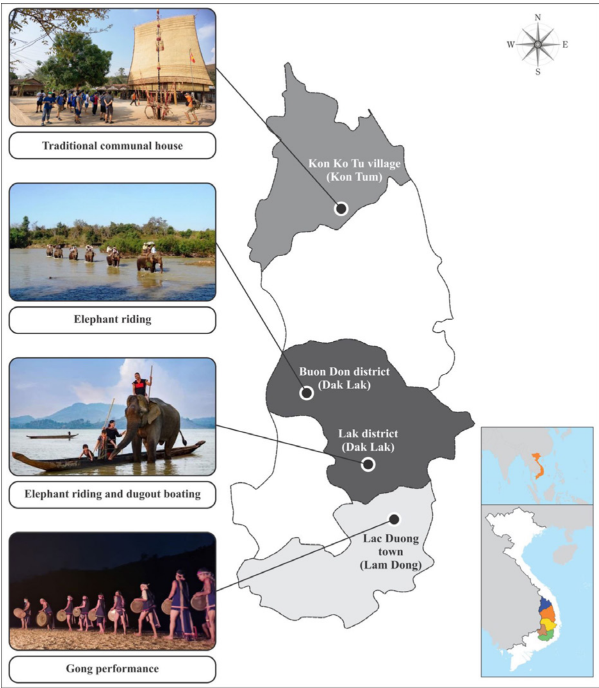


Figure 1. Map of four ethnic sites in the Central Highlands, Vietnam. *Source*: Drawn by the first author and Le Nguyen Vu, 2023

The importance ratings for the travel motivation question were used to segment respondents. The k-means cluster analysis in SPSS Statistics 28.0 was used to group domestic visitors based on their travel motivations. Chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests were undertaken to examine differences between clusters regarding demographic and trip characteristics, their interactions with hosts, and tourism experience outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tourist Segments based on Travel Motivations

This study employed direct *k*-means clustering of original travel motivation items to carry out market segmentation. The study used 13 out of 14 TCP motivations (Pearce & Lee, 2005) relevant to the ethnic tourism context. More specifically, *relationship (security)* used in the original work (Pearce & Lee, 2005) was excluded from the questionnaire because the authors considered its potential sensitivity to cultural differences. It can be problematic to ask domestic visitors about "feeling personally safe and secure" when travelling to ethnic villages in the intra-national context as it may reinforce stereotypes held by the majority population, who may view ethnic minority villagers as inferior (Nguyen, 2021).

By running *k*-means cluster analysis, two, three, and four cluster solutions were examined. The three-cluster solution was selected because it provided a relatively even spread of respondents and the clearest interpretation. The three clusters were named *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* based on the mean scores on travel motive items (Table 2). The *Explorers* were the smallest segment (27.9%) and rated the middle layer of travel motivations (*self-actualization, self-development, nature* and *host-site involvement*) highest. This segment was labelled as *Explorers* because they can be described as 'true' ethnic visitors based on their strong motives for exploring local natural and cultural values.

Seekers were the second largest segment (35.8%), with high ratings for most motivations, including core (4.59 – 4.61), middle (3.97 – 4.45), and outer layers (3.4 – 4.55) of travel motivations. Their ratings were higher than the other segments in all motivations, reflecting that they sought many things in their trip. They were especially motivated by "taking a rest or escaping daily routine" (*escape,* 4.69) and "viewing local natural scenery" (*nature*, 4.67). Notably, they rated the importance of "learning about ethnic minority culture" (4.04) and "interacting with local people" (3.95) as high as *Explorers* and significantly higher than *Enjoyers*.

The last group – *Enjoyers* – is the largest segment (36.3%) and they rated core motives as most important – such as *escape* (4.69), strengthening *relationship* (4.61), and *novelty* (4.59). "Interacting with local people" (*host-site involvement)* and "learning about ethnic minority culture" (*self-development)* were both rated as the least important (2.93) and significantly lower than the other two segments.

Who are the Others visiting the Central Highlands?

There were no statistical differences across the three segments in gender and ethnicity variables, but significant differences were found in other demographic variables (Table 3).

	Motivation	Total	Clusters			
			Mean rating			Post hoc
	Items	100%	1 (27.9%) Explorers	2 (35.8%) Seekers	3 (36.3%) Enjoyers	
Core motivation	Strengthening relationships with others (family, friends, colleagues)	4.39	3.61	**4.61**	**4.78**	SE & EN > EX
	Experiencing something new and different	4.29	3.68	4.59	4.46	SE & EN > EX
	Taking a rest or escaping my daily routine	4.22	3.54	**4.69**	**4.30**	SE > EN > EX
Middle layer	Viewing local natural scenery	4.39	**4.03**	4.67	4.38	SE > EN > EX
	Learning about ethnic minority culture	3.68	**4.04**	**4.13**	2.93	SE & EX > EN
	Interacting with local people	3.60	**3.95**	3.97	2.93	SE & EX > EN
	Gaining a new perspective on life	4.03	**4.11**	**4.45**	3.50	SE > EX > EN
	Experiencing thrills and excitement	3.96	3.52	**4.37**	3.82	SE > EN > EX
Outer layer	Having others know that I have been here	3.25	2.55	3.4	3.64	SE & EN > EX
	Experiencing something romantic	2.72	2.35	3.79	1.88	SE > EX > EN
	Doing things my own ways	3.13	3.28	**4.19**	1.92	SE > EX > EN
	Feeling at peace and calm	3.96	3.65	**4.55**	3.56	SE > EX & EN
	Thinking about and reflecting about good times and past memories	3.05	2.83	**4.12**	2.09	SE > EX > EN

Note. *Rating scale ranged from 1 = Very unimportant to 5 = Very important*
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 2. Motivation-based segments of ethnic visitors to the Central Highlands. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

Explorers were aged 21-30 years (38.8%) and well-educated (with 55.2% holding undergraduate and 21.6% postgraduate degrees). They were mostly students or employed in small-scale family businesses or by the government, with low (under 5m VND/month) (25.9%) to medium income (5-10 m VND/month) (22.1%). They had a moderate level of previous travel experience.

Seekers were mostly between the ages of 21 and 30 (45%) and had undergraduate-level education (66.4%). Most of this group were employed in small-scale family businesses or as office staff with a high income of 10-18m VND/month (34.2%). They had a lot of previous travel experience.

Enjoyers were in an older age group of 31 – 40 (43.7%) and had lower education levels (under/high school with 47%). They were mostly employed in small-scale family businesses and as casual workers, with a medium income of 5-10m VND/month (58.3%). They tended to have less travel experience.

Profile variable	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	χ^2	p-value
	Percentage				
Gender				5.256	.511
Male	38.8	43.0	45.7		
Female	59.5	55.0	54.3		
Non-binary/third gender	1.7	1.3	0.0		
Prefer not to say	0.0	0.7	0.0		
Age				19.272	0.037
Under 20 or 20	2.6	2.7	0.0		
21-30	38.8	45.0	31.1		
31-40	32.8	40.3	43.7		
41-50	19.0	8.7	17.9		
51-60	6.0	2.0	6.0		
Over 60	0.8	1.3	1.3		
Marital status				41.316	<.001
Married	41.4	43.6	64.9		
Living with another	37.9	24.8	9.9		
Single	13.8	28.2	19.2		
Divorced/Separated	4.3	2.7	4.6		
Widowed	2.6	0.7	1.3		
Place of origin				75.483	<.001
Hanoi	7.8	10.7	11.3		
Ho Chi Minh	20.7	34.9	15.9		
Da Nang	4.3	4.7	0.0		
Khanh Hoa/Nha Trang	4.3	4.7	5.3		
Kon Tum/Kon Tum	2.6	2.7	9.9		
Gia Lai/Plaiku	4.3	2.0	5.3		
Dak Lak/Buon Ma Thuot	11.2	6.0	21.2		
Dak Nong/Gia Nghia	1.7	2.7	9.9		
Lam Dong/Da Lat	23.3	14.1	10.6		
Other	19.8	17.5	10.6		
Ethnicity				19.219	.378
Kinh	95.7	91.3	90.1		
Other	4.3	8.7	9.9		

Profile variable	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	χ^2	p-value
	Percentage				
Education level				103.164	<.001
Primary, secondary school, or high school	11.2	11.4	47.0		
Diploma	12.1	12.1	22.5		
Undergraduate	55.2	66.4	27.8		
Graduate and higher	21.6	10.1	2.6		
Occupation				80.087	<.001
Governmental/Provincial employee	12.9	9.4	10.6		
Office staff	18.1	25.5	14.6		
Small-scale family business	25.0	29.5	37.7		
Causal workers	3.4	4.0	20.5		
Farmers	1.7	2.0	6.0		
Students	25.0	17.4	2.0		
Retired	0.9	1.3	4.6		
Other (Please specify)	12.9	10.7	4.0		
Income per month (VND)				45.646	<0.001
Less than 5,000,000 or 5,000,000	25.9	22.1	9.3		
5,000,001 - 10,000,000	37.9	28.9	58.3		
10,000,001 - 18,000,000	16.4	34.2	26.5		
Above 18,000,000	19.8	14.8	6.0		
Travelling experience within last 3 years				39.275	<.001
No any trip	2.8	2.9	4.6		
1-3 Trips	33.0	28.8	29.1		
4-6 Trips	29.2	18.0	39.7		
7-10 Trips	22.6	20.9	17.9		
11-15 Trips	4.7	12.2	6.6		
16-20 Trips	2.8	9.4	2.0		
21 or more	4.7	7.9	0.0		

Table 3. Segments' profile by demographic informations. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Trip Planning Characteristics

Most respondents in the *Explorers* group visited for holiday/leisure (50.9%), and they were most likely of all three segments to be on a business/professional trip (23.3%). They are more likely to visit Lam Dong (86.2%) with friends (41.4%) or alone (19%) (Table 4). While *Seekers* and *Enjoyers* were most likely to travel for holiday/leisure (65.1% and 66.2%, respectively), Enjoyers were significantly more likely than the other two segments to visit friends/family (27.8%). *Seekers* were more likely to visit Lam Dong (85.2) with a group of friends (55.7%), while *Enjoyers* were more likely to travel to Dak Lak (88.7%) with family (54.3%). *Seekers* were more likely to buy tour packages (27.5%), whereas *Enjoyers* (94.7%) were most likely to have arranged the trip to the Central Highlands by themselves.

While all three segments tended to use social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Tripadvisor, personal blog) as one of the main sources of information, *Enjoyers* (79.5%) were more likely to do so than *Explorers* (56.9%) and *Seekers* (67.1%). Additionally, *Explorers* and *Enjoyers* were significantly more likely to have traveled to the region based on their previous experience and word-of-mouth. Meanwhile, *Seekers* were more likely to search for information via advertising, travel articles or documentaries (42.3%) and travel agents (10.7%).

Variables (N = 416)	Variables	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	$\chi2$	p-value
			(Percentage)			
Main purpose of visit					52.461	<.001
	Holiday/leisure	50.9	65.1	66.2		
	Business/professional	23.3	11.4	4.6		
	Events	4.3	0.7	1.3		
	Visit friends and family	11.2	14.8	27.8		
	Other	10.3	8.1	0.0		
Visited place	Kon Tum (N=152)	26.7	40.9	39.7	6.729	.035
	Gia Lai (N=61)	8.6	18.1	15.9	4.991	.082
	Dak Lak (N=289)	57.8	59.1	88.7	41.557	<.001
	Dak Nong (N=31)	5.2	7.4	9.3	1.600	.449
	Lam Dong (N=332)	86.2	85.2	69.5	15.556	<.001
Source of information	Been here before (N=228)	45.7	53.7	62.9	7.975	.019
	Word of mouth (N=259)	53.4	46.3	84.8	52.525	<.001
	Travel agents or tour wholesalers (N=25)	6.0	10.7	1.3	11.766	.003
	Advertising, travel article or documentaries (TV, radio, movies) (N=143)	32.8	42.3	27.8	7.145	.028
	Travel book, guide or brochure (N=25)	9.5	9.4	0	15.157	<.001
	Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Trip advisor, personal blog) (N=286)	56.9	67.1	79.5	15.849	<.001
	Online websites (N=33)	11.2	8.7	4.6	4.078	.130
Travel companion	Alone (N=40)	19.0	8.7	3.3	18.71	<.001
	With family (N=163)	28.4	32.2	54.3	23.135	<.001
	With incentive trip (company) (N=47)	19.8	10.1	6	12.939	.002
	With a group of friends (N=197)	41.4	55.7	43.7	6.634	.036
	With tour group (N=24)	9.5	8.1	0.7	11.617	.003
Trip arrangement [a]					33.281	<.001
	Independent	74.1	70.5	94.7		
	Package	22.4	27.5	5.3		

Note. [a] The *'Other'* variable was excluded since 3 cells (50%) have expected count less than 5.

Table 4. Trip planning. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

In terms of trip characteristics (Table 5), *Explorers* most often used a bus to get to their destination (45.7%) and traveled around by taxi (25%) or on foot (26.7%). Even though most respondents stayed overnight when visiting ethnic sites, *Explorers* (85.3%) and *Seekers* (87.2%) were most likely to stay overnight. Particularly, *Explorers* usually stayed 1-2 nights (75.8%), with more opting for two-night than one night. During the trip, they mainly spent on meals and transportation instead of accommodation.

Seekers also used bus as the most common mode of transportation to the Central Highlands. They were more likely than the other segments to travel around by bus (22.8%). They usually stayed 2-3 nights and mainly spent money on meals and accommodation during their trip. Importantly, they tended to have higher expenditure on various on-site tourism services than the other two segments.

Enjoyers mostly traveled by private/rental car (40.4%). Understandably, more than one-half of the *Enjoyers* (53%) used private/rental cars to get around the destination. *Enjoyers* mostly stayed one night (38.1%) and spent most of their money on accommodation. This can be explained by our fieldtrip observations, which showed that *Enjoyers* were more inclined to stay either at a local resort or drive into the town center to stay at a modern, luxury hotel.

Information (N = 416)	Variables	Explorers	Seekers (Percentage)	Enjoyers	χ2	*p*-value
Transportation mode to the Central Highlands (N = 416)					41.942	<.001
	Airplane	11.2	15.4	10.6		
	Bus	45.7	48.3	23.8		
	Private/Rental Car	25.9	16.8	40.4		
	Motorbike	13.8	18.8	25.2		
	Other	3.4	0.7	0		
Transportation mode within the Central Highlands [a] (N = 416)	Bus (N=56)	18.1	22.8	0.7	34.579	<.001
	Private/rental car (N=158)	30.2	28.9	53.0	22.688	<.001
	Taxi (N=71)	25.0	16.8	11.3	8.766	.012
	Motorbike (N=211)	54.3	52.3	46.4	1.906	.386
	On foot (N=79)	26.7	20.1	11.9	9.543	.008
Stay overnight (N = 416)					17.465	<.001
	Yes	85.3	87.2	69.5		
	No	14.7	12.8	30.5		
Length of stay (N=333)					39.156	<.001
	1 night	26.3	14	38.1		
	2 nights	49.5	48.1	27.6		
	3 nights	9.1	28.7	25.7		
	4-6 nights	8.1	4.7	7.6		
	7-10 nights	2.0	2.3	1		
	11 nights or above	5.0	2.2	0		
Tour package (VND) (N=72)					14.06	.080
	Less than 3,000,000 or 3,000,000	37.5	10	12.5		
	3,000,001 - 5,000,000	33.3	32.5	25		
	5,000,001 - 7,000,000	16.7	40	25.0		
	7,000,001 - 10,000,000	8.3	17.5	37.5		
	Above 10,000,000	4.2	0	0		
Separated expenditure *(Average expenditure of the whole group in* ***thousand*** *VND)*	Accommodation, including any meals & drinks where you are staying and any amount (N = 270)	804	1,145	1,335	F = 4.017	.019
	Meals, drinks, and food (N = 333)	1,249	1,463	869	F = 10.202	<.001
	Tourism, entertainment, events and other leisure activities (N = 333)	446	780	410	F = 10.117	<.001
	Tour guides/tour services (N = 334)	109	143	81	F = 1.588	.206
	Transport, such as taxis, public transport, petrol, car hire and vehicle repair (N = 337)	944	799	629	F = 2.843	.060
	Retail Shopping - such as souvenirs, gifts, books, clothing, etc. (N= 335)	525	739	533	F = 2.428	.090
	Any other Expenses (N = 336)	259	308	201	F = 1.350	.261

Note. [a] The *'Bike'* variable was excluded since 3 cells (50%) have expected count less than 5.

Table 5. Trip characteristics. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Characteristics of Host-visitor Interactions

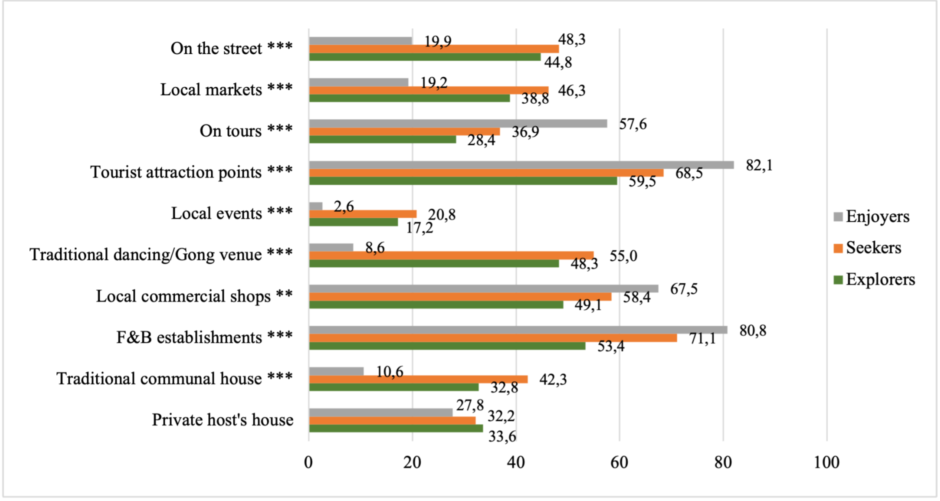
Physical settings in which visitors interacted with the hosts

Explorers and *Seekers* were significantly more likely than *Enjoyers* to interact in settings which were associated with ethnic culture (Figure 2). For instance, 55% of *Seekers* and 48.3% of *Explorers*, visited traditional dancing/Gong venues, compared to only 8.6%

of *Enjoyers*. Similarly, 42.3% of *Seekers* and 32.8% of *Explorers* interacted with hosts at a traditional communal house, while only 10.6% of *Enjoyers* did. Notably, no significant differences were found in the likelihood of visiting a private house across the three segments.

The proportion of *Enjoyers* interacting with local people was significantly higher in commercial settings; food and beverage establishments (80.8%) vs. 54.3% for *Explorers* and 71.1% for *Seekers*, tourist attraction points (82.1%) compared to 59.5% for *Explorers* and 68.5% for *Seekers*, and local commercial shops (67.5%) compared to 49.1% for *Explorers* and 58.4% for *Seekers*.

More than one-half of *Enjoyers* (57.6%) interacted with the locals on tours. *Seekers* and *Explorers* seemed to interact more frequently with ethnic people at local markets (46.3%, 38.8% respectively) or on the street (48.3%, 44.8% respectively) than the *Enjoyers* (both around 19%).



Note. n = 416, ** p = .01, *** p < .001

Figure 2. Physical settings in which visitors interacted with hosts. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Content of interactions that visitors had with the hosts

Table 6 compares three segments on the content of, and satisfaction with, interaction with the hosts. *Explorers* tended to interact with the locals at all ranges of intensity levels. Remarkably, they tended to have more intense interactions, e.g., exchanging personal contact with hosts (43.4%), than the other two segments. They were most likely to interact with locals in commercial encounters, e.g., tasting food and beverages (91.3%), participating in Gong performances (46.6%) or local events (29.6%) but were less satisfied with these encounters. A possible explanation can be that *Explorers* were well-educated and focused on host-site involvement as a motivation. Thus, they might be more demanding of the hosts when engaging in such interactions.

No significant differences were found in terms of interactions with hosts when purchasing goods and services and talking to local guides during tours. Yet, more than

90% of each segment interacted with hosts when purchasing goods and services. In such commercial interactions, *Seekers* were more satisfied than *Explorers* and *Enjoyers*.

Seekers were more likely to interact with hosts at all ranges of intensity levels like *Explorers,* yet they were mostly pleased with all interaction activities. Interestingly, they were even satisfied with low-intensity interactions, such as observing the local way of life (mean = 4.04), photographing with hosts (4.02), or observing Gong performances and local events (4.14).

Enjoyers were the least likely to interact with locals at all intensity levels. Their on-site tourism activities were similar to those of 'excursion tourism' or 'tribal village tour' groups found in Jorpakha, Thailand (Trupp, 2014). They were slightly satisfied with these interactions except for those occurring in Gong performances, local events, or handicraft-making venues. They have the lowest satisfaction ratings for short chats with villagers (3.35) and seeking local travel recommendations (3.49).

	Content of interactions	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers			Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	ANOVA		Post Hoc[b]
		Percentage			$\chi 2$	*p*-value	Average satisfaction (Mean)[a]			F	*p*-value	
Fulfilling long-term social needs	Exchanging personal contact details with the host for future communication (N=388)	43.4	43.1	29	7.617	.022	4.09	4.00	3.32	F(2,147) = 11.930	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Exchanging gift with the host (N=387)	34.5	35.3	21.7	7.353	.025	4.10	4.21	3.77	F(2,115) = 3.076	.050	SE > EN
	Making friends with ethnic people (host) (N=387)	40.2	33.3	26.3	5.427	.066	4.19	4.15	3.61	F(2,127) = 6.609	.002	EX & SE > EN
Seeking mutual understanding	Staying at the host's house (N=115)	59.4	64.4	76.3	2.464	.292	4.16	4.37	4.42	F(2,76) = 1.618	0.205	No difference
	Enjoying meals with the host (N=120)	66.7	55.6	57.1	1.082	.582	4.54	4.48	4.46	F(2,72) = .109	0.897	No difference
	Having a long conversation with the host for learning and sharing together (N=121)	84.8	82.2	88.4	.659	.719	4.30	4.37	3.95	F(2,102) = 4.265	.017	SE > EN
	Learning to speak ethnic language via the host (N=118)	57.6	68.2	51.2	2.588	.274	4.04	4.00	3.69	F(2,69) = 1.049	0.356	No difference
Purchasing goods and services	Interacting with the host when they provide me goods and services (N=411)	94.8	95.9	90.5	3.980	.137	3.79	3.94	3.40	F(2,380) = 19.821	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Tasting ethnic food & beverages (N=408)	91.3	88.5	81.4	6.120	.047	4.07	4.29	3.95	F(2,249) = 8.434	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Talking together with local guide during tours (N=396)	71.3	65	61.6	2.661	.264	3.80	4.05	3.69	F(2,255) = 4.786	.009	SE > EN
	Participating in traditional musical/dancing/Gong performance) (N=398)	46.6	40.1	21.4	19.647	<.001	4.11	4.38	4.38	F(2,133) = 2.452	.090	No difference
	Participating in local events (N=394)	29.6	26.6	14.3	9.799	.007	3.92	4.33	5.00	F(2,85) = 4.906	.010	SE > EX
	Participating in the production of handicrafts and/or coffee, local specialties (N=391)	26.3	24.8	9.6	14.185	<.001	3.97	4.47	4.00	F(2,73) = 4.760	.011	SE > EX
Seeking information or direction	Having short chats with the host when searching information about the village/local services (N=406)	73.0	82.3	69.4	6.817	.033	3.59	3.83	3.35	F(2,300) = 12.845	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Asking for/sought a help (N=394)	43.5	44.7	28.3	9.581	.008	3.96	4.12	3.49	F(2,149) = 10.911	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Seeking local travel recommendation or travel itinerary (N=393)	50.0	54.6	32.6	14.895	<.001	3.73	4.02	3.35	F(2,176) = 9.151	<.001	SE > EX & EN
Presence of hosts and visitors without active interactions	Observing traditional musical/dancing/Gong performance) (N=393)	60.0	48.9	27.3	28.859	<.001	3.73	4.14	3.67	F(2,123) = 5.360	.006	SE > EX
	Observing the local events (N=386)	43.4	38.7	18.4	20.665	<.001	3.66	4.14	3.42	F(2,124) = 12.936	<.001	SE > EX & EN
	Observing how to make handicrafts, and/or coffee, local specialties, traditional food (N=406)	56.1	59.2	40.7	11.237	.004	3.59	4.08	4.05	F(2,204) = 9.596	<.001	SE & EN > EX
	Taking photos with host (N=406)	71.9	70.1	54.7	10.943	.004	3.86	4.02	3.52	F(2,259) = 10.780	<.001	EX & SE > EN
	Observing local way of life (N=407)	79.1	89	84.4	4.747	.093	3.79	4.04	3.40	F(2,341) = 24.762	<.001	SE > EX > EN

Note. [a] Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = *completely dissatisfied* to 5 = *completely satisfied*

[b] Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 6. Content of and satisfaction with interaction with hosts. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Difficulties that visitors encountered in the interaction with hosts

There was no significant difference in the likelihood of experiencing most interaction difficulties across the three segments (Table 7). However, it is important to note three key points: first, the respondents strongly agreed that they found it difficult to understand local customs and taboos, demonstrated by average ratings of 4.03 (*Explorers*, *Seekers*) and 4.13 (*Enjoyers*). Second, they also reported some challenges in language

	Interaction difficulties	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	ANOVA F	p-value	Post Hoc
		Mean rating					
Verbal and Non-verbal behaviours	I misunderstood/misinterpreted because of different dialects, regional accents, or jargons.	3.69	3.78	3.74	F(2,255) = .199	.820	No difference
	I felt confused in the communication because of the host's way to express in Vietnamese.	3.73	3.84	3.74	F(2,333) = .611	.543	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable when the host avoided to look at me or looked at somewhere when we were talking.	3.28	3.24	3.47	F(2,253) = 1.331	.266	No difference
	I did not know what was happening when the host frowned	3.33	2.55	3.64	F(2,156) = 1.128	.326	No difference
	I misunderstood because of host's postures and/or gestures.	3.62	3.68	3.62	F(2,256) = .142	.868	No difference
Speech acts	I did not know the appropriate physical distance I should keep between the host and me in our interaction.	3.47	3.44	3.32	F(2,268) = .598	.551	No difference
	I did not know whether I should introduce myself to the host casually or formerly.	3.40	3.61	3.41	F(2,281) = 1.176	.310	No difference
	I did not know how to show my respect to the host in our interaction.	3.10	3.47	3.21	F(2,259) = 2.515	.083	No difference
	I did not know how to behave appropriately with different hosts who had different social statuses.	3.31	3.44	3.21	F(2,226) = .993	.372	No difference
Episodes	I felt confused when the host refused to hold or shake my hands.	3.25	3.29	3.72	F(2,146) = 2.461	.089	No difference
	I felt confused when the host avoided to answer or kept silent.	3.32	3.58	3.85	F(2,221) = 4.103	.018	EN > EX
	I could not respond quickly in different situations during our interaction because I was confused.	2.94	3.17	2.74	F(2,237) = 2.678	.071	No difference
	I could not recognise well between serious speaking and joke telling.	2.75	3.30	3.12	F(2,196) = 3.542	.031	SE > EX
	I felt uncomfortable in the way the host talked over other people (their neighbourhoods, other ethnic people and/or tourists).	3.13	3.21	3.27	F(2,127) = .161	.852	No difference
	I did not know what I should say/do to the host at the end of our interaction.	2.98	3.31	3.17	F(2,244) = 1.469	.232	No difference
	I felt to be misunderstood when tipping ethnic hosts.	3.08	2.95	2.97	F(2,167) = .292	.747	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable with the set-up of the room/stage.	2.56	2.82	2.83	F(2,254) = 1.470	.232	No difference
	I did not know how to respond well to the greetings and farewells that fit into the local way.	2.95	3.23	2.84	F(2,229) = 3.255	.040	SE > EN
	I was not familiar with local eating practices (kinds of food, amount of food, time of eating, way of eating).	3.50	3.36	3.49	F(2,265) = .527	.591	No difference
	I did not know how to get involved in religious events/practices.	3.72	3.75	3.83	F(2,236) = .287	.751	No difference
Relationships	I felt I was not trusted by the host as I was an outsider of the village.	2.88	2.97	3.12	F(2,277) = .986	.374	No difference
	I felt to be distant because I was a customer/buyer/tourist.	3.10	3.19	3.39	F(2,322) = 1.604	.203	No difference
	I felt uncomfortable when the host considered our interaction as material relationship.	2.89	3.04	3.36	F(2,179) = 2.325	.101	No difference
Life scripts	I felt the host's interaction with us was unnatural.	3.20	3.37	3.54	F(2,313) = 2.062	.129	No difference
	I felt the host seemed to be shy in our interaction.	3.40	3.47	3.59	F(2,315) = .779	.460	No difference
	I felt the host tended to be dominant in our interaction.	2.14	2.01	2.20	F(2,235) = .788	.456	No difference
	I felt less confident in the first conversation or meeting with the host.	2.58	2.82	2.64	F(2,298) = 1.141	.321	No difference
Cultural patterns	I felt uncomfortable when the host tried to talk about his/her personal problems.	2.54	2.96	3.16	F(2,192) = 4.295	.015	EN > EX
	I felt uncomfortable when the host asked about some very personal questions.	3.18	3.33	3.25	F(2,147) = .251	.779	No difference
	I did not know how to refuse host's request politely (be invited to drink local wine, taste 'exotic' food, dance, try traditional costumes, or purchase souvenir).	3.50	3.52	3.31	F(2,248) = .913	.403	No difference
	I was not familiar with host's daily routine (e.g., time to go to bed/wake up, working time, meals time, ...)	3.30	3.33	3.52	F(2,242) = 1.340	.264	No difference
	I felt difficult to understand host's customs and taboos.	4.03	4.03	4.13	F(2,290) = .388	.679	No difference

Note: Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

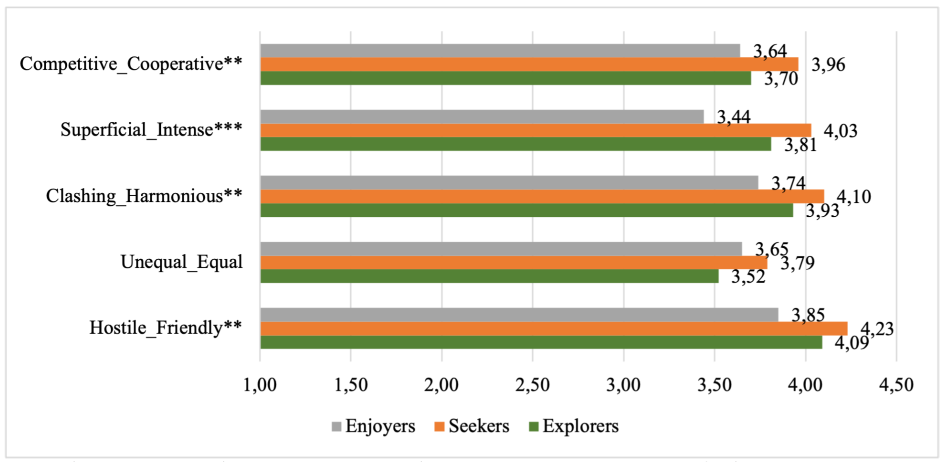
Table 7. Interaction difficulties that tourists encountered. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

barriers, including different dialects, regional accents, or jargon (3.69 – 3.74) and host's expressions in Vietnamese (3.73 – 3.84). Lastly, all three segments moderately agreed that they did not know how to get involved in religious events/practices (3.72 – 3.83).

For those variables with significant differences across the three segments, *Explorers* were least likely to have experienced interaction difficulties with hosts. *Seekers* were somewhat likely to have experienced some interaction difficulties and *Enjoyers* were more likely to have experienced interaction difficulties than others. For example, *Seekers* (3.30) were more likely than *Explorers* (2.75) to agree that they could not distinguish between serious speaking and joke-telling. While *Enjoyers* tended to agree more that they got confused when the host avoided answering or kept silent (3.85) and were more likely to find it difficult when the host tried to relate to his/her personal problems (3.16), compared to *Explorers* (3.32, 2.54, respectively).

How did visitors feel about their interactions with hosts?

Respondents in the three segments were likely to evaluate the quality of interaction as positive in general, with *Seekers* tending to rate their interaction quality with hosts higher (Figure 3). *Seekers* (4.23 and 4.10, respectively) reported higher scores than *Enjoyers* (3.85 and 3.74), rating interactions as 'friendly' and 'harmonious'. *Seekers* also found interactions to be more 'cooperative' (3.96) than *Explorers* (3.70) and *Enjoyers* (3.64). Interestingly, both *Explorers* (3.81) and *Seekers* (4.03) rated the interactions as more 'intense' than *Enjoyers* (3.44). There was no significant difference across the three segments in the 'unequal–equal' rating.



Note. Values were measured via 5-point semantic scale, 1= negative sentiment (e.g., superficial) to 5 = positive sentiment (e.g., intense)
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN
** p < .01, *** p < .001
Competitive – Cooperative: SE > EX & EN
Superficial – Intense: EX & SE > EN
Clashing – Harmonious: SE > EN
Unequal – Equal: No significance
Hostile – Friendly: SE > EN

Figure 3. Quality of interaction. *Source*: Elaborated by the authors

What did visitors think after the trip?

Each segment's overall trip experiences and perception of long-term ethnic tourism outcomes were consistent with their interactions (Table 8). Overall, *Explorers* rated the quality of interaction as moderately positive. Subsequently, they expressed neutral opinions on ethnic tourism outcomes contributing to the destination community. *Seekers* rated the interaction quality high and were significantly more likely to have positive attitudes and future behaviors. They agreed that ethnic tourism makes positive social, cultural, and economic contributions. By contrast, *Enjoyers* rated the interaction quality as the lowest and were least likely to agree with the positive contribution of ethnic tourism. For instance, *Seekers* were more likely to return to the ethnic destination (4.39) vs. *Explorers* (3.90) and *Enjoyers* (3.77). Generally, *Seekers* more strongly agreed that ethnic tourism contributes to the local quality of life (4.56) vs. *Explorers* (4.22) and *Enjoyers* (4.08).

Overall ethnic tourism experience outcomes	Explorers	Seekers	Enjoyers	ANOVA	Post hoc
		Mean rating		F	
My attitude toward ethnic people is more positive compared to pre-visit	3.70	4.09	3.66	F(2,413) = 8.607	SE > EX & EN
I will share my positive experiences about the Central Highlands on social media.	3.65	4.31	3.73	F(2,411) = 14.719	SE > EX & EN
I would like to return to the Central Highlands in the future.	3.90	4.39	3.77	F(2,409) = 14.468	SE > EX & EN
I would recommend visiting the Central Highlands to others.	3.90	4.43	3.74	F(2,406) = 19.415	SE > EX & EN
I want to learn more about ethnic language.	3.35	3.49	2.51	F(2,411) = 43.285	SE & EX > EN
I want to learn more about ethnic minority culture.	3.91	4.15	3.09	F(2,412) = 62.634	SE & EX > EN
I want to establish/maintain an ongoing mutual relationship with the host.	3.46	3.67	2.83	F(2,411) = 27.623	SE & EX > EN
I would like to express my gratitude to ethnic people by exchanging or presenting gifts to the host.	3.57	3.72	2.80	F(2,411) = 31.397	SE & EX > EN
I found my interaction with ethnic people in the village to be rewarding and satisfying.	3.58	3.85	3.36	F(2,411) = 10.255	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism can make positive contribution to the ethnic people's income in the future.	4.11	4.47	3.93	F(2,411) = 20.720	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism provide more meaningful employment/jobs.	4.19	4.53	4.02	F(2,411) = 18.114	SE > EX & EN
I believe tourism will contribute positively to the quality of life of this ethnic village.	4.22	4.56	4.08	F(2,411) = 16.834	SE > EX & EN

Note. Values were measured via 5-point Likert scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*
$p < .001$
Explorers: EX, Seekers = SE, Enjoyers = EN

Table 8. Tourist experience outcomes among three segments. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

Table 9 summarizes additional open-ended responses describing the two best features of the ethnic destinations identified by each segment and two things that need to be improved to deliver better tourism experiences and achieve long-term ethnic tourism outcomes.

Explorers and *Seekers* were impressed by ethnic and cultural assets and local architecture. *Seekers* also admired the positive personal qualities of villagers. Improvements in local human resources were suggested, including knowledge/awareness of tourism, communication and hospitality skills, proficiency in the Kinh/Vietnamese language, and better working attitudes and performance. Moreover, while *Explorers* suggested the recruitment of more villagers to work at local tourism enterprises and guaranteeing fair benefit distribution to the locals involved in ethnic tourism activities, *Seekers* further emphasized the need for cultural preservation.

Enjoyers were more interested in natural and cultural assets associated with entertaining activities such as elephants, the bamboo suspension bridge, dugout canoes, or

village sightseeing. They tended to recommend improvements in food hygiene and sanitation, attitudes and hospitality skills of local tourism staff.

Segments	Two best features	Two things need to be improved
Explorers	Gong performance, cuisine, *Cần* wine	Local human resources - communication skills, hospitality skills, language, working attitudes, local guide, knowledge/awareness of tourism, expertise in tourism
	Village architecture, stilt house, local housing architecture, traditional handicrafts, traditional costumes	Recruiting and training local villagers to participate in tourism, fair financial/benefit distribution to the locals
Seekers	Personal characteristics of local villagers: honest, friendly, sociable and humorous, kind, lovely, meek, naïve, hospitable	Host-tourist interaction, language, communication skills, working attitudes/performance at work
	Stilt house, housing architecture, village architecture, handicrafts, brocade weaving	Cultural preservation - ethnic identity, traditions, Gong culture, traditional food, traditional architecture
Enjoyers	Elephant, bamboo suspension bridge (hanging bridge), dugout canoe	Food hygiene and sanitation
	Stilt house, housing architecture, village architecture, traditional costumes	Attitudes and hospitality skills of staff

Table 9. Summary of two best features of ethnic destinations and two things that need to be improved across three segments. *Source:* Elaborated by the authors

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The study collected data from 438 responses of domestic visitors to Vietnam's Central Highlands. By employing the Travel Career Pattern (TCP) approach (Pearce & Lee, 2005), three segments of ethnic visitors were identified: *Explorers*, *Seekers*, and *Enjoyers* presented in three PERSONAS (Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6, respectively). The main features of each segment are summarized to answer the following questions: Who are they, where and how do they interact with ethnic hosts, how do they feel about such interactions, and what do they think about long-term ethnic tourism outcomes? The study provides a comprehensive understanding of the ethnic tourist market, particularly in the Southeast Asian context, proving that travel motivation is clearly associated with how visitors interact with ethnic hosts.

This study addresses the ADB and UNWTO's (2022) remarks to travel products and segments emphasizing authentic cultural and community-based experiences in Asia and the Pacific. While reinforcing the importance of examining host-tourist interactions in ethnic tourism (e.g., Su et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017), the study also contributes to existing research on a niche market of Asian domestic tourism which is more resilient and sustainable post-COVID-19 (Nyaupane et al., 2020; Trupp & Dolezal, 2020).

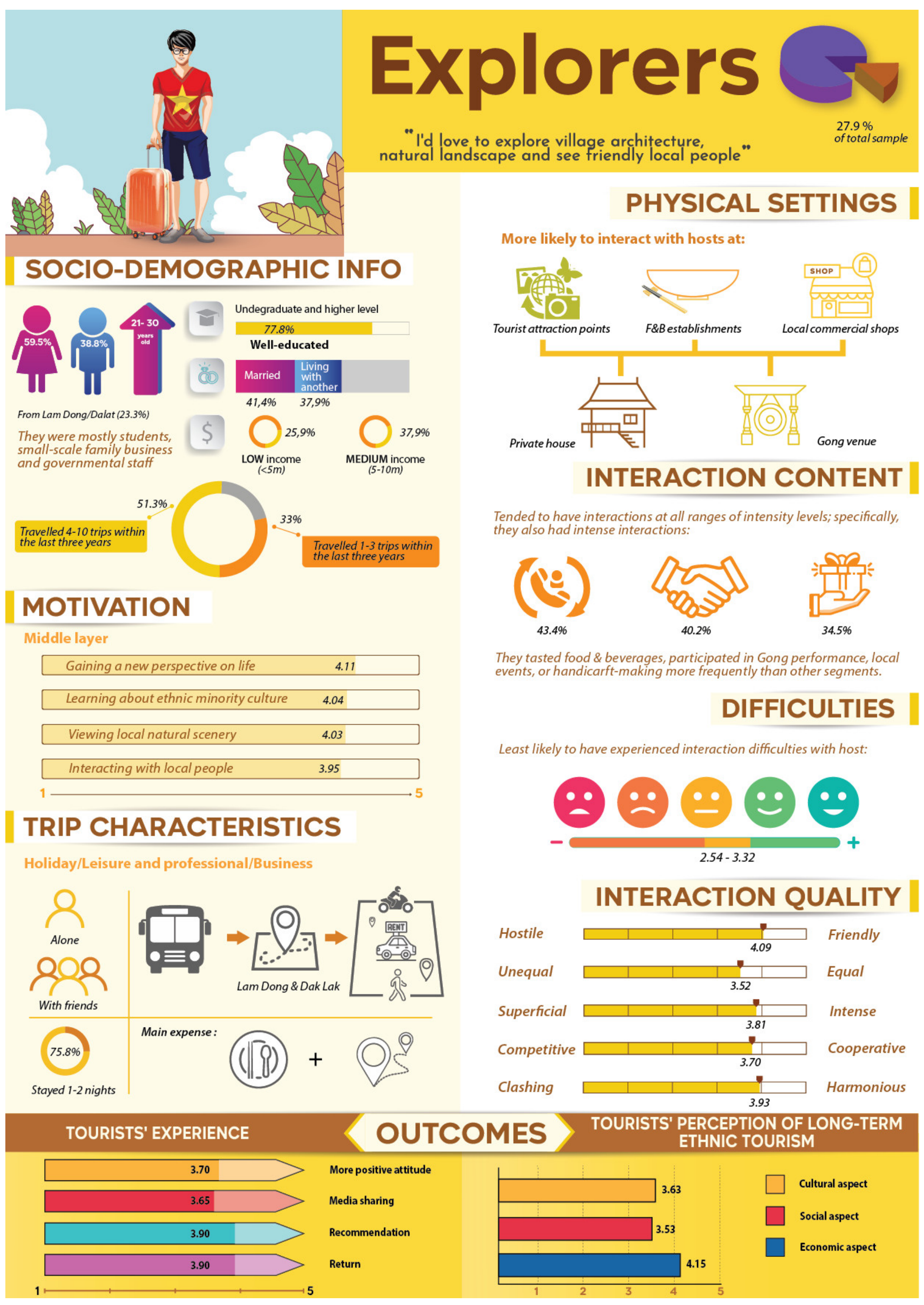


Figure 4. Explorers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

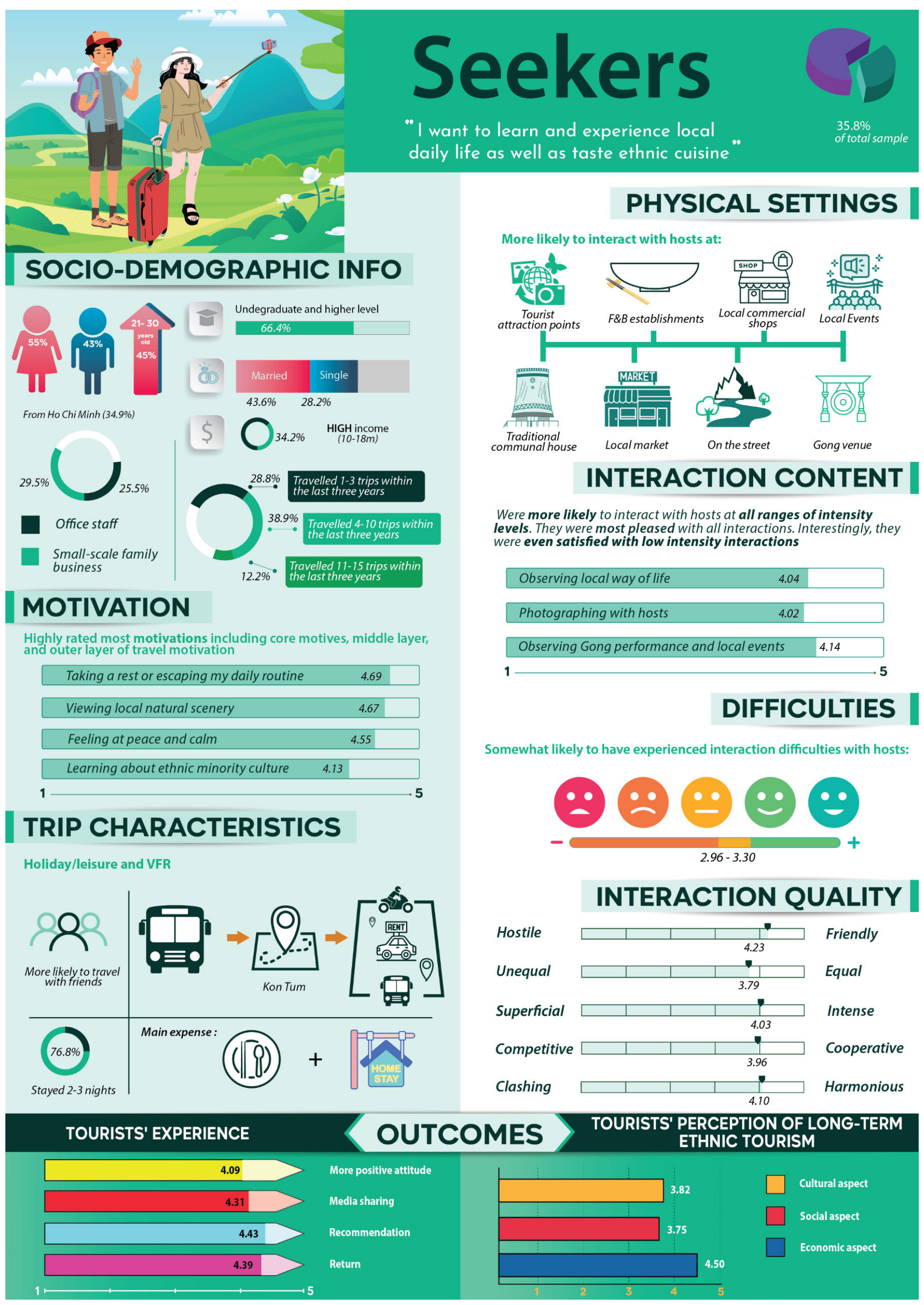


Figure 5. Seekers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

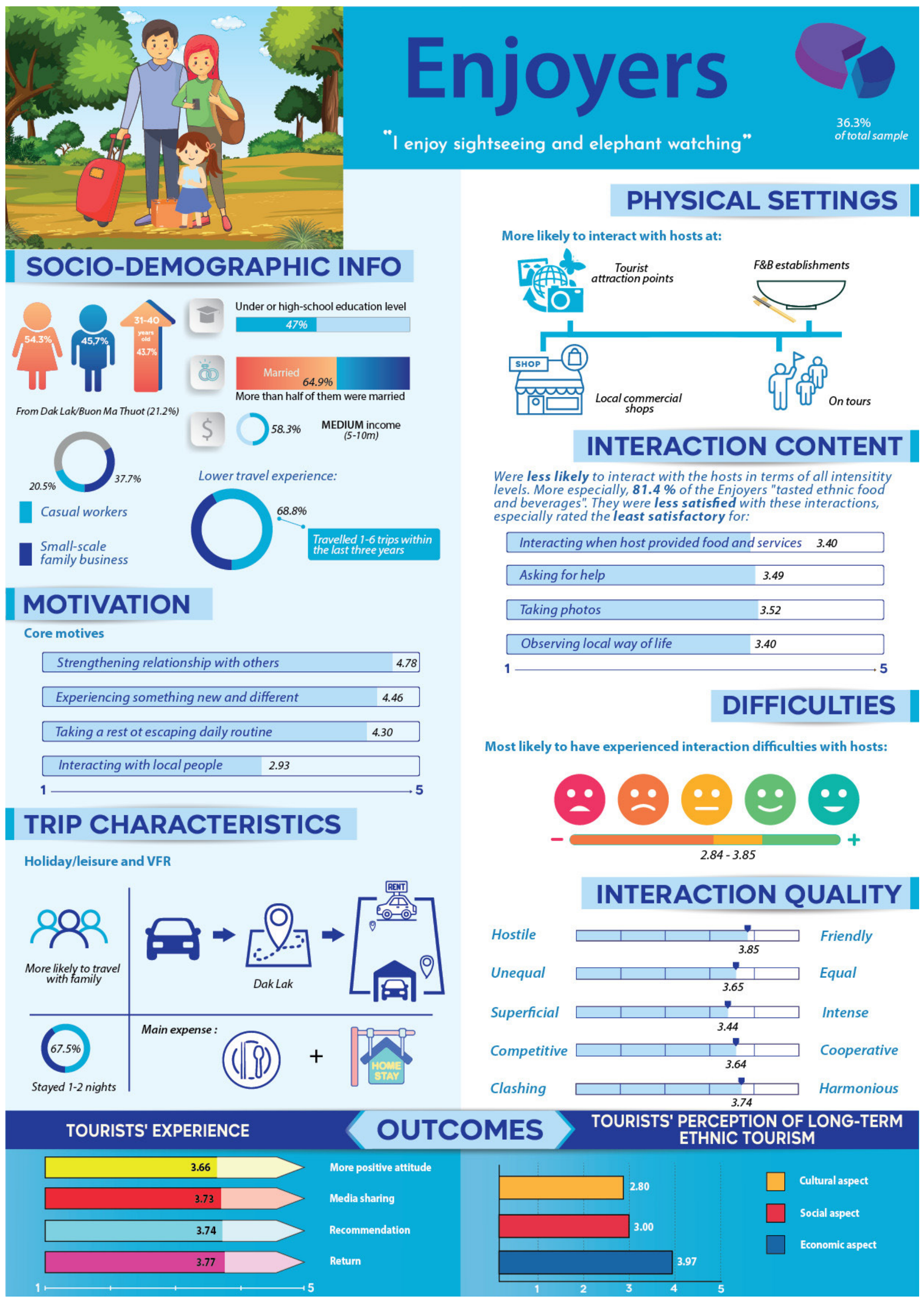


Figure 6. Enjoyers' Personas. *Source*: Designed by the first author and KStudio

Explorers and *Seekers* seem to be the most suitable target groups for the Central Highlands to achieve better interaction outcomes and positively contribute to the ethnic community. Both segments were motivated by local scenery, ethnic culture, and interaction with hosts, which are core components of ethnic tourism (Su et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2019). They were more likely to get involved in various interactions at ethnic destinations. This finding supports Pratt et al.'s (2013) study on tribal tourists interested in interacting with locals, having cultural exchange experiences, and sustainable development, which benefit the local Fijian community beyond the resorts.

Importantly, as depicted in Table 9, both *Explorers* and *Seekers* emphasized improving communication skills. More specifically, villagers offering hospitality services at the ethnic destination, the tour guides, and the mahouts need to improve active listening and observing, oral communication, and Kinh language proficiency. They must also learn hospitality skills and improve their attitudes and performance in the tourism workplace. Furthermore, both ethnic villagers and tourists must raise awareness of tourism impacts and cultural differences to achieve greater interaction outcomes. The two segments suggested the preservation of traditional culture and fair distribution of socioeconomic benefits to the ethnic communities. For example, at the lowest government level, the Commune's People Committee should directly support the villagers, who are directly involved in ethnic tourism, in terms of finance and policy to open special classes related to ethnic culture such as Gong performances, handicrafts, traditional food and beverage, allowing local artists to teach and transmit their knowledge and skills to village children. There should be a clear policy for recruiting and remunerating artists participating in the classes. The Commune's People Committee can consult higher-level government officials to allocate an adequate budget for paying these artists when they deliver the classes.

Explorers are more interested in "learning about ethnic culture" and "interacting with locals" than in other motivations. They tend to interact with the hosts at all intensity levels; specifically, they taste food and beverages and participate in local events or handicraft-making procedures more frequently than *Seekers*. However, *Explorers* are less satisfied with these interactions than *Seekers,* who interact with hosts at all intensity levels and tend to be satisfied with all interactions. Therefore, adding storytelling to ethnic tourism offerings is needed to encourage visitors to become more active in interactions and better understand the local way of life. As a result, *Explorers* may have "gained a new perspective on life" which is their most important motivation for visiting the village, and can ultimately lead to more positive interaction outcomes.

To attract more *Explorers* and *Seekers*, local tourism providers should diversify the range of food and beverage products, especially traditional ethnic cuisine (e.g., *Cần* wine, bamboo sticky rice, and charcoal-roasted chicken). Furthermore, seasonal farming specialties, souvenirs, and tourism entertainment activities could be provided in both greater variety and quantity to meet tourist demand, particularly for *Seekers* who had higher expenditure on shopping. To capitalize on the fact that roughly 90% of each segment interacted with locals when tasting ethnic cuisine, providing more opportunities and variety to taste traditional food will help to increase visitor expenditure and preserve ethnic culinary heritage. Traditional food recipe transmission

from senior females in the community to local restaurant chefs or even recruiting these ladies to work at restaurants can be encouraged. Cooking workshops or guided food tours are proposed to enhance visitors' engagement in learning ethnic culture and enjoying local gastronomy.

It is worth noting that all segments spent little money on tour guides/tour services. Villagers can be encouraged to get involved in ethnic tourism as local guides. Due to their local knowledge and genuine hospitality, they may encourage tourists to engage more in host-tourist interactions. Educating or training programs are required for these villagers to better communicate with tourists and to have well-equipped tourism skills when providing services.

Local transportation providers need to increase the number of daily bus trips to the Central Highlands region and improve the quality of bus services, especially the route from Ho Chi Minh City to the region. Increased opportunities for motorbike or car rental should be considered within each locality.

Both tourism marketers and practitioners should use social media marketing techniques, which are the primary source of information for these segments. The best features of the Central Highlands destination described in Table 9 imply that the focal point of marketing and advertising should be on ethnic cultural assets (Gong performance, cuisine, and *Cần* wine), local architecture, and the friendly and honest nature of the villagers. Facebook and Zalo (a Vietnamese platform) should be the leading social media platforms in this marketing strategy since Vietnam ranks seventh worldwide regarding the number of Facebook users, with over 80 % of Generation X and over 90% of Generation Y and Z using Facebook and Zalo (Statista Research Department, 2023). Strategies should be employed to encourage visitors to share their photos and comments about ethnic tourism experiences on social media as well as review platforms with gift vouchers or promo codes.

Segmentation results are useful for DMOs to understand current ethnic tourism markets and direct marketing efforts (Morrison, 2019). Importantly, the information becomes an input to community empowerment, enabling villagers to actively target which segment(s) they desire in order to foster positive interaction outcomes rather than placing tourist expectations as the core drivers of tourism planning, with the villagers playing a minimal role (Lor et al., 2019). Further, this step is necessary to develop specific ethnic tourism products to attract the target markets aligned with and more likely to contribute to community aspirations for the future (Moscardo & Murphy, 2016).

Theoretically, this study re-affirms the application of TCP in the existing tourism literature on tourist motivation and segmentation. Consistent with the key principle of TCP theory (Pearce, 2005), less important motives in the middle- and outer- layer are influenced by the levels of previous travel experience. The study further expands the body of knowledge on the ethnic tourist market since the early work done by Moscardo and Pearce (1999). It offers a more comprehensive understanding of the value and role of cluster analysis (Jopp et al., 2022). More specifically, the findings analyze the differences between three groups of ethnic tourists, focusing on their interactions with local villagers in non-Western tourism. The current study also provides insightful information on the ethnic tourism market in the context of Southeast Asian domestic tourism, contributing to enabling a prosperous, inclusive, and

resilient region (Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 2022).

The main limitation of this study is that data were collected at times outside of the traditional festive period in several ethnic communities when many Gong performances typically take place. Tourists, who are highly motivated by participating in ethnic festivals and Gong performances, were absent from this work. Future studies can expand on these research findings to propose an appropriate marketing strategy for a single market. Open-ended responses from three segments, particularly *Explorers* and *Seekers,* will be useful for future research to consider improving interaction quality and long-term ethnic tourism outcomes from a tourist perspective. A focus on the relationship between interaction content and tourist intentional behaviors would also be suggested to increase tourist revisitation and attract potential tourists.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the intellectual input from Professor Philip L. Pearce, as the inspiration and early conceptualization of this research.

This work was financially supported by a JCU Postgraduate Research Scholarship (JCUPRS) and the College of Business, Law and Governance.

DISCLOSURE

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Assembling Authenticity: The Afterlives of U.S. Army Uniforms in Thailand

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Received: 29 November 2023 / Accepted: 8 September 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Singdee, C. (2024). Assembling authenticity: The afterlives of U.S. army uniforms in Thailand. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 135-151.

In Thailand, U.S. military vintage clothing and insignia from the Vietnam War era are highly sought after by passionate collectors. This article explores how Thai collectors engage in a practice of 'assembling authenticity' through their pursuit and acquisition of these items. By examining collectors' intimate relationships with these material objects, this article reveals how personal memories and understandings of the war are shaped, often diverging from grand historical narratives. Furthermore, the competitive dynamics within the Thai collecting community, where Vietnam War materials become a form of capital that collectors leverage for commercial and social benefits, is investigated. The role of collectors' networks in negotiating and trading these items is also examined. By attending to these various dimensions of Thai collectors' engagement with U.S. military vintage fashion, this article explores the possibilities these sartorial materials hold for recreating and reshaping memories of the Cold War era within the Thai collecting arena. Through this exploration insights into the complex interplay between material culture, personal and collective memory, and the social worlds of collectors are offered.

Keywords: Collective Memory; Thai Collectors; U.S. Military Uniforms; Vietnam War; Vintage Fashion

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores the enduring presence of materials from the Vietnam War era in contemporary Thai society, specifically focusing on the transformation of U.S. military uniforms and relics into cultural artifacts instilled with significant symbolic value. Although the physical battles of the war ended in 1975, its memory and resonance persist through various mediums, including personal narratives, collective memories, and cultural representations. The Vietnam War remains an ongoing, evolving, and contested narrative that continues to shape the lives of subsequent generations. Research on this topic has focused on the effects on combatant nations, such as the United States and Vietnam. However, this phenomenon extends beyond American and Vietnamese societies to other

contexts, such as Thailand, where consumers actively engage with the war's artifacts to construct and contest meanings and memories.

Christina D. Weber elucidates how the Vietnam War's legacy affects subsequent generations of Americans, highlighting the war's ongoing impact on American society (Weber, 2015). Similarly, other scholars have examined the war's enduring influence on Vietnamese politics and society (Nguyen, 2016; Schwenkel, 2009). While these studies provide valued insights into the war's afterlife in the primary combatant nations, there is a gap in understanding how the war's material culture and memory extend to non-combatant nations, such as Thailand, which were indirectly affected by the conflict.

This study addresses this space by examining how Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia create, negotiate, and assign new meanings and values to these objects, diverging from their original purposes. By employing an assemblage perspective and ethnographic methods, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of how the interplay between material culture, individual experiences, and socio-cultural contexts shapes the construction of personal and collective memories surrounding the Vietnam War in Thailand.

This study employs an assemblage lens to extend beyond the limitations of material culture approaches and explore the complexities surrounding military vintage clothing consumption in the Thai context. Material culture theory, pioneered by scholars such as Jules David Prown (1982) and Daniel Miller (1987), focuses on the study of objects and their implications within cultural contexts. While this approach has been widely used to examine the relationship between people and things, it has been criticized for treating objects as static representations of cultural meanings. In contrast, assemblage theory, derived from the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), provides a framework for considering the dynamic interplay between material artifacts and human practices within networks that evolve to reflect changing social, cultural, and economic dynamics. This theoretical approach allows for understanding the complex connections between objects, people, and their contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs ethnographic methods to investigate the practices and experiences of Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia. The research, conducted from 2019 to 2021, utilized multiple data collection strategies, including in-depth interviews with 25 Thai male collectors, participant observation at collector gatherings, online ethnography of Facebook groups, and interviews with international vintage clothing dealers.

The study traces the historical context of U.S. military vintage consumption in Thailand from the Cold War era to the present day. It examines Thai collectors' acquisition and redecorating practices, uncovering how the materiality of these artifacts interacts with human practices to challenge conventional notions of authenticity. The research explores how Thai collectors reinterpret and assign new meanings and values to these U.S. military garments, diverging from their original purposes.

Case studies of individual collectors reveal how these uniforms and insignia serve as conduits connecting the past and present, fulfilling various personal and social needs. By shedding light on the complex relationships between Thai collectors,

Vietnam War-era artifacts, and their socio-cultural contexts, this study provides a theoretical understanding of how material culture, individual experiences, and collective memories intersect to shape the ongoing significance of historical events. This research brings a new perspective to the study of war memory and society by theorizing about the direct effect of indirect material flows on society decades after the war. While previous research has examined the long-term societal changes caused by the direct influence of the war on active combatants and supporting nations, this study is distinctive in its investigation of the afterlives of material goods circulating in a non-combatant nation decades after hostilities. The findings have practical implications for museums, collectors, and others interested in preserving and interpreting the material heritage of the Vietnam War era.

U.S. MILITARY UNIFORMS AND INSIGNIA: THE PATH TO THAILAND

Thailand is renowned as a prime vintage clothing market in Southeast Asia. Thai consumers have collected vintage items since the Cold War, influenced by American culture during the 'American Era.' Strengthened U.S.-Thai ties during the Vietnam War and increased economic connections and interactions through American soldiers' vacations and media influx. Initially, Thais acquired vintage clothing from wealthy households and American soldiers trading clothes for services. In the mid-1970s, Thai-Malaysian entrepreneurs began importing used clothes from U.S. charities to sell along the southern Thai border. Vendors then brought these secondhand items to retail and wholesale markets in Bangkok.

These clothes were distributed to various markets, including Bangkok's famous Sanam Laung weekend market, and later relocated to Chatuchak Market.[1] This history reflects Thailand's unique position in the vintage clothing market, shaped by its cultural and economic ties with the United States, particularly during the Vietnam War era.

During the Cold War, U.S. military uniforms gained popularity among Thai consumers through two channels. Thai folk musicians and young activists, influenced by anti-Vietnam War movements, used secondhand clothes to deliver political messages. In the 1970s, Thai folk singers like Caravan, Carabao, and Pongsit Kumpee wore Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms to protest the Thai government and U.S. involvement, highlighting working-class hardships, and supporting democracy (Myers-Moro, 1986, p. 108). Hollywood films also shaped this trend. *The Green Berets*, the only American-made film about the Vietnam war during the war, starred John Wayne and featured the popular Tiger stripes jacket. The M65 jacket, designed for extreme cold weather in 1965, became highly sought-after from the 1970s onward, known in Thailand as the 'jacket field.' Despite being unsuitable for the local climate, these jackets were collected for both wear and display, symbolizing 'cool' American culture. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between fashion, politics, and cultural influence in Thailand during and after the Vietnam War era.

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1 Chatuchak Market originated from a 1948 flea market in Sanam Luang, Bangkok. It relocated multiple times due to space issues and royal functions. In 1978, plans were made to move the market for Bangkok's bicentennial. It was established at its current Phahonyothin location in 1982 and officially opened in 1987 as Chatuchak Market.

The attractiveness of U.S. military uniforms has continued through the contemporary period and up to the present. Today, military clothing from around the world, not just from the U.S., continues to pour into Thailand as part of the supply of secondhand clothing originating from charity organizations and moving through transitional countries such as Malaysia, Cambodia, and Pakistan before reaching Thailand.[2] The admiration, study, and collection of U.S. Vietnam War military uniforms and insignias have taken on new forms as more information on this subject has become more readily available and accessible to consumers through the internet (e.g., through group blogs). More recently, Facebook has become the primary space for engaging in these consumptive activities. Consumers interested in U.S. military uniforms and insignias have begun to connect on Facebook's platform to share knowledge about materials from the Vietnam War and to exchange and trade goods (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A secondhand warehouse in Thailand where secondhand military clothes from Pakistan are waiting to be sorted and priced. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

REARRANGING THE PAST: EXPLORING ASSEMBLAGE AS A COLLECTING METHOD

The study of U.S. military uniforms, their transformation, and meaning intersects with the material culture framework utilized in this research. By acknowledging the agency of objects and their influence on consumers, this study emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between individuals and vintage uniforms, highlighting their role in shaping identities and experiences.[3] Drawing from anthro-

2 Hansen (2000) and Norris (2012) explore the global secondhand clothing trade, highlighting its complexity and the interplay between global and local dynamics. Their research, using material culture and global commodity chain perspectives, provides insights into globalization, inequality, and cultural exchange, while raising environmental and ethical questions.

3 The reciprocal relationship between individuals and objects is a central tenet of material culture studies, as discussed by scholars such as Miller (2005) and Tilley et al. (2006).

pologist Daniel Miller's (2005, pp. 1-4) concept of materiality, the dynamic role of objects in shaping social interactions and identities is underlined. Miller argues that objects play a pivotal role in identity formation and group affiliations, influencing consumption patterns and social norms.

While material culture studies offer appreciated insights into the meanings embedded in fashion artifacts, they may not fully capture the dynamic nature of fashion trends and practices. By examining fashion through the lens of material culture, this study investigates whether material culture approaches tend to fixate on the present fashion moment, disregarding its fluidity, impermanence, and complexities (Wilson, 1985). To address these limitations, the assemblage theory is employed as a complementary perspective to understand the complex interactions within the realm of fashion.

Assemblage theory challenges the traditional distinction between people and things, considering both as integral components of social assemblages, which recognize the active role of material objects in shaping actions. The key principles of assemblage theory are crucial for understanding the complex relationships between various elements in a system. The theory underscores the idea that these elements, whether people, objects, or ideas, come together to form assemblages that are more than the sum of their parts. In the context of fashion, assemblage theory provides a new perspective on how objects and their relationships with human and non-human actors contribute to the formation of social, cultural, and political realities. Scholars such as DeLanda (2006) and Bennett (2010) have further developed and applied this approach to the study of material culture. While assemblage theory is not extensively applied in fashion studies, it offers perceptions of the diverse elements and relationships within fashion phenomena.

This study combines material culture and assemblage theory to comprehensively understand how Thai collectors engage with U.S. military uniforms from the Vietnam War era. This integration allows focus on both the uniforms' materiality and the complex networks shaping their interpretation and valuation. This mode, exemplified by Woodward and Fisher (2014) and Dant (2006), emphasizes considering material properties and their interactions with human actors and social contexts. It is particularly suited to studying vintage clothing, recognizing multiple temporalities converging in collecting and wearing these garments (Jenss, 2015). Jenss (2015) highlights how vintage clothing references the past, is worn presently, and shapes future trends, enriching understanding of garments' new significance in different contexts. By integrating these approaches, this research demonstrates the potential for interdisciplinary studies in fashion and material culture, considering both symbolic and material dimensions of dress in understanding its social and cultural significance

Thai collectors transform U.S. military uniforms by collecting, modifying, and wearing them. Considering the uniforms' agency, cultural contexts, and actors involved in their circulation, extends understanding of the interplay between fashion, material culture, and globalization. Applying assemblage theory illuminates how garments experience transformations in meaning, value, and application when appropriated in a distinct cultural setting.

Two collecting practices have emerged in the Thai arena. The 'as is' approach,

emphasizing originality and authenticity, aligns with material culture perspectives that objects embody cultural meanings and histories. The value placed on rare uniforms and efforts to trace their provenance validate the significance of material properties in shaping meaning for collectors. However, the 'redecorated' approach, involving modification and completion with added insignia, highlights the dynamic nature of these objects as they circulate through different contexts. This practice allies with assemblage theory, emphasizing the fluid nature of social phenomena. By reconfiguring uniform elements, Thai collectors actively create new meanings and identities emerging from interactions between human and non-human actors.

The redecoration process is guided by the rules and regulations of the U.S. Armed Forces during the Vietnam War era, which are translated and shared among Thai collectors on Facebook pages. This demonstrates how the material properties of the uniforms and insignia are entangled with broader social and cultural practices, as well as the role of digital platforms in facilitating the circulation and reinterpretation of these objects. This interaction exemplifies the dynamic and open-ended nature of assemblages, where complex interactions between human and non-human constituents create emergent phenomena. The integration of material culture and assemblage theory allows an understanding of how Thai collectors navigate the complex interplay between the original meanings and functions of U.S. military uniforms and their recontextualization within contemporary Thai society. This tactic emphasizes the importance of considering the broader contexts and networks in which these assemblages evolve and acquire new meanings (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A collector redecorates his tropical combat jacket with a reference picture of a U.S. Army serviceman from the 25th Infantry Division. (photos by Chatchawan Ruenloey)

Thai collectors redecorate U.S. military uniforms with insignia based on their interpretations of ideal Vietnam War-era units and personnel, sketching inspiration from photographs and films. The process allows collectors to construct and negotiate meanings and identities associated with these uniforms by selecting and arranging specific insignia, such as rank, unit, nametag, and awards. The act of redecorating uniforms can be seen as a form of creative expression and identity construction, as collectors imbue these objects with new meanings and values that reflect their interests and aspirations.

Redecorating uniforms can be understood as a form of assemblage, in which collectors combine various material elements to create new configurations of meaning and value. Each insignia contributes to the overall significance of the redecorated uniform, forming a complex network of associations. The popularity of certain U.S. military units, like the First Cavalry Division with its iconic horse's head design, highlights the role of cultural narratives and media representations in influencing the desirability of specific insignia. These narratives and representations serve as cultural resources that collectors draw upon in their assemblage practices, contributing to the formation of shared meanings and identities within the collecting community.

From an assemblage perspective, redecorating uniforms is a dynamic process where meanings and identities associated with vintage artifacts evolve through interactions with collectors and socio-cultural contexts. Such a non-representational approach highlights these objects' transformative potential and their impact on owners' experiences and identities, moving beyond a symbolic understanding of fashion and material culture. As advocated by Nigel Thrift (2007, p. 7) in *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, this approach focuses on embodied, affective, and performative aspects of material culture, emphasizing how people interact with and experience fashion objects in everyday life, rather than solely on symbolic meanings.

Thai collectors' redecoration of U.S. military uniforms demonstrates the interplay between material culture and assemblage theory, revealing the complex dynamics of fashion and collecting. By treating uniforms as malleable objects, collectors create new meanings and identities emerging from interactions. This underscores the fluid nature of fashion and materials in a globalized world. Notably, this relationship can alter a society's collective memory, with war producing lasting influence through indirect means. The uniforms, initially symbolic of military identity, transform Thai collectors' hands, acquiring new identities and shaping collective narratives that diverge from their original context. This process echoes the enduring impact of conflict on societal psyche and cultural expressions, revealing the power of material objects in shaping collective memory.

THE SOCIAL LIVES AND BIOGRAPHIES OF THE VIETNAM WAR UNIFORMS

The social lives and biographies of Vietnam War uniforms offer insights into how these artifacts captivate Thai collectors. Drawing from Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), these commodities acquire new meanings as they circulate through different contexts. As fluid entities, the uniforms and insignia undergo constant transformations, accumulating diverse biographies through technical, social, and cultural alterations.

Originally crafted for soldiers in wartime Vietnam, uniforms served as symbols within the military hierarchy. However, post-war, their social lives transformed as they dispersed worldwide. They transitioned into commodities through philanthropic channels, traversing borders and continents. Upon reaching Thailand, these garments were re-evaluated and made available to buyers. Rare, vintage, and fashionable pieces commanded high prices, reflecting their newfound status in local and international markets. This journey from military issue to collectible item illustrates the dynamic nature of material culture, aligning with the assemblage approach that emphasizes the contingent nature of social phenomena, including fashion and material culture.

The journey of these uniforms from military issue to prized collectibles can be understood through "consumer pastness," a concept introduced by Schibik et al. (2022, p. 2). This concept suggests that consumers perceive products with higher pastness as scarcer, more desirable, and valuable. This perception becomes integral to the assemblage for Thai collectors, emerging from interactions between uniforms' material properties, collectors' knowledge and imagination, and cultural narratives about the Vietnam War era. Consumer pastness contributes to the uniforms' aura and perceived authenticity, influencing how collectors engage with and value these objects.

When acquired, these uniforms undergo recommodification by vendors and re-singularization by collectors, acquiring distinct biographies and generating an aura of authenticity from their association with war participants. This aura is reinforced by their production period (1965-1975), lending unquestionable genuineness. These dates correspond to the Vietnam War period, and items manufactured then are regarded as authentic, having been produced during the conflict. They are highly sought after due to historical significance and direct war connection. This concept provides another dimension to understanding how uniforms accumulate diverse biographies and acquire new meanings as they circulate through different social contexts. It highlights the complex interplay between materiality, perception, and value in collecting practices.

As these objects circulate through commoditization and singularization, their biographies unfold, inviting new owners to connect with past lives. For Thai collectors, the betweenness of material and immaterial emerges from the imagined reality assigned by new owners. The uniforms and insignia allow them to conjure a war they did not experience but can now be imagined through various accounts and the objects' fabric and patina. This process aligns with studies on material objects, memory, and imagination, offering insights into how people construct identities about the past. Scholars like Hirsch and Spitzer (2006) and Sturken (1997) highlight material objects' importance in mediating imagined experiences and memories, particularly for traumatic or displaced pasts. These objects serve as tangible links, helping individuals and communities reconstruct, interpret, and engage with their histories.

The meanings associated with these materials facilitate conversations between collectors and their acquisitions, transcending fixed objectivity and incorporating them into cultural objects loosely related to specific times and spaces. Meaning emerges through sociality rather than classification efforts. This understanding of Vietnam War uniforms' social lives align with the assemblage perspective. Such practice highlights their dynamic nature as they interact with collectors and the broader socio-cultural context. By tracing complex networks of associations and meanings, vintage military uniforms' role shapes Thai collectors' identities, experiences, and memories.

THE AURA AND TOUCH OF AUTHENTICITY

The concept of authenticity in fashion can be approached from two perspectives: one that emphasizes the inherent quality of objects and another that views it as socially constructed and context-dependent (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In the realm of vintage fashion, authenticity often serves as a form of cultural capital (Entwistle & Rocamora, 2006), with exercises like storytelling and curation shaping perceptions of genuineness. Materiality and sensory experiences also play a crucial role in constructing authenticity, invoking a sense of historical depth and connection to the past.

For Thai collectors of Vietnam-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia, authenticity is closely tied to historical narratives and the concept of aura, as explored by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1936/2008, pp. 7-9). Objects deemed authentic due to their historical roots, connect collectors to real experiences and resist commodification, despite their mass-produced nature. Benjamin's notion of aura highlights how relics from past eras evoke a sense of marvel and infuse inanimate objects with social life and narrative. Korsmeyer (2019) emphasizes the importance of physical engagement with historical artifacts as a means of connecting with the past. She argues that touching authentic objects allows individuals to forge direct links to bygone times, generating genuine aesthetic encounters. Korsmeyer (2019, p. 28) stresses that for an object to authentically connect us to the past, it must be preserved in its original state.

However, this emphasis on maintaining authenticity through preservation may overlook complexities in reproductions or altered objects. In the case of Thai collectors redecorating U.S. military uniforms, the aura and authenticity of these objects become fragmented as they negotiate new narratives. By referencing U.S. servicemen from the Vietnam War era, collectors reshape the artifacts' aura, suggesting alternative forms of authenticity that diverge from strict adherence to original conditions.

This process highlights the fluidity of aura and authenticity, as collectors navigate between imagined narratives, recognizing that the authenticity of these uniforms emerges not solely from their inherent qualities or original state, but from dynamic interactions between the objects, collectors, and broader socio-cultural contexts in which they circulate. By exploring alternative pathways for engaging with the past and negotiating legitimacy through consumption practices, this section offers an understanding of how authenticity is constructed and experienced in vintage military collectibles. The act of redecorating uniforms, as practiced by Thai collectors, can be seen as a creative process that allows the production of new forms of aura and authenticity, challenging conventional notions of what constitutes a genuine historical artifact (Figure 3).

In this context, the social lives and biographies of Vietnam War uniforms, as discussed in the previous section, take on new significance. As these objects circulate through various stages of commoditization and singularization, their authenticity is continually negotiated and reconstructed, shaped by the imagined realities and narratives assigned to them by their new owners. The meanings and values associated with these uniforms and insignia emerge not only from their historical roots but also from the social interactions and cultural practices that surround them, blurring the lines between the material and the immaterial, the authentic and the imagined.

Figure 3. Insignias are embroidered onto tropical combat jackets by skilled seamsters using tools like tube glue, needles, and thread. Glue is applied to the back of badges to secure their position on the jackets before being sewn on. (photo by the author)

ASSEMBLING AUTHENTICITY THROUGH 'TOUCHING THE PAST'

The practices of redecorating uniforms with authentic insignias extend the possibilities for these materials to attain a sense of aura – that sense of wonder and historical depth that Walter Benjamin described. Through the meticulous process of assembling uniforms according to wartime regulations, Thai collectors can 'touch the past' and forge tangible connections with the experiences of American soldiers in the Vietnam War.

For these collectors, a blank uniform cannot evoke the narratives and chronicles of the war. As Charlie explains in an interview conducted in May 2020: "A uniform operates as an empty body that must be decorated and filled with insignias to link to war accounts, completing memories that are conceptualized through the bodies of the uniforms." By carefully curating and arranging insignia that denote rank, qualifications, and achievements, collectors can construct unique stories and understandings around each assembled uniform.

This practice stands in contrast to Western approaches that prioritize preserving original wartime attire in untouched conditions, as advocated by theorists like Carolyn Korsmeyer. Thai collectors instead choose to creatively intervene and modify the materials, reshaping the aura through their creativities and engagements with the objects' materiality. As Tom attests in a May 2020 interview: "The uniforms are from the period. Soldiers wore these ... The insignias are also real because they were also on these uniforms. So, both elements are from the period and went into combat actions with these soldiers."

The redecorating process is painstaking, often taking months or years. Matching insignia colors and conditions is crucial, as Charlie notes: "If insignias are not matched according to their shades, they will look off." Negotiating scarcity requires expertise

and sometimes dismantling existing configurations - what collectors call "killing elephants for ivory," a Thai idiom meaning to sacrifice something significant for a trifle. For Thai collectors, this laborious assembly produces an authenticity transcending the uniforms' original context. The aura emerges through active engagement, as they 'touch the past' by handling and animating these relics with new meanings. This practice challenges rigid notions of originality and fixed historical truth. Authenticity lies not just in preserving untouched artifacts, but in the interplay between collectors' involvement and the materials' embedded experiences.

PRODUCING AURA THROUGH THE THEATER OF WAR

For Thai collectors of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms and insignia, their annual gatherings organized by groups like the *Thailand Military Collection Association* are not just opportunities to buy, sell, and trade artifacts. These meticulously orchestrated events, such as the group's 2020 meeting held over two days atop a dry mountaintop in Nakhon Ratchasima, allow participants to quite literally produce aura and re-touch the past through immersive, multi-sensory experiences (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A scene of the meeting of the "Thailand Military Collection Association" in February 2020. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

The chosen location was carefully selected to evoke the ambiance of the Vietnam War, featuring replicas of war materials like U.S. Army jeeps, helicopter parts, and vintage flags. Attendees could also engage in photo shoots with BB guns resembling M-16s and AK-47s, adding to the transformative experience. These meetings, organized by the administrator of the Facebook page *Fit Merican Design*, provide a platform for collectors to learn and share insights on accurate uniform decoration according to U.S. Army regulations from the Vietnam War era (Figure 5).

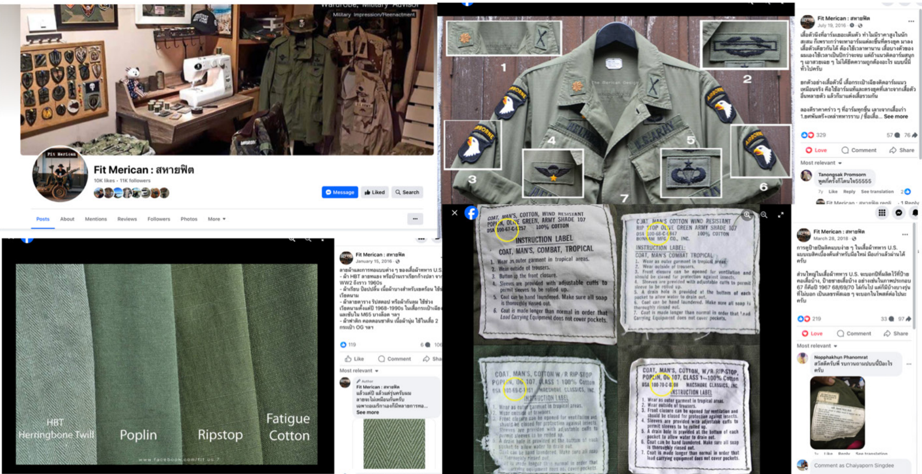

Figure 5. The image shows a screenshot from *Fit Merican Design*, a popular Thai Facebook page dedicated to vintage U.S. military clothing from the Vietnam War era. The post provides collectors with information on fabric types, production years, and proper decoration according to U.S. Army regulations. This page is a valuable resource for Thai enthusiasts of vintage American military apparel. (compilation by the author)

The settings are meticulously curated to recreate the battlefield ambiance – from the rugged mountain locations to the display of replicated war materials. Collectors adorn their beloved redecorated uniforms, the assembled insignia reflecting their painstaking efforts to accurately recreate the roles and experiences of American GIs according to military regulations of that era.

These living history events are theatrical performances where collectors reanimate fragmented war memories. Collectors creatively decorate uniforms to express knowledge, social standing, and imagined heroic personas. As one explains about his 2nd pattern tropical combat jacket: "If I want to be a super soldier, I can add Jungle Expert and Path Finder insignia or even the green combat leader stripe." Unlike strict reenactments, there is romanticization in reconstructing war narratives. Uniforms become canvases, with insignia reflecting specific skills that reveal the collectors' social capital. These gatherings offer immersive opportunities to inhabit reconstituted versions of the past through touch and embodied experiences like photoshoots with replica weapons. The theatrical staging melds sensory engagement with imagined storytelling, allowing collectors to materialize their own interpreted auras around the objects.

For Thai collectors, military artifacts' aura and authenticity emerge through creative assemblage and world-building, not passive preservation. The aura is actively produced through physical and narrative engagements in transformative settings. 'Theater of war' events show how redecorated uniforms become palimpsests with overlapping meanings - past echoes refracted through contemporary curation and imagination. This staging sets the scene for understanding the outcomes of assembling authenticity. Redecorated uniforms and imaginative settings allow collectors like Sam and Ae to materialize personal identities, cultural meanings, and sociopolitical aspirations distinct from the artifacts' original symbolism.

OUTCOMES OF ASSEMBLING AUTHENTICITY

Through the practice of touch and recreation, Thai collectors like Sam and Ae reconstruct memories of the Vietnam War, a conflict they did not directly experience, by forming intimate relationships with vintage war materials. For these collectors, engaging with U.S. military uniforms and insignia is not merely about nostalgia but also a means of fulfilling their present-day social, cultural, and economic needs.

Sam, a factory mechanic in his mid-50s, has been collecting Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms for over a decade. His favorite pieces come from the First Cavalry Division, a unit known for its heavy use of helicopters and high casualty rate. Sam is drawn to the sacrifices made by American soldiers in Vietnam, seeing in their uniforms a symbol of the democratic values they fought and died for (Figure 6). As he explains in an interview conducted in February 2020:

> I rarely share my political perspective with people, especially among collectors, because it may jeopardize our friendships. As you know, the political conflict in Thailand is very contentious. I hope that one day Thailand will be free from the military junta and enjoy a real democracy like the United States, where young people can see their future. The uniform of the First Cavalry Division, who suffered the most from the war, reminds me of hope and democracy, which someday I might see.

For Sam, the First Cavalry Division uniform is a material embodiment of his aspirations for a more democratic Thailand, even if expressing such views openly could risk his social standing within the collecting community.

Ae, another collector from northeast Thailand, where American air bases were once located, has a different perspective. Ae's collection includes not just uniforms but also various pieces of U.S. military equipment, which he proudly displays in his home as symbols of American technical superiority and quality. In an interview conducted in February 2020, he states: "You see! All this stuff was used here in Thailand during the war when I was a young kid. Today, they are still fine, working as they were meant to be. This just shows how great American-made things are."

Ae's childhood memories of receiving gifts from American airmen and witnessing the might of U.S. air power have shaped his attachment to objects like the First Cavalry Division uniform. For him, these artifacts represent the technological advancement and moral righteousness of the American military: "The Americans would try their best to rescue soldiers even if they lost equipment in the attempt, unlike in the Thai Army, where gear can be more valuable than the lives of their men."

Through his collection, Ae connects with a vision of American greatness holding deep personal significance. Sam's and Ae's cases illustrate how Thai collectors imbue Vietnam War-era uniforms with new meanings departing from original military functions. For Sam, the First Cavalry Division uniform symbolizes democratic hopes, for Ae, American technological and moral superiority. Their experiences highlight the fluid nature of authenticity in vintage military collectibles. While seeking genuine connections with the past, their understandings are shaped by personal memories, cultural narratives, and political aspirations that may not align with historical realities.

Figure 6. A collection of insignias belonging to the 1st Cavalry Division, poised to be affixed onto a uniform. (photo by Eakphol Karntreepech)

The authenticity of their collections lies not in fidelity to objective facts but in materializing deeply felt, often inexpressible desires and identities. This process reveals complex interactions between material culture and personal meaning-making.

CONCLUSION

This study distinguishes itself from existing research on material culture and collectors by offering a perspective on how non-Western collectors engage with and reinterpret artifacts from a conflict they did not directly experience. Unlike previous studies that often focus on the preservation and interpretation of military artifacts in their original cultural context (e.g., Saunders & Cornish, 2009), this research examines how Thai collectors actively reshape the meanings and authenticity of Vietnam War-era U.S. military uniforms. Furthermore, while Scott (2015) explores how military museums create diverse representations of war through object display and interpretation, this study extends such considerations to individual collectors operating outside institutional contexts. It investigates how these collectors, influenced by their own cultural background and personal interests, construct new narratives and understandings around these artifacts, contributing to ongoing debates about the power of objects to create meaning and the complexities of representing war history across cultural boundaries.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argued that we engage with history as both actors and narrators, challenging conventional understandings of history as mere recollections. He critiques Western scholarship that dismisses non-Western historical approaches, emphasizing that sociohistorical processes and narratives intersect to serve diverse objectives (Trouillot, 1995, pp. 6-10). The practices of Thai collectors redecorating U.S. military uniforms from the Vietnam War demonstrate this interplay. These collectors actively rearrange material artifacts to retell stories of the war through the

arrangement of insignia on authentic period uniforms. By acquiring, exchanging, displaying, and imaginatively engaging with these war materials, collectors transcend the uniforms' original militaristic materiality to construct new personal meanings and memories around an event they did not experience firsthand. In this process, the political symbolism originally attached to the insignia and uniforms becomes repurposed as social capital within the local collecting arena. The meanings ascribed to these vintage military artifacts extend beyond simplistic notions of subversion or subjectivity. The realities of these objects emerge through complex networks of relationships and embodied practices formed between collectors and materials.

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of materiality and assemblage theory by demonstrating how Thai collectors actively reshape historical narratives and imbue artifacts with new meanings and forms of authenticity. Conceptualizing these uniforms and insignia as components of ever-shifting assemblages, the analysis reveals how meanings and auras emerge through complex relational networks rather than being inherent to objects themselves. This challenges Western notions of authenticity as merely preserving original artifact states. The research also contributes to the understanding of collective memory and its entanglement with material culture. Applying an assemblage approach, the study foregrounds how subjective experiences and collective memories are constituted through entangled human-nonhuman interactions.

The findings reveal how collectors from non-Western backgrounds can develop meaningful relationships with war artifacts from conflicts outside their immediate cultural experience. Future research could explore comparative studies of similar collecting practices in Vietnam and Indonesia, where Vietnam War uniforms are also consumed and collected, but with potentially different cultural contexts and historical relationships to the conflict. Examining these diverse contexts could help identify regional patterns and variations in the reinterpretation of Vietnam War artifacts, shedding light on how local histories, cultural values, and contemporary socio-economic factors shape collecting practices across Southeast Asia. Such research could also explore how these practices foster intercultural dialogue, impact local economies and global vintage markets, and raise ethical questions about the memorialization of conflict and respect for veterans in different cultural contexts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research article was supported by The Thailand Research Fund, Royal Golden Jubilee (RGJ) Ph.D. Program, and the National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), PHD 0121/2561. Moreover, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Professor Dr. Pinkaew Laungaramsri, and the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Chiang Mai University for their endless support. Additionally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Professor Dr. Katherine Bowie, Dr. Michael Culinane, and the Center of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for their kind guidance and unforgettable friendship. Their contributions have been invaluable to this research.

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

The (Im)Possibilities of Public Atheism in Indonesia: Legal Perspectives and Social Practices

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Received: 2 April 2024 / Accepted: 6 September 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Duile, T., & Ricardo, V. (2024). The (im)possibilities of public atheism in Indonesia: Legal perspectives and social practices. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 153-169.

Indonesian society is, in large part, deeply religious. The notion of a divine entity (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*) is the first principle of the Pancasila, Indonesia's founding philosophy, also referred to as *philosofische grondslag* (philosophical basis) by Sukarno or *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (fundamental norm of the state) by the Indonesian Constitutional Court. While a limited religious pluralism characterizes Indonesian society, atheism has often been portrayed as something alien or as a threat to the state and society, especially in the so-called New Order era (1967–1998). While studies stress that Indonesia's society has become increasingly conservative in recent years, cases of public atheism have also emerged. This article sheds light on these cases and demonstrates that this controversial issue has been normalized in social media groups, or in other public forums, where people approach atheism with serious, educational debates or humor and irony. As Indonesia's state and society can be described with analytical concepts, like 'godly nationalism', 'religious harmony state', and 'plural society', public atheism can illuminate how these concepts are challenged but also, to a certain extent, incorporate atheism as their antithesis. How atheism is publicly debated demonstrates how Indonesia's religious plural society in its post-*Reformasi* era has reconceptualized atheism from a latent threat to an at least partially accepted social phenomenon.

Keywords: Atheism; Freedom of Belief; Indonesia; Religious Plural Society; Pancasila

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INTRODUCTION

In academic research, many societies in South- and Southeast Asia are depicted and investigated in religious terms. Only recently has the issue of non-religion and atheism in these countries sparked some interest (Blechschmidt, 2018; Duile, 2020; Schäfer, 2016). By studying the phenomena of non-religiosity in otherwise mainly religious societies, we not only become able to challenge the scholarly understanding of secularism developed in the Western tradition (Kleine & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2020) but also to enhance our understanding of how religious societies function and how they deal with non-religion and atheism.

While José Casanova (1994, p. 5) has argued that in the West a deprivatization of religion has taken place after a period of secularization, the question is whether in overwhelmingly religious – and even increasingly conservative societies like Indonesia – a similar process can be found with regard to secularism and even atheism. That is, a deprivatization of secularism and the appearance of atheism as a phenomenon antagonistic yet complementary to increasing conservatism and religiosity. In his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor (2007) developed the argument that in many societies, being religious has developed from the default option to a choice. In Western societies, people are now confronted with a range of opinions and occupy disengaged standpoints when it comes to these opinions. In a certain sense, for Charles Taylor, secularity can mean "a condition in which it is possible to not believe" (Künckler & Schankar, 2018, p. 3). Taylor (2007, p. 12) also acknowledges that there is always a default option of being either religious or atheist. In religious societies, such as Indonesia, being religious is not only the default *option* but, usually, the default *stance,* and an engaged standpoint regarding the religious prevails. Hence, becoming irreligious or even atheist is a choice that individuals do not view as a usual choice, as the secular condition in which it is possible to not believe is not a hegemonic stance. Yet some people nonetheless not only become atheists but argue for a disengaged standpoint regarding religion that makes atheism at least a comprehensible option within public spheres.

This article investigates the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate and express atheism. We understand the notion of 'public' in the sense of Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a realm of social life where public opinion is negotiated. This public sphere emerges when private individuals come together to form a public body (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). This can be a discussion among a few individuals on- or offline but also a general public debate facilitated by mainstream media. We thus understand the notion of public in the sense of the *forum externum* in contrast to the *forum internum* (Lindsey & Butt, 2016, p. 25) – a distinction that mirrors the distinction between public and private. The notion of 'public' is, therefore, more specific than the notion of 'open' atheism as the former points toward some kind of exchange and debate. For the same reason, it is also more than 'discovered' atheism. Public atheism is expressed atheism, but it can also be simply discussion about atheism without an openly atheist participant.

By investigating the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate atheism, this article also engages with the more general question of how Indonesia's religious society and state function regarding identities that challenge their constitutive consensus of religiosity. Conceptualizing Indonesian identity as "godly nationalism" (Menchik, 2016) and as a religious harmony state of a religious plural society, cases of public atheism are analyzed to understand how the overwhelmingly religious framework can or cannot accommodate non-religious public expressions. Using the term atheism, we mean all convictions that there is no God or Gods, that is, the absence of theistic beliefs (Bullivant, 2015, pp. 11-21). Atheism can mean both the belief that there is no God, or – as is usually the case in a religious society like Indonesia – "a principled and informed decision to *reject* the belief in God" (McGrath, 2004, p. 175), that is, to reject a fundamental norm of society itself and what it means to be part of that very society. In other words, it is precisely this rejection that makes the phenomenon of atheism such a controversial one in Indonesia.

Indonesia applies notions of religion, religiosity, and belief to its national identity. In the following, the notion of religiosity is understood as a reference to the Indonesian concept of religion as *agama*, namely, as an affirmative, positive attitude toward a set of formalized, acknowledged religions as monotheist faiths and to the *sila* of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* that is important in discourses on Indonesian national identity (Ropi, 2016, pp. 147-151). The Sanskrit term *agama*, referring to tradition and sets of rules, is closely connected to this concept as it strongly indicates its social dimension. *Agama*, originally meaning guidelines, worldviews, and practices handed down as tradition, has become in the Indonesian context a term for civil religion (Picard, 2011, pp. 3-7).

Religiosity thus encompasses spirituality but is much broader and emphasizes the public dimension of religion and its public formalization. Being religious has thus become a benchmark for Indonesian society, which is highly diverse in terms of religions, ethnic groups, and languages. Indonesia has often been defined as a plural society, that is, as a society with distinct segments living under one political unit (Furnivall, 1939). When Indonesia declared its independence in 1945, religion and religiosity became important unifying factors. While John Furnivall has argued in his study on the plural society in the late colonial order that the plural society lacks a common will and is thus unable to form a coherent society, Indonesia has successfully found a consensus shared by both secular nationalists and religious leaders and political groups (Elson, 2008, pp. 106-111). This consensus is expressed in Indonesia's national philosophy Pancasila, which consists of five principles. The first principle reads *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* and is often translated as belief in one God, despite the fact that the notion of belief is not mentioned and the noun *Ketuhanan* just denotes an abstract divine entity. Religion, or being religious in general, is thus a unifying concept that may not only contribute to social cohesion but also constitute an idea of society by simultaneously constructing its outside, namely non-belief.

However, the question of whether atheism and atheist expressions are or should be punishable is subject to debate. As we will show, public expressions of atheism that occur in Indonesia are usually not sanctioned. Therefore, we analyze the circumstances under which such expressions and debates are possible and when they are sanctioned. We understand Indonesia as a religious harmony state that provides an oppressive frame for non-religious expressions (Duile, 2020, pp. 453-456). By stressing the notion of social harmony – and the very concept of Indonesian society – with reference to religiosity as a prime value, the religious harmony state constitutes the social universality of society by simultaneously excluding the non-religious. This is, for instance, relevant in the legal realm where the right not to have a religion is not acknowledged against the backdrop of the Pancasila (Iskandar, 2016, p. 731). While there is no legal provision that explicitly prohibits atheism, Art. 28E of the Indonesian Constitution that guarantees freedom *of* belief is often interpreted in a way that also suggests that every citizen must be a theist, that is, it does not guarantee freedom *from* belief (Hasani, 2016, p. 201).

This discursive and legal framework of exclusion is, in practice, however, more complex and nuanced, and as a matter of fact, atheist expressions in public are incorporated into the realm of public reasoning and debate in various ways. Jeremy Menchik (2016, pp. 65-92) has suggested understanding Indonesian nationalism – especially as

proposed by the country's largest Muslim organizations – as a "godly nationalism", that is, a we-feeling that is nonetheless predicated on theological exclusion.

This is why there is, for instance, a widespread consensus against Ahmadiyya but not so much against Shiism (Fealy, 2016, pp. 123-128). One can easily see how atheism opposes this godly nationalism. However, unlike in the case of Ahmadiyya, there have so far been no larger controversies against atheism, even though, as we demonstrate, there are forms of public expression of atheism in Indonesia.

The discussion on openly embracing atheism in Indonesia is rapidly gaining momentum on the internet and in public discourse due to people's ability to freely disseminate information. Old documents mentioning non-believers, such as then-President Sukarno's speech at the UN-General Assembly, or articles by figures like Kiai Haji Agoes Salim advocating for freedom of religion that includes atheists (e.g., Yasir, 2021), are becoming available to the public. This has sparked a new trend in debating Indonesia's constitution and Pancasila, which focuses on understanding the constitution based on its original intent. Of course, this trend is not solely caused by the intellectual works of the educated elites. Growing acceptance and normalization of atheism also stems from popular sub-cultures, such as stand-up comedy or movies that portray religions in a less sacred light, from the rising popularity of comedians like Coki Pardede and his colleagues, who make jokes at the expense of religion, to the increasing fame of public intellectual Rocky Gerung who some also consider an atheist. This became especially vibrant after the conservative 212 movement of 2016/2017 in which conservative Muslim groups protested against the then-governor of Jakarta, whom they accused of blasphemy, fostering conservative forms of Islamic tribal nationalism (Lim, 2017). As a reaction to this and generally as a reaction to what Martin van Bruinessen (2013) has called the "conservative turn in Indonesian Islam" (a trend that started around the mid-2000s), some parts of society have become increasingly secular and, in parts, even atheist. While atheists have organized in social media groups since at least 2008 (Schäfer, 2016, p. 260), the new developments of Islamic mass mobilization, on the one hand, and pluralist-secular rejection of conservativism, on the other, have also made atheism a relevant topic.

In a first step, this article explores on the legal framework and its interpretation when it comes to atheism, and problematizes the notion of public atheism with regard to Indonesian laws. In the main part, we analyze cases of public atheism, that is, cases where atheism has been discussed between people who do not personally know each other in settings that are generally open to the public. Analyzing these cases helps to understand how the religious plural society deals with public atheism in practice. While atheism is, without doubt, a sensitive topic, we demonstrate not only that reasoned debates on the issue are possible but also that irony and humor sometimes help to reduce prejudices and hatred against non-believers. The main argument is that public atheism is possible even in a society where secularity – as a predominant cultural condition, where not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3) – is not established. This is possible as long as the notion of social harmony, with its reference to religiosity, is not challenged, for instance through blasphemy. Within this framework of possibility, different approaches are present: Atheism can be discussed under the hegemonic notion of religious harmony, or, as in some online groups, as a matter of personal conviction that is performatively debated

to enhance theist or atheist subject positions. Paradoxically, public atheism has to acknowledge religious hegemony first in order to challenge it, at least, when it wants to transcend online enclaves that are especially designed as spaces where the notion of religious harmony does not apply.

For this article, the first author conducted fieldwork with Indonesian atheists from 2015 onwards both on- and offline. In 2016/17 the author was in Jakarta for five months and interviewed not only atheists but also stakeholders from religious and state institutions. Since then, the author has kept in touch with many atheists and has conducted subsequent interviews. The co-author is a secular Indonesian citizen who wants to counter stereotypes and misrepresentations of atheism in Indonesia and has, through his engagement with Indonesian atheists, further insights into atheists' lives and has observed Indonesian public discourse on this matter since the 2012 Alexander Aan case, especially from a legal perspective.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDONESIA: *KETUHANAN* VS. ATHEISM?

Academic debates have often revolved around the question of the degree of secularism one can observe and measure in the Indonesian state, law, and society. Indonesia has been termed "not fully secular" (Otto, 2010, p. 456), "quasi secular", "pseudo secularist" (Elson, 2010, p. 329), or "semi-secular" (Butt, 2010, p. 299), and the relation between Islam and a secular state (Assyaukanie, 2009) has been the subject of investigation. Mahfud MD, the former chairman of the Indonesian Constitutional Court, has characterized Indonesia as neither secular nor religious but as a godly nation. This characterization raises complex questions: What defines a godly state that neither aligns with specific religions nor adheres to secular principles? Such ambiguity can lead to varied interpretations and challenges in reconciling this concept with the constitution's guarantee of freedom of belief and the protection of all its citizens. However, as John Bowen (2005) has stressed, in Indonesia, the absence of a shared normative starting point puts society in a mode where there is rather a "convergence" or "reasoned modus vivendi" (p. 169) prevailing. Stewart Fenwick (2016, p. 87) thus concluded that, in terms of governance, the dichotomy between religious and secular modes is false, and this might be extended to the way Indonesia's society functions in general. Describing Indonesia as religious state means, on the one hand, that it is non-secular and non-atheist as, for instance, the Indonesian Constitutional Court has stressed (Mahkamah Konstitusi, 2009, p. 273). This also refers to secularism in the sense of a cultural condition, where not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3), and, as we will argue in the following, the legal and foundational framework of the Indonesian state is in this sense non-secular.

This complex relation between religion (or religiosity) and secularism is displayed in laws and in Indonesia's foundational philosophy of Pancasila (or, more precisely, how the first *sila* of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* is interpreted), and how this contrasts with atheism. Two laws are highly relevant for public atheism, namely Art. 156 a(b) of the Indonesian Criminal Code (*Kitab Undang-Undang Pidana*, KUHP) of 1965 and the 2008 Law No. 11 on Electronic Information and Transaction (EIT). Whereas Art. 156 a(b) is specifically about blasphemy, the 2008 law is generally about disturbing the ideal of a harmonious public life through online expressions. Art. 156 of the KUHP,

also known as the blasphemy law, was introduced under the Sukarno government at a time when religious groups feared the rise of communism. While some leading communists were probably atheists, the Communist Party of Indonesia emphasized that they were not against religion and even stressed common goals between Islam and communism. However, tensions between these camps grew strong during the early 1960s and erupted in mass violence against and the killings of hundreds of thousands of communists who were then said to be atheists and therefore a threat to the nation (Duile, 2018, pp. 164-165; Hiorth, 1998; Mortimer, 2006, pp. 93-94). The law was subject to a judicial review in 2010, when human rights activists criticized that the law severely limits freedom of belief and expression and that the law was a product of the authoritarian 'guided democracy' of Sukarno which did not uphold democratic standards (Yonesta et al., 2014, pp. 1-10). However, the Constitutional Court found the law to be in line with the Indonesian Constitution (Iskandar, 2016, p. 732).

According to the law, someone can be sentenced to imprisonment for a maximum of five years if they deliberately express atheist sentiment in public or commit an act with the intention of encouraging people not to adhere to a religion which can be subsumed under the concept of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*, as found in the foundational state philosophy of Pancasila. In their decision, the Constitutional Court also stressed that the protected right to freedom of religion in Indonesia is only a private right in the *forum internum*, and that the state can restrict individuals' rights when belief – or, in the case of atheism, disbelief – is publicly expressed in a *forum externum* (Lindsey & Butt, 2016, p. 25). This was adopted in paragraph 302 of the new criminal code that was passed in 2023. Two years in prison or a fine of up to IDR 50 million can be the punishment for people who publicly incite others not to have a religion. The fine is up to IDR 200 million (about USD 22,200) or 4 years in prison for those who use violence or threats of violence in order to make someone an atheist. In 2008, Law No. 11 on Electronic Information and Transaction was passed. Art 28(2) reads that it is forbidden to electronically spread information that can incite hatred and hostility based on ethnic identity, religion, or race. This affects public atheism insofar as many atheists exchange their atheist thoughts online, usually among each other but sometimes also with theists, which can lead to emotional responses and indignation.

However, most importantly, Pancasila has a strong normative notion in Indonesia. It was referred to by Sukarno as a *philosofische grondslag*, philosophical base, or fundamental philosophy (Elson, 2008, p. 107) and as a *Staatsfundamentalnorm* (fundamental norm of the state) rather than simply a *Grundnorm* (basic norm) by the Indonesian Institutional Court (Sinn, 2014, p. 231). While this pivotal position for Pancasila has received some criticism, suggesting that the role of Pancasila maintains a problematic Indonesian exceptionalism not in line with democratic principles (Iskandar, 2016), others have stressed Pancasila's inclusive features and democratic potential even in light of further challenges (e.g., Magnis-Suseno, 2022). The first pillar of Pancasila is usually translated as one (almighty) God, but the noun *ketuhanan* indicates an abstract notion that might more accurately be translated as "the divine" (Damshäuser, 2022, pp. 15-22). However, in practice, the first pillar is often connoted as a monotheistic principle or as the "belief in one God", despite the fact that "belief" is not mentioned. Based on this interpretation, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are formally equally recognized in Indonesia

and all are conceptualized as monotheist beliefs. The question of how this abstract principle in the Pancasila relates to atheism is crucial.

According to Article 2 of Law No. 12 of 2011 on the Formation of Statutory Law in Indonesia, Pancasila is recognized as the source of all legal principles in the state, obligating lawmakers to ensure that all laws align with Pancasila. However, this law is paradoxical because Law No. 12 of 2011 is subordinate to the Indonesian Constitution, and Pancasila is already enshrined in the constitution's preamble. The preamble, particularly paragraph four, outlines the Republic of Indonesia's core objectives: establishing a government that protects all Indonesians and their territorial integrity, promotes public welfare, educates the populace, and contributes to a global order based on freedom, perpetual peace, and social justice. Therefore, Pancasila should be viewed as a guiding principle designed to achieve these goals and should not be interpreted in a way that contradicts or undermines these foundational objectives, including the protection of all Indonesians without exclusion.

Whether people can or cannot be atheists is therefore a matter of interpretation, influenced by political events or various interpretative approaches, whether textualist, originalist, or pragmatic approach. Ismail Hasani (2016, p. 201) argues, for instance, that according to former Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court Mahfud MD, there are no legal provisions in the criminal code that prohibit atheism. Since Indonesian Criminal Code upholds the legality principle (*nullum crimen, nulla poena sine lege*), atheism as a personal belief within the *forum internum* is allowed. What can be on trial is the *forum externum*, thoughts made public, and therefore atheism is an issue of freedom of expression rather than an issue of freedom of belief. A similar argument was presented by the Catholic public intellectual Magnis-Suseno with one of the authors. Magnis-Suseno even said that state officials could privately be atheists as long as they hold on to the Pancasila, which would mean that, in their function as officials, they must facilitate religion and religiosity.

However, although these arguments do not outlaw atheism per se, they say little about the extent to which atheism can be voiced publicly in a state that is based on *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*. Moreover, there are even interpretations suggesting that the notion of *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* is in general incompatible with all kinds of atheist convictions. Contrary to the interpretation of Magnis-Suseno, Iskandar (2016, pp. 730-731) mentions several other interpretations: Asshiddiqie, chairman of the Indonesian Constitutional Court between 2003 and 2008, said that the bureaucracy and the officials who work for the government cannot be atheist as they have a clear mandate to believe in and trust the one almighty God. Arif Hidayat, who was Chief Justice of the Indonesian Constitutional Court from 2013 to 2018, emphasized that Indonesia is a religious nation, and that any discussion of religious freedom should not be about whether Indonesians may be atheists. In his opinion, all Indonesians should believe in God. However, Arif's opinion contradicts that of his predecessor, Mahfud MD, a Chief Justice of the Indonesian Constitutional Court between 2008 and 2013, who emphasized that atheists and communists also have the right to live freely in Indonesia as long as they respect the religious freedom of other citizens.

The Muslim scholar, economist, and human rights activist Dawam Rahardjo supports Pancasila as an "open ideology" that would welcome atheism only in the form of scientific discourse, by which he probably means naturalist scientific operations,

but not as a discourse against religion or God. The latter should be banned by the state. These notions express what Jeremy Menchik has termed godly nationalism – a religious nationalism supported by mainstream Muslim organizations and many Indonesians. However, from an atheist perspective, godly nationalism is deeply repressive as "[n]o religious belief (or unbelief) disqualifies anyone from obtaining or keeping citizenship" (Menchik, 2016, pp. 161-162). In the next part, we shed some light on public atheism. Contrary to what one might expect against the backdrop of godly nationalism, especially in times of the conservative turn of Indonesian Islam, there are examples of atheist expressions and dialogues between believers and unbelievers that did not cause public controversies.

PUBLIC ATHEISM IN INDONESIA

Even the rather liberal interpretations of what the notion of a state and a nation based upon *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* means for atheism are highly cautious when it comes to public expressions of atheism. What seems to be at stake is the core of Indonesian identity as a religious nation, as this religiosity is, apparently, defined against atheism and views atheism in public as a threat to its very foundation. However, the question then is to what extent public atheism is actually sanctioned and rejected. In other words, what does the social practice of public atheism looks like? By public atheism, we mean atheism that trespasses the *forum internum* and expresses itself in a setting where it is subject to debate between people who do not personally know each other. In the following, we analyze three cases and argue that social practices might be more open than the arguments mentioned above. However, some crucial precautions have to be fulfilled in order to avoid being excluded from public discourse when debating this controversial issue.

The most famous case of atheism in Indonesia is probably that of Alexander Aan. His case demonstrates the limits of atheism as his atheism was on trial as a blasphemous expression. The case shows that atheism cannot be accepted when it comes in the form of expressions that are interpreted by the public or the courts as blasphemous and therefore against the notion of religious harmony. Aan was a civil servant in West Sumatra who was sentenced to jail for 2.5 years after the prosecution had demanded 3.5 years. Additionally, the Muaro District Court in Sijunjung regency also fined him IDR 100 million (or USD 11,100) and failure to pay would result in another two months in prison (Bachyul, 2012). Previously, Aan had declared on the Facebook-page *Minang Atheis* that there is no God and had posted content that people in his neighborhood found highly offensive. One meme depicting Mohammed read that he had sex with his wife's maid, while another read "Prophet Mohammed interested in his own in-law". Aan was attacked by a mob and brought to the local police station. He was accused of spreading information that incited hatred, pursuant to the EIT law. Furthermore, he faced a charge based on Art. 156 of the KUHP, namely that he had performed an act hostile to a religion recognized in Indonesia (Art. 156 a(a)), and that his act was committed with the intention of drawing people away from belief in God (Art. 156 a(b)). However, he was only found guilty under the EIT law (Hasani, 2016, p. 197). In other words, his atheist expressions on Facebook were, according to the judges, punishable because they incited hatred against Islam. It is not clear

whether this was because of his simple declaration that God does not exist or because of the pictures insulting the Prophet Mohammed, but it is likely that the second caused the indignation. In contrast, the case was often mentioned as an example of restricted freedom of expression and/or belief in Western media (e.g., Brown, 2015; Schonhardt, 2013).

Today, Aan lives near Jakarta as he feels that living in West Sumatra has become too dangerous. He works as a teacher and is still a convinced atheist. In a conversation with one of the authors, he declared that it was wrong to make believers upset, although he does not regret criticizing Islam and religion in general. But instead of provocative, his atheism has become rather private. Even when visiting his family, the topic is not discussed as he wants to maintain good relations, especially to his religious mother. An interesting detail can be found in the court file where Alexander Aan's religious affiliation is recorded. Court officials wrote "atheist, wants to convert to Islam" ("*atheis, mau masuk Islam*"). Alexander Aan never declared this intention, so it can be assumed that this was simply written by the officials. While this might simply indicate ignorance or a patronizing legal system, it could also be analyzed as a practice of the religious harmony state that aims to ensure social integration through the shared social value of being religious.

Alexander Aan's case happened when the phenomenon of atheism emerged in Indonesia, mostly in social media, where people express their atheism and also engage in debates with fellow atheists as well as with theists. These cases reveal different ways in which public atheism can be accepted. This can be through the establishment of public enclaves in which participants agree to certain rules. While in some cases of public atheism social integrity is key, we argue that some Facebook groups are designed to undermine the notion of social harmony that is upheld by the principle of religiosity. They do so by not only allowing but even encouraging the expression of fundamental differences between theism and atheism, and that this kind of opposition between theism and atheism contributes to identity formation. Both theists and atheists can rely on their respective other in the performance of debates that serve their own identity rather than convincing others.

These public spaces developed from atheist online engagement that was initially restricted to atheists as internal support groups. By 2008, a larger Facebook group of Indonesian atheists had already been established, along with other groups like *Dialog Ateis Indonesia* or *Komunitas Indonesia*. Some pages were restricted to atheists only, but some had the aim of facilitating dialogue between atheists and believers. These pages are somewhere in between online activism and platforms that serve the formation of the in-group, namely the atheist identities of their members (Schäfer, 2016). The most well-known blog in this regard is probably the *Anda Bertanya Ateis Menyawab* (You Ask, Atheists Answer), or ABAM blog and Facebook page which was set up in 2011. In 2016, it had 55,000 likes (Schäfer, 2016, p. 261) and about 22,000 members in 2024. Today, the page is still maintained and offers discussion within a moderation regime that bans all kinds of hate speech and insults, although the blog was originally inspired, among other things, by a discussion thread in a then-popular online forum *Kaskus*. There was a discussion thread called "fight club", where people could debate without any rules or boundaries. As this sparked the idea to start discussions about a taboo topic, it quickly became clear to the administrators that such a project could

not continue without rules and moderation. Indeed, the Facebook page was shut down twice by Facebook due to complaints from people who themselves had been banned from the page. However, as the administrators had good contacts with Karl Karnadi, an Indonesian atheist who at that time worked at Facebook, they always managed to persuade Facebook that hate speech and insults were not allowed and that they could ensure that all discussions were according to Facebook's community standards. It was indeed the main goal to initiate civil discussions about atheism, as some atheists found that there are many misperceptions and peculiar stereotypes about atheists in Indonesia. Not only are they often perceived as either extremely intelligent and only concerned with science, or stupid as they failed to acknowledge the 'obvious' truth about religion, atheists also still carry the stigma of being communists as accused by the authoritarian Suharto regime. On the other hand, the page was met with criticism from the atheist community as well, as some Indonesian atheists found it pointless to debate with believers. However, the administrators are convinced that they are able to facilitate meaningful dialogues which can change believers' perceptions of atheists (Valbiant, 2020).

The crucial point here is that this page was never meant to draw others away from their belief in God but rather to counteract misperceptions about atheists and atheism with civilized forms of discussion. As Karl Karnadi explained in an online interview, the point is that atheists just answer questions from believers. In other words, they remain passive and do not actively draw others away from their belief. The fact that this blog has not attracted any legal cases in over 12 years makes it a successful example of public atheism in Indonesia. Today, discussions on the page are sometimes serious and deal with moral and political issues (like, for instance, abortion, parenting and religious education, and social justice), but occasionally they are also funny and ironic, and make visible contradictions in official religious morals (like the brutal and revealing scenes in the religious movie which make it through the Indonesian censor agency). This balance of entertaining and serious topics as well as moderation makes it a successful page in terms of membership. Currently (March, 2024), the page has over 15,800 members.

Another discussion group on Facebook worth mentioning is *Debat Islam Versus Atheisme* (DIVA) which currently has more than 17,000 members. Interestingly, it is written in the rules that Muslims are allowed to try to convince atheists of the Muslim faith and make them Muslims: "*Member muslim di ijinkan* [sic] *untuk berdakwah dan meyakin kan* [sic]*Ateis*[sic] *akan ajaran islam*[sic]." On the other hand, the rules read that atheists are allowed to criticize Islamic teachings: "*di ijinkan*[sic] *untuk mengkritik ajaran islam*[sic]". This avoids the accusation that atheists are being allowed to convert Muslims, which indeed could be potentially punishable under Indonesian law. The rules close with a warning that people who enter this group must be ready to expose their views to sharp critique (*kritik tajam*) and if they do not feel mentally ready then they better not join. According to some members the first author of this article has interviewed, there had never been, unlike in ABAM, instances of the group being shut down due to complaints. This was, in their view, due to the fact that people who want to join have to agree to the rules first. Although discussion sometimes becomes quite harsh, members seem to accept the framework for debate.

One can also find public expressions of atheism on YouTube. For instance, the co-author of this article, the content creator Vincent Ricardo, made a video on “becoming atheist in Indonesia” wherein atheism in general is explained. The video also explains the stigmas atheists face in Indonesia and is meant as an educational video so that religious people do not feel threatened by atheists. Within six years, the video was watched more than 520,000 times. The video has become a notable reference point regarding the existence of atheism in Indonesia. As a result of this video, Vincent has had the opportunity to connect with individuals who now feel less isolated as atheists in Indonesia and have begun seeking out like-minded individuals or even publicly acknowledging their atheism to friends and family. The primary objective behind creating and releasing this mini-documentary was to explain about the lives of Indonesian atheists, aiming to dispel the stigma and misconceptions surrounding atheism within the country. This initiative, in Vincent’s view, was particularly crucial due to various factors, including the prevalent propaganda during the New Order era associating atheism with communism, which falsely claimed that atheists violated the first principle of Pancasila by not believing in the existence of God. However, in the post-New Order era, there has been a growing realization that communism and atheism are distinct concepts and that Pancasila does not prohibit someone from being an atheist. More people, especially Millennials and Gen Z who have grown up in the internet era, increasingly understand the difference between communism (a socio-political ideology) and atheism (disbelief in god or gods). This evolving trend toward openness and tolerance has led to an increasing number of public figures openly expressing their disbelief or skepticism of religions or gods or, at least, that they are associated with atheism and do not actively deny these accusations. Notable individuals in this regard include neurosurgeon Ryu Hasan, philosopher Rocky Gerung, and comedian Coki Pardede as well as other celebrities (e.g., Kurniawan, 2024; Nabilla, 2021).

From reactions to his video, Vincent concluded that many people are pragmatically religious, which he stresses as a crucial feature of Indonesian religiosity. Vincent illustrates this with regard to the coronation of the new Javanese Duke and controversies surrounding the succession. Public concerns arose due to speculation that the new ruler of Mataram Islam might be non-Muslim, given that the Empress’s oldest son was known to be Catholic. Shortly after the coronation, it was announced to the public that he had converted to Islam (Sushmita, 2022). This occurrence reflects the pragmatic approach of Indonesian elites toward religion as they often adopt religious practices for power and business reasons.

This pragmatic attitude toward religion is something Vincent encountered after publishing the mini-documentary on YouTube (Ricardo, 2018). Not only did non-believers reach out to him, but also people who self-identified as believers expressed that their views on religion were mostly pragmatic. They acknowledged the irrationality and contradictions of religious beliefs but found personal spiritual comfort in religion, as well as relief from existential anxiety. This kind of mindset or approach, in which people adhere to religious beliefs and practices because they find them beneficial in their everyday life rather than solely based on deep spiritual or philosophical convictions, is quite common among many privately atheist individuals. They might only reveal their identity to their friends or those who they assume will accept them.

Vincent's video is important to them as they realize that their objections to and rejection of religious beliefs are not uncommon.

Videos are a convenient tool for individual atheists to express themselves and explain why they became atheists. For example, about three years ago, Greg Latupeirissa made a YouTube video series about his atheism. He engaged in online discussions and was interviewed by the first author of this article. His videos received between 3,000 and 10,000 views, but Greg eventually decided to make them private, while he left only one video online where he explains his view on atheism (Chada, 2021). Greg clarified that he did not restrict the videos' availability because he received threats. In fact, most of the comments he received were encouraging and supportive. He simply was not satisfied with the way he talked and appeared in the videos. While Greg had wanted to create these videos for a long time, he was only able to make them after some religious friends encouraged and helped him. He was also not afraid that the videos would cause problems, as he had good personal experiences of being open about his atheism. While his family is religious and still hopes that he will become a Protestant again one day, they nonetheless accept his atheism. Greg stresses that he has a close friend who is a pious Muslim and was even a member of the now-outlawed FPI (*Front Pembela Islam*, Front of the Defenders of Islam), an infamous vigilante organization that not only had close ties to the political elite (Petrů, 2015) but also played a leading role in the 2016 protests against the Christian governor of Jakarta, whom they accused of blasphemy (Fealy & White, 2021). In our interview, Greg emphasized that it is important for atheists to develop a respectful attitude. This was not a matter of performance in public, he said, respect must be real. If religious people were addressed as stupid and ignorant, dialogue would not be possible. He also stresses that, in his opinion, the question of whether there is or is not a God would be less relevant than the question of whether religion is still useful as a social device. In Greg's view, religion is useful, as many people would need it as a means of orientation to decide what was good and bad. In terms of its social function, he endorses religion, even though he does not believe in it. The problem for Greg is that many atheists would only insist on the question of God's existence and many would just exchange the dogma of religion for the dogma of atheism. This dogmatic perspective could make public dialog difficult, especially if people were not ready for heated debates, like in DIVA. Atheism, for Greg, is an outcome of a process of reasoning, not an identity. He does not simply want his friends to think of him as 'Greg the atheist', but as 'Greg, my friend'.

Another interesting case of public atheism was a discussion held in early 2017 at Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Islamic State University. Known as a campus embracing religious pluralism, the religious studies program has incited curiosity among most of its students about different religions, and even atheism became a topic of discussion. As we outline in the following, this event also demonstrates that discussing atheism in a public space is possible if it is framed in a manner that does not contradict the notion of religious harmony. The event was organized by a libertarian[1] group concerned with freedom of expression. As Indonesia had seen serious violations of these

1 Libertarian here means a radically liberal political ideology stressing the importance of individual and economic freedom. Members of the group emphasized the importance of libertarianism in Indonesia as they argued that many flaws of the Indonesian society derive from a widespread disregard for individual rights.

rights by vigilante Islamic groups, such as the FPI, and also by state authorities, the activists aimed to engage in dialogue in a manner that could bring their messages about atheism to Muslims willing to discuss the controversial issue. They translated the autobiographical book *The Atheist Muslim* by Ali Rizvi (2017) into Indonesian and launched it at the Islamic State University. On that occasion, the general topic of atheism was discussed. While libertarian activists are either atheists themselves or sympathetic to atheism as they uphold the right of expression, the large majority of the participants in the discussion were Muslims. The thrust of the book was that Muslims who abandon their faith can still be Muslims in a cultural sense, for instance, they can celebrate Islamic holidays with friends and families. This was to counteract the image of atheists as entirely hostile toward religion. By presenting the content of the book, the activists also talked about reasons why people might abandon their faith and argued against the widespread perception that one cannot have morals without religion.

Overall, the discussion was controversial but caused no indignation or emotional uproar. The activists explained to one of the authors of this article that it would not have been possible to organize such an event at a non-Islamic university. The very fact that it was held at the Islamic State University was necessary to counteract any suspicion that the event would be promoting atheism and could draw others away from religion. Instead, the discussion was framed as an academic event in a religious environment. A common prayer and a reading of Quranic verses by an *uztad* as well as the obligatory singing of the Indonesian national anthem at the beginning of the event set the frame of acknowledged social norms. While almost nobody declared that they were atheist, some participants expressed their understanding and recognition of atheism. The libertarian activists made their case not by declaring atheism as right and religion as wrong but rather by referring to individual rights of expression and religion which, they hoped, could be widely acknowledged when religious people did not feel threatened by non-believers. Nonetheless, one participant in the audience made anti-religious remarks and declared his disbelief in God. He mentioned that he had written an atheist manifesto and argued strongly against theism. While he was able to deliver his outspoken, anti-theist views, both liberal activists and religious scholars did not respond to him. After the discussion, some participants in the audience told one of the authors of this article that the participant who made the anti-religious remarks was mentally unstable or insane. Regardless of whether that is true or not, this incident shows that, in this particular setting, it was crucial to maintain social integrity and the content of what it means to be atheist had to be delivered indirectly by referring to non-Indonesian cases. While it was tacitly understood by the audience that this was of relevance for Indonesia as well, it had to be approached this way in order to secure harmony.

CONCLUSION

While atheism emerges as a constitutive outside of the religious harmony state and its society, its implications have drastically changed. During the New Order regime, it was connoted with communism which was said to be a latent threat to Indonesia and its religious values. While the Communist Party had enjoyed broad support from the popular classes, the new regime had to find narratives to delegitimize communism.

Even though the leadership of the party was eager not to criticize religion, the New Order regime successfully promulgated a conceptualization of the Communist Party as atheist and anti-theist, and therefore as a threat that had to be eradicated in order to save the nation (Duile, 2018, pp. 164-165). In contrast, today, the narrative of communism as a threat and atheism as synonymous with communism has lost much of its relevance, especially for younger Indonesians less affected by the New Order propaganda. Anticommunist indoctrination, for instance through the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* screened in schools, is now less common, and occasionally alternative and even contrasting narratives are discussed (Pratama, 2022). When one of the authors was teaching at Universitas Nasional in Jakarta in early 2023 and asked what the students thought of when they heard the term *ateis*, not a single one mentioned communism or the PKI. Atheism was rather seen as a personal issue.

While Indonesian society has, in large part, become more conservative after *Reformasi* and Indonesian politics have turned toward an Islamic nationalism (Bourchier, 2019, pp. 718-730), secular identities have formed as a reaction against religious conservativism, and atheism has become an expression of oppositional or rebellious stances. Generally, we can conclude from our cases that the only way atheism is legally and discursively made impossible is when it comes with blasphemy (as in the case of Alexander Aan) or as an anti-religious stance (as in the case of the participant in the discussion at Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Islamic State University). In social media, some groups have even established controversial and harsh discussions. While in official events, like the discussion at the Islamic State University, or even in YouTube videos, social integrity is key, the DIVA Facebook group has been designed to challenge the notion of social harmony by allowing and encouraging the expression of differences, challenging both theist and atheist worldviews. One could argue that DIVA and ABAM are exceptions to the religious harmony state, as the common ground for what it means to be part of Indonesian society – namely, to be religious – is missing. However, this kind of opposition between theism and atheism serves the purpose of identity formation, as both theists and atheists might need a respective other to argue against.

Public atheism represents a challenge for Indonesia where secularity – as a cultural condition in which not believing in God is not simply one option among others (Taylor, 2007, p. 3) – is not established. While this limits the ways atheism can be publicly expressed and discussed, we have seen that challenging religious hegemony through atheism is, paradoxically, possible if expressions of atheism acknowledge religious hegemony in first place. Not acknowledging religious hegemony and directly attacking religiosity is considered blasphemy and inevitably positions atheist expressions outside the social order. Public atheism in Indonesia is in a more difficult position than in other predominantly religious societies where atheism is also a controversial issue but where atheists can organize in public (Blechschmidt, 2018; Quack, 2012). When it comes to the public sphere, atheism in Indonesia is not organized, and depends on the engagement of individual atheists. However, despite the non-secular nature of the Indonesian state, the relative openness of Pancasila makes public atheism more acceptable than in other countries in which Islam retains a supreme position, like in Malaysia (e.g., Ramli et al., 2022)

Having investigated the circumstances under which it is possible in Indonesia to publicly debate and express atheism, we conclude that these public debates are debates

about Indonesian identity. Atheism, as the outside of Indonesian society, is simultaneously within it, both as a matter of fact (because there are atheist Indonesians) and as a possibility within public discourses. On the one hand, the religious harmony state claims to encompass the whole Indonesian people and is therefore inclusive. On the other hand, it defines itself upon the exclusion of deviant elements within itself. The social harmony state is thus set upon a paradoxical relation between inclusion and exclusion when it comes to 'deviant' interpretations of its officially recognized religions (fe.g., Fealy 2016), or the recognition of social norms that contrast religious standards, such as in the case of LGBTIQ (Thajib, 2021) or atheism. In the case of growing conservativism, scholarship stresses that the dominant group or the majority are those who increasingly decide what is included in and what is excluded from society and thus identified as a disrupter of harmony (Suaedy, 2016, p. 159). But as social media provides public spaces for atheists, even though their influence is limited, atheism can have a voice without challenging social cohesion.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, German Research Foundation), Grant Number 491339839.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

'Mabuhay ang Filipina!': The Independence of the Philippines in the Imaginations of Indonesian Freedom Fighters in the Context of the Dutch-Indonesian War

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Received: 29 January 2024/ Accepted: 10 October 2024/ Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Zara, M. (2024). 'Mabuhay ang Filipina!': The independence of the Philippines in the imaginations of Indonesian freedom fighters in the context of the Dutch-Indonesian War. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 171-186.

creative commons www.seas.at 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0117

This study discusses a pivotal but forgotten aspect in the history of Indonesia-Philippines relations, namely how the Indonesian freedom fighters, who were in conflict with the Dutch, responded to Philippine independence, which was proclaimed and acknowledged on July 4, 1946. Using Indonesian print media published between June and July 1946, this study shows that Indonesian freedom fighters devoted considerable attention to Philippine independence and they showed it with various expressions and media, including speeches, writings, editorials, congratulatory letters, news, and photographs. The Indonesian nationalists not only congratulated the Philippines on its independence but also made Philippine independence a momentum to evaluate and reflect on the struggle for Indonesian independence, including by using the Philippines as an example of how a young country can educate its people, emancipate its women and have an important position in the international world, mainly because of its good relations with the United States. Indonesia and the Philippines were also narrated to have close relations, both as brothers and neighbors, and have the potential to build cooperation in the future. These perspectives contributed to providing moral strength and confidence for Indonesian fighters in defending their independence in the context of the Dutch-Indonesian war and postwar decolonization in Asia.

Keywords: Indonesian Independence; Philippine Independence; Indonesia-Philippines Relations; Postwar Southeast Asia; Media Representations

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on bilateral relations between Indonesia and the Philippines have been conducted by scholars, and these studies try to answer questions about the history, basis, forms, purposes, and problems in relations between the two countries. Roesnadi (1970) traces Indonesia-Philippines relations to the era of the spread of

Hinduism from Indonesia to the Philippines in the early centuries AD, then continued during the spread of Islam from Indonesia and Malaysia in the 15th century, and the estrangement of relations in the colonial period. In the 1950s, relations between Indonesia and the Philippines were strengthened by their shared understanding of the importance of Asian and African voices in the new world order, as reflected in Carlos P. Romulo's speeches at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 (Mall, 1959).

Indonesia-Philippines relations can also be placed in the context of regional anti-communism and anti-colonialism struggles in Southeast Asia (Abell, 1972). Evelyn Tan-Cullamar (1993) studies the Indonesian diaspora in the Southern Philippines since the early 1900s and found that the movement of Indonesians occurred because there were push factors in Indonesia and pull factors in the Philippines. Ikrar Nusa Bhakti (2010), who examines Indonesia-Philippines bilateral relations from 1949 to the early 2000s, summarizes it as "stable and fully cooperative". He, like several other researchers, emphasizes that the most important milestone in Indonesia-Philippines relations was the formal opening of bilateral relations in 1949. John Nery (2011) sees the anti-colonialism of prominent Filipino national activist Jose Rizal as an element that connected Indonesia and the Philippines in the colonial period.

However, very few serious studies discuss the relationship between Indonesia and the Philippines in the period from 1945 to 1946, when the two countries had just proclaimed their respective independence. Indonesian independence was declared on August 17, 1945 and Philippine independence was recognized by the United States (US) on July 4, 1946. Roesnadi (1970) mentions the reaction of Indonesian officials to Philippine independence on July 4, 1946, but only at a glance. John Nery also discusses the response of the Indonesian press, particularly in *Bakti* magazine (Mojokerto), to Philippine independence, but focusing only on the views of Indonesian nationalists on Rizal. Besides, Augusto V. De Viana (2013) examines the views of the Philippines towards Indonesian independence as reflected in Philippine newspapers, mostly in 1949.

Thus, the study of Indonesia-Philippines relations emphasizes more on the relationship between ideas in the colonial period and post-1949 relations and ignores Indonesian perceptions of the Philippines in the first years after the Second World War. As a consequence, we tend to disregard the ideas and efforts of Indonesian nationalists in seeking solid principles and foundations to build bilateral relations between the two countries and leave us with an incomplete understanding of how the key ideas of the Filipino intelligentsia were read, translated, and adopted into the Indonesian context by various parties among Indonesian nationalists.

This study aims to address this gap in the historiography by examining how Indonesian freedom fighters viewed the Philippines, especially when Philippine independence was announced and officially recognized by the US on July 4, 1946. This study focuses on three main questions, namely (1) why Indonesian freedom fighters considered Philippine independence day important, (2) what were the views of the Indonesian freedom fighters towards Philippine independence day, and (3) how Indonesian freedom fighters placed Philippine independence day in the context of the Indonesian independence struggle, the Dutch-Indonesian war, and the Indonesia-Philippines relations. The primary sources used were print media published by

Indonesian nationalist journalists, especially in the June-July 1946 editions, namely *Antara* news agency (Jakarta), *Minggoean Merdeka* newspaper (Jakarta), *The Voice of Free Indonesia* magazine (Jakarta), and *Kedaulatan Rakjat* newspaper (Yogyakarta) (all translations from Indonesian to English are mine unless otherwise stated). Using these sources, I examined their reports and views related to the events surrounding the independence of the Philippines and the views of Indonesian nationalists. It includes various news, headlines, editorials, articles, and illustrations about the Philippines, especially its history, its independence struggle, and its achievements. These print media were managed by Indonesian nationalist journalists (*Minggoean Merdeka* and *Kedaulatan Rakjat*) or affiliated with the Indonesian government (*Antara* and *The Voice of Free Indonesia*). Most of the journalists and editors-in-chief were nationalist journalists, both from the late colonial period and the Japanese occupation era. As such, their tone was very pro-Indonesia and anti-Dutch, and this was reflected in their framing of Philippine independence and the responses of Indonesian nationalists.

CELEBRATING FIILIPINA'S INDEPENDENCE

The earliest reaction of Indonesian nationalists was to congratulate and appreciate the establishment of the Philippine government, especially the presidency, ahead of Philippine independence. For Indonesians, this signified that the Philippines was ready to exist as a sovereign state. On June 6, 1946 the Executive Board of a Solo-based party *Partai Rakjat* (People's Party), led by Maruto Nitimihardjo, sent congratulations to the President of the Philippines, Manuel Roxas, on his election as President of the Republic of the Philippines. The congratulations were delivered in an English text (except for the salutation, which used Indonesian), a copy of which was published by the Indonesian news agency *Antara,* both the English version and the Indonesian translation. Maruto began his words with a distinctive greeting used as a national greeting by Indonesian fighters in recent months, '*Merdeka!'* (Freedom). Maruto said his party conveyed "our most sincere sympathy and congratulation" to Roxas ("Oetjapan selamat," 1946).

The Indonesian government paid great attention to Philippine independence. To celebrate Philippine independence, it held a special rally. The government, through the Ministry of State, formed a committee to welcome the Philippines' independence day. Information about the formation of this committee was disseminated through the press a few days earlier so that more Indonesians would participate in the activities welcoming Philippine independence. The rally was announced to be on July 4 1946 in the main square of Yogyakarta, Alun-Alun Utara. Indonesia's national leaders would give their speeches, including representatives from the Konsentrasi Nasional, *Badan Konggres Pemoeda Repoeblik Indonesia*, Indonesian Women, and the people of Yogyakarta. Interestingly, there would be a reply speech from a Filipino citizen named Ir. Estrada (full name unknown). In the evening, there would be a "meeting of the gathering of nations" where essential and relevant speeches from Indonesian President Soekarno, Ir. Estrada, and representatives from other nations would be delivered ("Rapat samodera menjamboet," 1946).

Indonesian nationalists youth saw Filipino youth playing a key role in the country's struggle for independence. From July 3 to 7, 1946 the Indonesian nationalist

youth who joined various youth organizations, under a forum called South Andalas Youth held a congress in Lahat, South Sumatra. In between congresses, they sent a congratulatory telegram to Roxas. They expressed gratitude for Philippine independence and underlined that "we believe that this independence is the fruit of the efforts of Filipino youth who cannot be eradicated in their struggle to defend the democratic sovereignty of the Philippine nation" ("Oetjapan selamat," 1946).

On July 4, 1946, when the Filipino nation finally celebrated its independence, Indonesian officials extended their congratulations and good wishes to the Filipino nation. Soekarno congratulated the Philippines on July 4, 1946 for achieving complete independence after the Filipino nation fought a long struggle to make it happen. Soekarno, who emphasized himself as President of the Republic of Indonesia, regarded President Roxas as his colleague and a fellow head of state. He stated: "On behalf of the 70 million Indonesians who are now defending their independence with the firmest determination against imperialism, I, as the President of the Republic of Indonesia, hereby express encouragement regarding the full independence of the Philippines" ("Hari ini Philipina Merdeka", 1946).

Soekarno delivered a radio speech devoted to congratulating the Philippines. The Indonesian government hoped that more Indonesians, as well as foreign correspondents in Java, could understand the importance of Philippine independence for Indonesia. According to Soekarno, Philippine independence was a unique event because it would be considered a victory by other Asian nations, both independent and unindependent ones. This included Indonesia, which, despite its independence, still had to defend itself from Dutch interference. Previously, Indonesia and the Philippines had also suffered under Japanese occupation. Soekarno wished that with the independence of the Philippines, there would come a day in the future when Indonesia the Philippines, and other Asian countries could help each other to advance nations in Asia ("Philippine and the U.S.," 1946).

In addition to Soekarno, another Indonesian official who congratulated the independence of the Philippines was the Chairman of Indonesia's semi-parliamentary body, KNIP (*Komite Nasional Indonesia Pusat*, Central Indonesian National Committee) Assaat. On July 3, 1946 he sent a telegram to Roxas, expressing his delight with Philippine independence and congratulating the Filipino nation. For Assaat, Philippine independence played a major role for the Indonesian nation, which was seeking recognition of its sovereignty, because the independence of the Philippines boosted the confidence of the Indonesian people that the struggle based on the aspirations of the people would lead to the expected results ("Repoeblik Pilipina," 1946).

Various non-state actors in Indonesia congratulated the Philippines, including representatives of Indonesian students and workers. Indonesian students in Yogyakarta, in a communiqué, expressed their "utmost respect, congratulations and happiness for the realization of the independence of the Philippine nation on July 4, 1946". For them, the independence of nations was the foundation of world peace and they especially paid their respects to their "fellow Filipino students" who had a crucial role in fighting for this new country ("Samboetan-samboetan hari kemerdekaan Pilipina," 1946). Meanwhile, Indonesian workers' organizations that were members of the Indonesian Labor Struggle Concentration Agency in Yogyakarta declared in a press statement that they expressed their "joy at the independence of the Republic

of the Philippines" and wished that the Filipino workers "will prosper" ("Samboetan-samboetan hari kemerdekaan Pilipina," 1946).

The Indonesian nationalist press dedicated its front page to show its support and sympathy for Philippine independence. *Kedaulatan Rakyat,* on July 4, 1946, made a headline congratulating the independence of the Philippines. A photograph of President Soekarno was posted. The centerpiece of the headline was a text containing congratulations from Soekarno to Roxas. The editor of *Kedaulatan Rakjat* emphasized that on July 4, 1946, two countries celebrated their independence: the US and the Philippines. He explained that Philippine independence was achieved after Filipinos for centuries fought to gain independence from their colonizers, at the cost of many lives, including their hero, Jose Rizal. The editor compared the nature of US and Dutch colonialism, emphasizing that the US was better at understanding the soul of the Filipino nation and realized that the colonized nation would one day succeed in gaining its independence. This was in stark contrast to the Dutch, who, wrote the editor, "still has the soul of fascism" ("Kemerdekaan," 1946).

On July 4, 1946, as planned, the Indonesian government in Yogyakarta held a special ceremony celebrating the independence day of the Philippines. The rally was attended by Indonesian officials such as Vice President Mohammad Hatta, and representatives of the Yogyakarta regional government as well as many Indonesians. The event was opened by the chairman of the rally committee, who explained that after 48 years of sacrificial struggle, the Filipino nation finally succeeded in achieving its independence. This independence, he said, was proof that the Philippines "has made it through the golden bridge and is on its way to a delighted society". At the rally, the women's representative, Mrs. Soenarjo Mangoenpoespito, corrected the impression that Philippine independence was achieved smoothly and easily by underlining the magnitude of the struggle, sacrifice, and suffering of the Filipino nation in the past. She saw that the determination of the Filipino nation encouraged other colonized nations to materialize their independence as well immediately. She criticized the Dutch attitude towards Indonesia for not following in the footsteps of the US in granting independence to the Philippines. A representative of the Catholic community emphasized the idea that Philippine independence was successfully realized without getting help from other parties. According to him, this was an insight for the Indonesian people to be confident, not depend on other parties, and unite to achieve happiness and prosperity. The renowned educator Ki Hadjar Dewantoro, who represented the people of Yogyakarta, praised the Philippine independence celebration ceremony initiated by the Indonesians because for him the event was important to convey Indonesia's message to the world that the Dutch-Indonesian conflict that occurred in Indonesia was a humanitarian issue ("Philipina melaloei djembatan emas," 1946).

To show that the congratulatory messages of the Indonesian government and people received a warm response from the Philippines, the Indonesian government invited a representative of the Philippines, Estrada, to the event. He delivered his speech in English and Tagalog, emphasizing the history of the Filipino nation's struggle for independence. He closed his speech by shouting the national greetings of the Philippines and Indonesia. The Philippine representative's speech seemed to be aimed at sending a signal to the Philippines that the Indonesian government and people had

established a close relationship with a Filipino citizen so that it was expected that in the near future official relations would be established between the two countries ("Philipina melaloei djembatan emas," 1946).

The Philippine independence celebration ceremony was also held in other cities, including Madiun, East Java. On July 4 1946, the Republican government in the city held a mass rally in the city square to celebrate Philippine independence, led by the head of an official of the Ministry of Information, Soekardjo. Speeches congratulating Philippine independence were conveyed by envoys from various nationalities in Madiun, such as Arabs, Chinese, and Indians. The meeting was closed with a speech from the deputy resident of Madiun, who wished that the event could be an encouragement for the Indonesian nation to strengthen its efforts so that Indonesia's independence could be recognized by the world, just like the Philippines experienced. After the meeting, the committee held a parade around the city, which was reportedly attended by many people ("Menjamboet Philipina Merdeka," 1946).

The celebration of Philippine independence in Indonesia continued after July 4, 1946. The Indonesian nationalist press still reported on Philippine independence after July 4, 1946. For example, *Kedaulatan Rakjat* on July 5, 1946, on the first page briefly reported the course of the independence ceremony in Manila the previous day so that Indonesian readers could find out what the official procession of recognition of Philippine independence was like, what themes were discussed at the event, and how the US and the international community viewed the Philippines and Asia. President Roxas' speech in the ceremony indicated that the Philippines strongly supported the US efforts to maintain world security by sustaining its military bases in the Philippines ("Pilipina merdeka," 1946).

Philippine independence remained a topic until mid-July 1946, when the Republican government in Sumatra held a special rally to welcome Philippine independence. The meeting was held in Pematang Siantar, North Sumatra, and was attended by thousands of Indonesians. The Governor of Sumatra, Teuku Muhammad Hassan, stressed that Indonesia "gladly welcomed the independence of the Philippines", even though Indonesia was still in conflict with the Dutch at the time. He stressed that Philippine sovereignty had been recognized internationally, indicating that for Indonesian fighters, they not only needed to declare their nation's independence but also seek international recognition of Indonesia's independence ("Soematera ikoet merajakan" 1946).

INTRODUCING THE HISTORY OF PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE

In addition to congratulatory speeches, the Indonesian public sphere in the first week of July 1946 was also filled with extensive narratives that introduced Indonesian readers to the Philippines. This was a necessary step considering the Philippines was not a country that was widely known by the people of Indonesia. The areas in Southeast Asia that gained a place in the Indonesian press in the first year of Indonesian independence were limited to Malaya, Burma, and Indochina. By introducing the Philippines, Indonesian readers could get to know the broader historical context of the history of the struggle for Philippine independence and were directed to find similarities between the history of the struggle for independence in the Philippines and in Indonesia.

An Indonesian author, Umar Santoso, introduced a brief history of the struggle for Philippine independence in *Kedaulatan Rakjat,* which gave Indonesian readers context about the significance of July 4, 1946 to the Filipino people. He described the ideals of Philippine independence that had been advocated by Filipino heroes from previous eras. He examined the Spanish defeat in the Philippines, which was mainly caused by domestic resistance by Filipino nationalists and attacks from the US. This defeat of Spain refers to an event known as the Mock Battle of Manila. Occurring in 1908 in Manila, the war between Spain and the US (supported by Filipino fighters such as Aguinaldo and his followers) was actually just a pretend war waged by both countries. Military officials of the two countries agreed to a secret agreement that they would conduct a sham war, then Spain would declare defeat and hand Manila to the US. The condition was that Filipino nationalists should be kept away from Manila (Schirmer & Shalom, 1987). It was the Spanish and US colonizations that made Filipinos aware of the importance of independence, and it was during this period of US occupation that many new developments emerged, including the presence of Philippine representatives in the US Congress in 1907, the establishment of the Philippine parliament in 1912, and the signing of the treaty establishing an independent Philippine state by US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in 1936. Santoso explained that during the Japanese occupation, resistance against Japan was led by Roxas and Romulo in cooperation with the US.

A more extensive exploration and reflection was published by the weekly magazine *Minggoean Merdeka*, which provided in its July 6, 1946 issue pages 1 to 10 (out of a total of 12 pages in that issue) to review Philippine independence. This was the largest number of pages provided by an Indonesian print media discussing Philippine independence. The article on the first page of the issue, written by R.A. (referring to the magazine's journalist, Rosihan Anwar) was titled "Manuel Roxas: President of the Republic of the Philippines" and featured two photos, one of Roxas and the second of a Filipino woman aiming an arrow, with a caption likening her to firing an arrow in hope towards the goal of an independent Philippines (Anwar, 1946).

This article discussed the profile of Roxas. The perspective in this article positioned Roxas as a Filipino freedom fighter whose background was beset by controversy. On the one hand, he was described as the son of a wealthy family, highly educated, mastering several European languages, active in politics, and above all, a patriot. On the other hand, he was criticized for representing only the elite and having worked with the Japanese occupation government. The author appreciated Roxas' struggle for Philippine independence but reminded his Indonesian readers that Roxas' idealism to build a country led by Filipinos themselves and no longer Americans was not easy due to the still strong influence of US capitalism in the Philippines, the unrealization of the ideals of the workers and peasants, and the attacks on the leftist group (Anwar, 1946).

Rosihan's next article on the Philippines was titled 'The Personality of Poet Rizal'. Here Rosihan saw that the independence of the Philippines on July 4, 1946, which brought the Philippines into a new phase of history, could not be separated from the long struggle against colonialism in the country. He provided facts about resistance to Spanish rule from the 16th century to the late 19th century, when finally, in 1898, Spanish colonialism successfully ended, and the US rule rose. He introduced to his Indonesian readers the names of Filipino freedom fighters such as Emilio Aguinaldo,

Andres Bonifacio, Apolinario Mabini, and Antonio Luna, and the generations after that, such as Manuel Luis Quezon y Molina, Sergio Osmeña, Carlos P. Romulo, and Manuel Roxas, who were eventually able to lead the Philippines through the Japanese occupation and become an independent nation. In the midst of this struggle, Rosihan reminded Indonesian readers of one name that should not be forgotten, namely Jose Rizal, whom he called "a meritorious figure, a son who breathed the breath of struggle into the soul of his nation, a patriot and poet, a genius, peerless idealist, whose name will be famous until the end of time" (Anwar, 1946).

For Rosihan, Rizal was "a hero of justice and truth, defender of the humiliated and oppressed", who "moved his pen to open the eyes of his people to the cruel and unjust treatment of the Spaniards". He described various phases of Rizal's life related to the struggle for Philippine independence. He closed his article by quoting Rizal's most famous poem, which he composed the night before he was executed by the Spanish. The poem, which emphasized love for the motherland, sacrifice and freedom, according to Rosihan, contained the spirit of love for the nation and needed to be used as a guiding principle by Indonesian youth in their struggle for independence (Anwar, 1946).

Rizal's biography was also presented by another author, S. Tasrif, this time by placing it in the sociopolitical context of his time. He explained Rizal's background, his education in the Philippines and Spain, his work as an ophthalmologist, his efforts to advance Philippine society and break the bonds of colonialism, his struggle-oriented literary works, especially his two novels, *Noli Me Tángere* (Touch Me Not) and *El Filibusterismo* (The Reign of Greed) which were considered insults to the Spanish government and religious authorities in the Philippines. Tasrif described Rizal as a man who "united the best qualities of the East coupled with the civilization he received from the West" and "a Filipino patriot" who, despite his death, his dream of liberating the Philippines was finally realized on July 4, 1946. To emphasize the brotherhood and closeness between the Philippines and Indonesia, the article featured a photograph of a farmer, apparently located in the Philippines, with a caption emphasizing that Indonesians and Filipinos were agrarian peoples and both "are indeed people of one descent who share the same cultural origin" (Tasrif, 1946).

Another Indonesian author, M. Sjaaf, focused on the Philippines' leading diplomat and resident commissioner of the Philippines to the US Congress, Carlos P. Romulo. He cited Romulo's thoughts on democracy to show that Romulo was a man he called a "warrior and hero of democracy". The proof, explained Sjaaf, was when Romulo sided with the US and opposed Japanese fascism. Sjaaf praised Romulo's fortitude, determination, and courage in fighting the Japanese together with General MacArthur and his army, especially in Bataan. Sjaaf praised two big ideas championed by the Filipino nation: nationalism and democracy. He saw the Philippines as far more advanced compared to Indonesia. He saw the key in the fact that the US, which colonized the Philippines, was a democratic country, and these democratic traits manifested itself in its colonies as well. Sjaaf did not see this in the British, who he thought were arrogant, cruel, and racist towards the people of the countries they colonized, and also in the Dutch, who he said suffered from the so-called *'tropenkolder'* (tropical madness), which was shortsighted and demeaning the natives. Other evidence Sjaaf put forward was that in the Philippines there were no rubber laws and places of exile such as Digoel and Tanah Merah to punish nationalists (Sjaaf, 1946).

An author named Maroeto Daroesman described the history of the struggle for Philippine independence and the current political conditions in the Philippines. He explained to his Indonesian readers what July 4 meant for the US and for the Philippines, the history of the US struggle for independence, the works of leading US political thinkers such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the journey of the US to become an industrial and imperialist country, and the US resistance to fascism in the Second World War. Maroeto said that Filipinos were fortunate because, compared to other colonized countries in Asia, they were more familiar with the ideas of nationhood, democracy, and progress (Daroesman, 1946).

Maroeto recalled his meeting with a young Filipino diplomat in London, who told him his happiness because the Philippines was getting a higher position in the circle of nations, but he was also worried because at home, there was conflict among political streams and also because of the strong influence of US capital. Maroeto then examined how the US saw the Philippines' position in the Pacific. According to him, the Philippines was an important country for the US, including as a US military base in the Pacific, something that could hinder the progress of the Philippines. Maroeto stressed that Philippine independence would have great significance for other Asian countries fighting for their independence, including Indonesians, Indians, Burmese, and Vietnamese (Daroesman, 1946).

WOMEN IN THE PHILIPPINES AS AN INSPIRATION FOR INDONESIAN WOMEN

One of the crucial yet still forgotten themes discussed in various perceptions of Indonesian nationalists towards Philippine independence was related to the high achievement of women in the Philippines compared to women in Indonesia. This achievement was especially in the fields of education, as well as in social and political position. Indonesian nationalists saw that Filipino women's interaction with Western nations, especially the US, has made it easier for Filipino women to adopt modernity. One notable example here was a female journalist named Herawati Diah, who congratulated the Philippines for independence from a women's perspective and focused on the women's aspects, something that other Indonesian intellectuals and activists have yet to explore. Herawati praised women in the Philippines, who – as she said – had advanced like women in the West, including by having European and American education, being able to drive cars and play tennis, which in turn allowed them to become leaders in Filipino society. She even praised the existence of a special university for women in Manila, The Philippine Women's University, which she said was not inferior in quality to other high schools. Herawati shared her interesting experience when she met and discussed with a 23-year-old Filipino woman. The 23-year-old was still very young, but Herawati was amazed that her interlocutor was a jurist, a city councilor in Manila, and an activist in the progressive women's movement. What astonished Herawati even more was that "despite Western influence, Filipino women are still Easterners in their souls", while still following their traditions and not abandoning their feminine qualities (Diah, 1946, p. 8).

Another thing about Filipino women that amazed Herawati was that apart from politics, women in the Philippines also had a high position in terms of the economy. She likened it to the position of women in Minangkabau, West Sumatra, who

controlled family property. During a previous visit to Manila, Herawati observed first-hand the many and varied possessions owned by women there. However, Herawati recommended that women in Indonesia do not fully imitate what women do in the Philippines because not everything was in accordance with the values that were prevalent in Indonesia, including, for example, women giving pocket money to their husbands (Diah, 1946).

In addition, Herawati saw that the Philippines were greatly influenced by the US, as can be seen from its use of the English language, its young people who liked to drink Coca Cola and played baseball, and its education system that imitated the education system in the US. Nevertheless, Herawati lauded the Americans in the Philippines while giving bad marks to the Dutch in Indonesia. For example, she looked at how the intellectual, cultural and political fields of Manila, as the capital of the Philippines, was dominated by educated Filipinos, with the Americans playing only a minor role there. She compared it to the Dutch in Indonesia, who she described as "a cunning colonizer", because they controlled positions from all levels, both in government and private, and excluded Indonesians. She compared the US, which kept its promise to grant independence to the Philippines, to the Netherlands, which in 1918 promised Indonesians that there would be political reform in the Dutch East Indies, but did not realize it until 1946 (Diah, 1946).

The deepest exploration and appreciation of an Indonesian thinker about women in the Philippines can be found in Adi Poetera's writing in *Minggoean Merdeka,* 'Filipino Women in the Level of Progress'. He explained the socio-economic context that allowed women to work outside the home, including industrialization and modernization in the West, which later entered various regions in Asia, such as China, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century. Adi believed that the key to the high position of women in the Philippines compared to other Asian countries was the vast opportunities for women to get education. Through education, he underlined, women could gain knowledge and freedom (Poetera, 1946).

One aspect of education that received attention from Adi was the women-only college established in the Philippines. Adi praised the education system in the Philippines for providing opportunities for women to pursue education from various levels. In addition to attending school, there was one new profession of Filipino women that amazed Adi, namely their involvement as journalists, with jobs including as news writers, workers in printing presses, and even print media leaders. Adi mentioned several print media led by female journalists in the Philippines, such as *The Philwomenian, The Philippine Women's Magazine,* and *The Maroon and White.* In short, he concluded that in the Philippines *"Wanita mentjapai tingkatan kemadjoean!"* (Women have made progress!) (Poetera, 1946).

However, Adi believed that Filipino women had not forgotten their own households. He said that women in the Philippines were even leaders in the household, especially in terms of family financial management. Furthermore, Adi explained that about 300 women's organizations in the Philippines focused on activities to advance family and community life, such as by establishing care centers for children, libraries, handicraft centers, and participating in promoting family health care. Adi closed his article by setting up Filipino women as role models for women's struggles in Indonesia and in the East in general (Poetera, 1946).

THE PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE AND INDONESIA-PHILIPPINES RELATIONS

Indonesian nationalists not only congratulated the Filipinos on their independence, but also used the momentum of independence to build reflection on the struggle for independence in Indonesia itself. The leader of the *Partai Rakjat*, Maruto Nitimihardjo, for example, explained in an English-language congratulatory message to the Filipinos on their independence, that although Indonesian fighters had limitations, they were formidable fighters against foreign enemies who wanted to rule Indonesia. He appealed to Filipino nationalists for help, emphasizing brotherhood among colonized nations and the long history of Philippine nationalism that gave birth to important nationalist figures: "We are looking for our sister nation's sons and daughters of Rizal[,] Bonifacio and Mabini as a symbol of hope and living inspiration". He closed his congratulations by praying that the young Filipino country and nation would get "prosperity, strength and culture" in the future ("Oetjapan selamat" 1946). It is interesting to note that in the Indonesian translation, it was emphasized that in the struggle for Indonesian independence against the colonial nations, Indonesian nationalists drew inspiration and enthusiasm from the great Filipino warriors such as Rizal, Bonifacio, and Mabini, and other prominent Filipino leaders who became their successors.

In addition to congratulating the Filipino nation on their independence, the President of Indonesia, Soekarno, positioned the independence of the Philippines as an inspiration and encouragement for other colonized nations. He underlined the importance and significance of Philippine independence for countries struggling to escape colonialism. He called the Philippines' independence day a glorious day, recorded in gold ink. To the President of the Philippines, Soekarno stated that "for every nation that is now struggling and defending its independence, the independence of His Majesty gives inspiration and hope" ("Hari ini Philipina Merdeka" 1946).

As explained earlier, from July 3 to 7, 1946 the South Andalas Youth held a congress in Lahat, South Sumatra. It sent a congratulatory message to Roxas and emphasized that what was happening in the Philippines and in Indonesia was essentially the embodiment of one of the points of the Atlantic Charter, namely that every nation had the right to choose the form of government it wanted. The organization closed its congratulations with a wish, not only that the Philippines could become a developed country in the future, but above all so that the Philippines and Indonesia could work together for mutual progress ("Oetjapan selamat"1946).

In the past, there was an attempt to see Philippine independence in the context of relations between Filipino nationalists and Indonesian nationalists. An interesting example was Sjaaf's writing about Carlos P. Romulo in *Minggoean Merdeka.* Sjaaf stressed that Romulo, as a Filipino freedom fighter and patriot, was not a stranger to Indonesia, as he had visited Indonesia in the late colonial period. Sjaaf explained that before the outbreak of the Pacific War, Romulo, as a journalist, visited various regions in Asia, namely China, Indochina, Siam, Burma, British Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies. In Manila, several Indonesian students met him to convey a message from Indonesian nationalists that they would like to meet Romulo if he visited Jakarta.

After observing the oppression of Western imperialists in China, Indochina, and Burma, Romulo arrived in Batavia. It was here that Romulo began to discover how

strong Dutch colonial oppression was against Indonesian nationalists. He, according to Sjaaf, presented some evidence, including the fact that an Indonesian nationalist leader secretly sent him a letter of invitation to a meeting in Batavia, the passivity of the Indonesians in preparing against the Japanese, the sharp social hierarchy between the colonizers and the colonized, and the Dutch police's strict monitoring of him as a foreign journalist (Sjaaf, 1946).

Romulo himself mentioned that he met with Indonesian nationalists from the Indonesian National Party (Spencer, 1953), a nationalist party founded by a prominent independence activist, Soekarno (in 1945 he was appointed as President of Indonesia), in 1927. The visit shaped his belief that Dutch colonialism was racist in Indonesia, with the native Indonesians being marginalized and even insulted through a strict social hierarchy. He also observed this colonial racism in Hong Kong, Burma, and Singapore. However, this situation, he argued, was different from American colonialism, at least in the Philippines, which was more democratic, where indigenous peoples were given considerable freedom to participate socially and politically (Cogan, 2000). In addition, from the visit, he saw that Indonesian nationalists were of the opinion that Japan could help Indonesians to free themselves from Dutch colonialism.

Only secretly did Romulo manage to meet with Indonesian nationalist leaders somewhere far from Batavia. Sjaaf talked about Romulo's admiration for Indonesian nationalists because they were Western-educated and bravely used national symbols, which later reminded him of the nationalists in the Philippines known as the KKK (*Kagalang-galang Kataastaasan Kaptipunan*), read anti-colonial reading materials, one of which was the Philippine nationalist newspaper *The Citizen* (managed by Romulo and Quezon), and also because of the Indonesian nationalists' expression of respect for the Filipino nationalist leaders, who became an inspiration for the Indonesian nationalists. According to Sjaaf, this meeting and Romulo's experience while in Indonesia made Romulo return to the Philippines with a promise to introduce the struggle of Indonesians to the Filipino nation, the US, and the world. Sjaaf stressed that for Romulo, Indonesians are "the same countrymen and descendants of his nation". Sjaaf underlined that although around July 1946, many Indonesians did not know much about Romulo's activities, he was confident that Romulo would keep his promise to help the struggle for independence for Indonesians, "his brothers living in the south of his country". Sjaaf closed his writing by wishing the Philippines all the best: "Mabuhay ang Filipina!" (Sjaaf, 1946).

Female journalist Herawati Diah, in an article welcoming Philippine independence, tried to find cultural and political relations between Indonesia and the Philippines. She emphasized that "Filipinos are descendants of the Malays", and used a matrilineal system like one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Minangkabau people. In her article, she provided a special section on the subject. There she said that the Indonesian and Filipino people had a relationship and similarities, both culturally and politically. She added, "The revolution and resistance to colonialism showed the desire of both peoples to live again as in the days before the arrival of Magelhaens and Houtman to the two regions inhabited by the Indonesian nation". Herawati underlined that Philippine independence was vitally important for Indonesia because it acted like "oil poured on the fire for Indonesia's current struggle for independence".

She concluded by congratulating the Filipinos in Indonesian and Tagalog ("Mabuhay ang Filipina!") (Diah, 1946). The term *'mabuhay ang Filipina'* (long live the Philippines) became the most famous catchword used by Indonesian nationalists to congratulate Philippine independence.

President Soekarno saw close relations between Indonesia and the Philippines in the past and wanted future relations to be even stronger. As fellow colonized nations, he believed that there were also similarities between Indonesia and the Philippines, both in the past and in the future:

> We, the Indonesians and the Filipinos, as two peoples of the same ancestors, and both of whom have suffered under foreign rule, should in the future work closely together to maintain strong international relations and to create a new world structure in which there is no place for colonialism, oppression, and exploitation ("Hari ini Philipina Merdeka" 1946)

Views on the importance of Philippine independence for opening cooperation between the two independent and sovereign states were supported by other Indonesian officials as well as by the nationalist press. The Chairman of the KNIP, Assaat, in his congratulations to the Philippines, also hoped that the independence achieved by Indonesia and the Philippines would bring the two nations closer in the future, which would certainly contribute to the stability of the post-war world ("Repoeblik Pilipina," 1946). In the same vein, the editor of *Kedaulatan Rakjat* expressed his hope for Indonesia and the Philippines that both nations would be willing to work hard to achieve progress ("Kemerdekaan," 1946).

Non-state actors had different ways of welcoming Philippine independence while criticizing Indonesian government policies, including by mentioning Tan Malaka, a left-leaning Indonesian freedom fighter who once fled to the Philippines after being chased by colonial police. It was understandable that Indonesian officials, such as Soekarno and Assaat, despite knowing that Tan Malaka (under the pseudonym Elias Fuentes) used to be in the Philippines about two decades before and had friends among Filipino nationalists, avoided mentioning Tan Malaka by name in their congratulations to the Philippines. This was clearly because, in early July 1946, there were serious tensions between the Indonesian government and the opposition led by Tan Malaka. Due to his opposition, Tan Malaka and his comrades were arrested by government forces on March 17, 1946 (Poeze, 2009, p. 33). However, the Partai Rakjat chose to use the name Tan Malaka in response to Philippine independence. One important phrase was written by the party's leader, Maruto Nitimihardjo, at the end of his letter to Philippine President Manuel Roxas, which brought the imagination of Filipinos and Indonesians to Tan Malaka as a bridge between the two countries: "The Popular Partay [sic], Maruto, Chairman, Comrade of Elias Fuentes, who is still in Custody" ("Oetjapan selamat" 1946).

The satirical column of *Kedaulatan Rakjat,* Podjok (lit. means corner), written by the author under the pseudonym Semar, gave a mocking response to the Dutch regarding the meaning of Philippine independence in the struggle for Indonesian independence as well as to other nations in Asia and Africa. Semar stressed that on July 4 "the whole of Asia and Africa rejoiced" in welcoming the Philippines' independence.

However, Semar wrote that there were still those who felt disappointed with the independence of the Philippines. He represented it in the figure of Mas Slamet, a Javanese aristocrat who rejected the existence of the Republic and wanted the continuation of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. Semar referred to Mas Slamet as *"djongos Van Mook"* (houseboy of van Mook) and a slave-spirited man. According to Semar, Mas Slamet was so disappointed with Philippine independence that he complained to his "mother", the Queen of the Netherlands, Wilhelmina. Semar alleged that Philippine independence made Liutenant General of the Dutch East Indies Hubertus Johannes Van Mook angry with the US by making the political situation in Asia murky. Semar went so far as to compose a poem describing Mas Slamet's disappointment, anger and sadness over the independence of the Philippines.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze Indonesian nationalists' perceptions of Philippine independence, which was recognized by the US on July 4, 1946. By examining a number of Indonesian print media in mid-1946, this study reveals that for Indonesian freedom fighters, Philippine independence was an important achievement, not only for the Philippines but also for other former colonized countries, including Indonesia. Indonesian freedom fighters expressed their views on the Philippines in various ways and media. These perspectives made Indonesians more familiar with various aspects of Philippine life, such as with Filipino nationalist leaders, the story of the struggle for Philippine independence against Spain and the US, the achievements of Filipinos, and historical cities in the Philippines. Various parties in Indonesia congratulated the independence of the Philippines, including intellectuals, journalists, students, women activists, political parties, the president, and other Indonesian officials, showing that Philippine independence had broad relevance and meaning for various layers of Indonesian society.

The extensive discussion of the Philippines in early July 1946 was a new discourse in the Indonesian public sphere, leading Indonesia to look to its closest neighbor to the north as a brother separated by colonialism, comrades-in-arms against colonialism and potential allies in the future. Emphasizing the similarity and closeness of Indonesia and the Philippines also aimed to send a message to the Netherlands that the Philippines, which was close to the US, had a history of independence struggle that was in line with Indonesia. The Indonesian nationalists' praise of the way the US prepared the Philippines to become independent indicated the Indonesian nationalists' efforts to reach out to the US through the US success story in the Philippines and attacked the Dutch weakness in treating Indonesia in colonial times.

For Indonesian fighters, Philippine independence was one of the crucial moments to reassess how far the Indonesians had gone and raise morale in their conflict with the Dutch. Philippine independence was an opportunity to compare Indonesia and the Philippines and then learn good practices in state life and community life in the Philippines to be applied in Indonesia. Examples were in the fields of education, gender equality, state administration, and roles in the international world. Not only that, with the independence of the two countries, Indonesia hoped that both would start seriously thinking about bilateral relations in the future.

Nevertheless, this study is almost entirely one-sided, focusing only on the responses of Indonesian nationalists to Philippine independence. Understanding the reactions of Filipino nationalists, such as the government, officials, nationalist activists, and the press, to Indonesian nationalists' responses to Philippine independence will be important in completing the study of Indonesia-Philippines relations. However, this theme is beyond the scope of this study and can be placed as a potential subject for future research agendas.

This study shows that relations between Indonesia and the Philippines were not only built with the official opening of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1949 but with the foundation that had been built earlier. Celebrating Philippine independence on a large scale was one way for Indonesian independence fighters to broaden their international political spectrum, from mainly seeking support from Western countries to also seeking support from fellow Asian countries. This study fills gaps in the literature on Indonesian historiography, especially with regard to the history of Indonesian-Philippine relations, by showing the importance of Philippine independence for raising the morale of Indonesian freedom fighters in the context of the Dutch-Indonesian war and the birth of new countries in postwar Asia.

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Invisible Workers in Philippines' Ghost Kitchens: Trends and Implications

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Received: 24 February 2024 / Accepted: 21 September 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Cornell, D., Manamtam, J-R, & Tham, A. (2024). Invisible workers in Philippines' ghost kitchens: Trends and implications. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 187-200.

This research workshop reports on employee relations within ghost kitchens, which are delivery-only food businesses. Surveys conducted with 125 'invisible' ghost kitchen employees revealed that almost 70% of them had less than one year's experience working in ghost kitchens. Yet, close to half could see themselves working in such environments for four years or more. Ghost kitchens also featured a small pool of less than four staff and a workforce aged 18-25. More than half of the respondents possessed undergraduate qualifications, and at least two-thirds of those surveyed were female. Overall, favorable working conditions, as evidenced by ghost kitchen employees, contribute to theoretical and managerial implications for existing and future ghost kitchen practices.

Keywords: Cloud Kitchen; Digital Disruption; Hospitality Human Resources; Platform Economy; Virtual Kitchen

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INTRODUCTION

This research workshop focuses on one of the more recent developments in the form of a platform economy, characterized by economic transactions taking place entirely in a digital ecosystem (Farrell & Greig, 2016). Some scholars attach the term 'gig economy' to the platform economy, positioning the workforce in a highly precarious frame because they are contractors for service rather than full-time employees of the organizations concerned (Lin *et al.*, 2023; Popan, 2024). In this vein, studies have examined the workforce from perspectives such as Uber and other meal-delivery riders within a hospitality context (Goods *et al.*, 2019; Myhill *et al.*, 2021), though the 'invisible workers' of ghost kitchens remain largely under-studied (El Hajal & Rowson, 2021).

Ghost kitchens have been known in other contexts as cloud/virtual/dark kitchens and refer to delivery-only businesses where kitchen operations are not disclosed to customers (Ashton *et al.*, 2023; Cai *et al.*, 2022; Hakim *et al.*, 2022).

Ghost kitchens operate on mobile applications (apps), whereby customers can select from a range of menus or cuisine brands and are taken by food delivery riders to their intended address (Chen & Hu, 2024; Klouvidaki *et al.*, 2023). According to Howarth (2023), the ghost kitchen industry was reportedly worth US$58 billion and is anticipated to grow to almost US$90 billion by 2026.

Some studies have emerged to explore consumer motivations towards ghost kitchens (Leung *et al.*, 2023; Recuero-Virto & Valilla-Arrospide, 2022; Shapiro, 2023) or why businesses operate such establishments (Fridayani *et al.*, 2021; Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022). However, few studies have empirically analyzed ghost kitchen working conditions and employee welfare, with Giousmpasoglou *et al.* (2024) alleging labor exploitation. Prompted by extant literature (or a lack thereof), the research questions are:

- Who are these ghost kitchen employees?
- What are these employees' working environments?

Understanding the perspectives of these ghost kitchen employees helps to elucidate greater insights into their work conditions and what may account for their loyalty to the business (or lack thereof). This research then addresses the gaps in extant literature that have called for more studies on the viewpoints of ghost kitchen employees (da Cunha *et al.*, 2024; Rosette, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The meteoric rise of ghost kitchens can be broadly classified into two main themes – technological advancement and the COVID-19 pandemic. These broad themes provide the necessary backdrop to elucidate employee characteristics within ghost kitchens.

Technological Advancement

Technological advancement in terms of mobile connectivity has given rise to hospitality innovation, including online food delivery (Ardiansyahmiraja *et al.*, 2024; Darekar *et al.*, 2020). Ghost kitchens, in this space, allow for on-demand and a product/process focus where such establishments deliver items on their menu to their intended audiences and monitor trends and consumer preferences to reconfigure menus of interest (Choudhary, 2019; John, 2023). This mechanism reduces inefficiencies and potential food waste because orders are cooked on demand without significant storage requirements (Cai *et al.*, 2022; Shroff *et al.*, 2022).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted hospitality operations as many countries were compelled to halt dining-in opportunities for hospitality establishments (Kaavya & Andal, 2022; Ma *et al.*, 2021). To arrest the financial and operating losses, ghost kitchens became popular in streamlining kitchen operations without having direct customer contact (Gonzalez-Aleu *et al.*, 2022; Othman *et al.*, 2021; Vu *et al.*, 2023).

YEAR	AUTHOR(S)	CONTEXT	METHOD	FINDINGS	FUTURE STUDIES
2020	Upadhye & Sathe	Indian ghost kitchen in Pune	Case study on Swiggy ghost kitchen	The ghost kitchen was located in an area that was convenient to service its intended customers Ghost kitchens would benefit from supporting a range of food delivery platforms and ensuring food and hygiene quality The strength of a ghost kitchen is its ability to have staff specialize in tasks	
2021	Othman *et al.*	Customer usage of ghost kitchens in Malaysia	200 online surveys	More than three in five respondents indicated that perceived control, convenience, and service fulfillment made them adopt ghost kitchens	
2021	Wankhede *et al.*	Ghost kitchen sustainability in Mumbai, India	40 online surveys	Customers indicate they are likely to continue purchasing from ghost kitchens post-COVID-19	
2022	Cai *et al.*	US online food service customers	977 online surveys	Personal and societal benefits develop trust in online food delivery, while societal risk reduces trust	Customer familiarity with ghost kitchens and level of trust Perspectives from operators Cross-cultural insights
2022	Chatterjee *et al.*	Ethical and sustainable perceptions of ghost kitchens in India	Questionnaires with 72 customers and 68 stakeholders (managers)	Loss of human touch from traditional restaurants to on-demand ghost kitchens Men perceived ghost kitchens as being more cost-effective than women Ghost kitchens generate lower food waste	Employee perspectives needed
2022	Deepak *et al.*	Financial viability of ghost kitchens in Hyderabad	12 interviews with ghost kitchen managers	Ghost kitchens offer a more attractive return on investment than traditional restaurant setups	
2022; 2023	Hakim *et al.*	Brazilian consumers	623 online questionnaires	General public awareness of ghost kitchens is in its infancy Perceived food safety, trust in health systems, quality control, consumer experience, and solidarity with foodservice were positive predictors of consumption	Consumer preferences of ghost kitchen brands Food safety and hygiene in ghost kitchens vs full-service restaurants
2022	Kulshreshtha & Sharma	Indian Gen Z ghost kitchen users	576 online questionnaires	Purchase decisions were influenced by a combination of factors including food quality, marketing, convenience, price, hygiene and speed	Sustainability of ghost kitchens Other cultural contexts Gender and age variables
2022	Nigro *et al.*	Ghost kitchen consumer intentions post COVID-19	596 online surveys with Italian consumers	Social influence is a key driver of ghost kitchen adoption Hedonic value is not a main element of ghost kitchen adoption	Country differences

2022	Ongkasuwan *et al.*	Ghost kitchen consumers and providers in Thailand, China and the USA	554 surveys with consumers and 18 interviews with providers	Convergence towards a more efficient food delivery management system is advantageous	Effect of artistic design for meals Use of robots for delivery Compliance with health regulations
2023	Ghazanfar *et al.*	Ghost kitchen stakeholders in Dubai, UAE	7 interviews with executive chefs, restaurant owners and a ghost kitchen operator	Ghost kitchens helped businesses get through COVID-19 to save on rental spaces and overheads However, ghost kitchens are heavily reliant on third party applications and can come at a cost of profit margins	Stakeholder analysis Other destinations
2023	Khan *et al.*	Ghost kitchen business model in Dhaka, Bangladesh	168 online surveys with customers, 33 surveys and 6 focus groups with managers, and 3 interviews with industry experts	Customers prefer ghost kitchens over traditional establishments as they are cheaper and faster, but food quality was perceived as higher in restaurant settings While ghost kitchens require less overhead costs to setup, they are not as flexible in terms of employee payroll systems, and overall, managers are undecided as to whether the ghost kitchen model will grow in the next few years	Engagement with social media and returns on investment with ghost kitchens Longitudinal studies on sustainable ghost kitchen operations
2023	Klouvidaki *et al.*	Ghost kitchen consumers in Greece	1097 consumers	Ghost kitchens offer a new innovative tool to engage with consumer expectations and demands	Other contexts Longitudinal studies
2023	Pookulangara *et al.*	US based ghost kitchen consumers	316 consumers	Perceived innovativeness, price and hedonic motivations triggered attitudes towards ghost kitchen patronage	Experimental studies Other contexts Post pandemic attitudes and preferences
2023	Vu *et al.*	Ghost kitchen owners in Vietnam	20 owners and head chefs	Ghost kitchens facilitated entrepreneurial freedom to make decisions and adapt based on market preferences Ghost kitchens enabled the development of customer-centric brands Future developments call for investment into training and development of staff and processes	Longitudinal studies Cross-cultural perceptions
2024	Leung *et al.*	Ghost kitchen consumers in the US	487 consumers	External attribution and ethnic cuisine strongly influence consumption patterns	Comparison between chain and independent owned ghost kitchens Consumer needs in terms of future dining behavior

Table 1. Empirical studies on ghost kitchens (compiled by authors)

Employees could also work with specializations of labor – focusing on a specific cuisine type, while delivery drivers took charge of reaching the intended addresses (Chern & Ahmad, 2020; Talamini *et al.*, 2022).

Despite these advantages, ghost kitchens are not without their critics. Altenried (2024) alluded to the precariousness of ghost kitchen employment conditions,

where exploitation, wage theft, and work contracts are under intense scrutiny. Several scholars (Aiswarya & Ramasundaram, 2024; Ghosh & Reddy, 2021; Wrycza & Maslankowski, 2020) called out how ghost kitchens have shifted socio-cultural practices of home cooking and dining out, which may inadvertently create cultures of convenience. Ashton *et al.* (2023) and Ghazanfar *et al.* (2023) further problematize how ghost kitchens can result in business dilemmas of gaining new markets but losing control of customer interactions. Amidst this backdrop, 17 empirical studies have emerged to paint a more nuanced picture of ghost kitchens, as depicted in Table 1. Importantly, these papers reveal how ghost kitchens have become more sophisticated and reflect a growing adoption of different business models catering to diverse market segments (Hakim *et al.*, 2023).

However, as Chatterjee et al. (2022) postulated, very little has been empirically revealed about employees in ghost kitchens and their employment conditions and futures in these facilities. This is important to address as very little is known about their plight and circumstances, especially with the global rise of ghost kitchen models. This knowledge gap justifies undertaking research in this space to uncover employee sentiments and experiences in working within ghost kitchen environments to advance theory and practice in this space.

METHOD

The paper utilized quantitative research approaches to provide a systematic approach to answer the research questions. By employing online surveys and statistical analysis techniques, the researchers collected and analyzed numerical data that offered valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of ghost kitchen employees in the Philippines. Qualitative data was not considered feasible due to the data collection undertaken during the pandemic, limiting opportunities to conduct interviews or focus groups with participants working various shifts and unavailable to meet outside work hours. The survey design was informed by the work of other scholars (Md Fadzil & Che Azmi, 2022; Wu *et al.*, 2019), as well as direct answers to profile these 'invisible' workers.

The Philippines was chosen as the context for investigation as it was the country that exhibited the fastest-growing food delivery market in Southeast Asia, worth an estimated US$8 billion in 2025 (Abudheen, 2023). As data collection occurred whilst the COVID-19 pandemic was still raging, online surveys were the most realistic and safe option for both the research team and respondents. Following a call for participation through the researchers' networks and on social media sites related to the Filipino hospitality workforce, 125 completed surveys were received in October 2022. Statistical software and techniques such as path analysis were adopted in this research using SPSS to investigate patterns of effect within the variables. Moreover, WARP-PLS and AMOS were employed in this study since they looked at how the components directly affected the outcomes. The software's ability to handle complex models with both reflective and formative indicators proved invaluable in assessing these components' direct and indirect effects on each other. WARP PLS facilitated the examination of path coefficients, the significance of relationships, and the overall model fit, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the

experiences and perceptions of ghost kitchen employees. Through the use of WARP PLS, the study established a strong theoretical foundation and contributed valuable insights into ghost kitchens and gig economy research. KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and Bartlett's test of sphericity were employed in this study to assess the suitability of the data for factor analysis. These statistical tests are crucial in determining if the variables under consideration are suitable for dimension reduction techniques like factor analysis.

Hypotheses were derived from the current body of work surrounding ghost kitchens, particularly from the perspectives of employees. These hypotheses sought to expand on knowledge regarding employee experiences, satisfaction, ghost kitchen loyalty, and outlook on individual likelihood to perceive desirable futures working in this sector. These hypotheses are therefore structured to help address the research questions of interest.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the breakdown of the respondents who had completed the survey.

1. Do you work in a cloud/ghost kitchen based on the definition above?	f	%
Yes	112	89.6
No	13	10.4
2. How long have you been working in a cloud/ghost kitchen?		
1-6 months	61	48.8
7-12 months	15	12
More than a year	49	39.2
3. Before the cloud/ghost kitchen, did you have any prior experience working in a kitchen or hospitality setting?		
Yes	73	58.4
No	52	41.6
4. How many years of kitchen/hospitality experience did you have prior to the cloud/ghost kitchen?		
Less than a year	87	69.6
1-4 years	24	19.2
5-9 years	9	7.2
10 years or more	5	4
16. How long do you see yourself working in the cloud/ghost kitchen for?		
1-6 months	23	18.4
7-12 months	15	12
1-3 years	29	23.2
4 years or more	58	46.4
17. Would you recommend this cloud/ghost kitchen to others?		
Yes	120	96.8
No	4	3.23

20. How many employees usually work with you during each shift?	f	%
1-4	98	78.4
5-9	17	13.6
10 or more	10	8
21. How many hours do you work during each shift?		
1-4	47	37.6
5-8	62	49.6
9 or more	16	12.8
22. Do you consider your cloud/ghost kitchen accessible (e.g. easy to get to)?		
Yes	114	92.68
No	9	7.32
23. What is your gender?		
Male	42	33.6
Female	82	65.6
Non-binary	1	0.8
24. What is your income level per month?		
Less than 2,500 Pesos	25	20
Between 2,501 and 5,000 Pesos	33	26.4
Between 5,001 and 7,500 Pesos	27	21.6
7,501 Pesos or others	40	32
25. What is your age group?		
18-25	83	66.4
26-35	24	19.2

18. Would you work for another cloud/ghost kitchen?			36-45	15	12
Yes	73	60.8	46-55	3	2.4
No	46	38.3	26. What is your highest qualification?		
Not Sure	1	0.8	Junior High School	5	4
19. Is your cloud/ghost kitchen part of a wider franchise?			Senior High School	26	20.8
Yes	32	25.6	University or College Undergraduate Degree	70	56
No	67	53.6	University or College Postgraduate Degree	21	16.8
Not Sure	26	20.8	Vocational	3	2.4

Table 2. Profile of respondents (compiled by authors)

Table 3 includes the correlation matrix of items 6-15 in the cloud/ghost kitchen. The intercorrelations of items 6, 7, 8, and 9 exceed 0.30, while the intercorrelations of items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 exceed 0.40.

	Item 6	**Item 7**	**Item 8**	**Item 9**	**Item 10**	**Item 11**	**Item 12**	**Item 13**	**Item 14**
Item 6	1.00								
Item 7	0.55	1.00							
Item 8	0.39	0.55	1.00						
Item 9	0.40	0.42	0.52	1.00					
Item 10	0.34	0.44	0.65	0.56	1.00				
Item 11	0.30	0.37	0.49	0.33	0.42	1.00			
Item 12	0.22	0.13	0.61	0.40	0.63	0.47	1.00		
Item 13	0.17	0.36	0.45	0.36	0.49	0.55	0.47	1.00	
Item 14	0.32	0.48	0.49	0.36	0.51	0.44	0.514	0.56	1.00
Item 15	0.29	0.41	0.45	0.29	0.54	0.50	0.592	0.59	0.72

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of 10 items in the cloud/ghost kitchen (compiled by authors)

Table 4 revealed the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, Bartlett's test of sphericity, and rotated component matrix. The KMO value of 0.875 indicates that the degree of common variance is meritorious. Bartlett's test was

KMO AND BARTLETT'S TEST			**ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX**		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)		0.879	**Items**	**Component**	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Chi-Square	607.941		**1**	**2**
	Df	45	Item 6		0.835
	Sig.	Less than 0.001	Item 7		0.739
			Item 8	0.549	0.588
			Item 9		0.676
			Item 10	0.641	
			Item 11	0.656	
			Item 12	0.737	
			Item 13	0.799	
			Item 14	0.745	
			Item 15	0.829	

Table 4. KMO Test, Bartlett's Test, and Rotated Component Matrix (compiled by authors)

significant (less than 0.05), suggesting that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. Both the KMO and Bartlett's tests revealed that it is preferable to conduct factor analysis [9]. The rotated component matrix showed that items 6, 7, 8, and 9 have the highest loading from component 2, while items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 have the highest loading from component 1.

Table 5 shows the indicator loading of all constructs/items, as well as the average variance extracted, composite reliability, and Cronbach alpha measurement. In addition, the AVE of components 2 and 1 are 0.603 and 0.616, respectively. The outcomes are all acceptable, as all the extracted average variances were greater than 0.5. Given that all the composite reliability values are greater than 0.7 for all the items, the instrument has good to excellent consistency in terms of component 2 (CR = 0.858; CA = 0.780) and component 1 (CR = 0.906; CA = 0.874).

STATEMENT	Mean	SD	AVE	CR	CA
Component 2			0.603	0.858	0.780
6. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved your income level?	3.73	1.02			
7. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved your job security?	3.82	0.94			
8. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved your working conditions?	3.98	0.9			
9. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen been more flexible in terms of working hours?	4.14	0.82			
Component 1			0.616	0.906	0.874
10. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved kitchen efficiency?	4.18	0.77			
11. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen reduced gender pay gaps?	3.92	0.92			
12. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved kitchen cleanliness?	4.19	0.93			
13. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen made hospitality work easier (e.g. 2t having to deal with customers)?	4.14	0.87			
14. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen improved employee morale?	4.1	0.87			
15. To what extent has working at a cloud/ghost kitchen enhanced organisational culture?	4.07	0.85			

AVE: Average Variances Extracted; CR: Composite Reliability; CA: Cronbach Alpha.

Table 5. Reliability and Validity Tests of the Constructs (compiled by authors)

Table 6 presents the HTMT ratios. Since the HTMT value is 0.793 (<0.85), which is best, it passes the HTMT ratios.

The following findings were drawn from the data after it had been collected, cleaned, and examined. The study used Partial Least Square - Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to examine the relationships between the two components.

Table 7 represents the model fit and quality indices of the model. It depicts that APC = 0.661 ($p < 0.001$), ARS = 0.437 ($p < 0.001$), AARS = 0.432 ($p < 0.001$). All p-values

	COMPONENT 2	COMPONENT 1
Component 2		
Component 1	0.793	

Note: For HTMT, good if < 0.90, best if < 0.85

Table 6. KMO Test, Bartlett's Test, and Rotated Component Matrix (compiled by authors)

of the APC, ARS, and AARS should be less than 0.05 to have a good quality fit (Kock, 2015). Thus, the model provides a more comprehensive and explanatory prediction of the latent variables (Kock & Lynn, 2012). The Tenenhaus Good of Fit (GoF) value is 0.516, which is greater than the threshold of ≥ 0.36, hence having a higher explanatory power.

INDEX	COEFFICIENT
APC	0.661, P<0.001
ARS	0.437, P<0.001
AARS	0.432, P<0.001
AFVIF	1.755, acceptable if ≤ 5, ideally ≤ 3.3
Tenehaus GoF	0.516, small ≥ 0.1, medium ≥ 0.25, large ≥ 0.36

Table 7. Model Fit and Quality (compiled by authors)

Table 8 shows the direct and indirect effects of the PLS Model. Based on the findings, the hypothesis was confirmed. The path coefficient of H1 is 0.661 with an effect size of f^2= 0.076. Based on Cohen's effect size, the hypothesis falls under a large effect size.

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	p-value	Standard Error	Effect Size (f^2)	Decision
Direct Effects					
H1. Comp2 ▸ Comp1	0.661	<0.001	0.076	0.437	Supported

Note: f^2 is the Cohen's (1988) effect size: 0.02=small, 0.15=medium, 0.35=large.

Table 8. Direct Effects of the PLS Model (Component 2 to Component 1) (compiled by authors)

Figure 1 shows the PLS path model of components 2 and 1 with path coefficients. It shows that component 2 has a direct effect on component 1 (β = 0.661; p < 0.01).

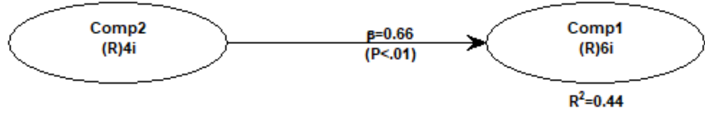

Figure 1. Conceptual model of components 1 and 2 with parameter estimates (compiled by authors)

Table 9 shows the regression path coefficient and p-values of component 2. The paths from item 6 to item 9 are significant.

HYPOTHESES	PATH COEFFICIENT	S.E.	C.R.	P - VALUE	DECISION
H2: Item 6 ✍ Item 9	0.318	0.066	4.783	< 0.001	Supported
H3: Item 6 ✍ Item 7	0.426	0.073	5.870	< 0.001	Supported
H4: Item 9 ✍ Item 7	0.273	0.090	3.023	0.003	Supported
H5: Item 7 ✍ Item 8	0.381	0.073	5.193	< 0.001	Supported
H6: Item 9 ✍ Item 8	0.385	0.084	4.561	< 0.001	Supported

Table 9. Regression Path Coefficient of Component 2 (compiled by authors)

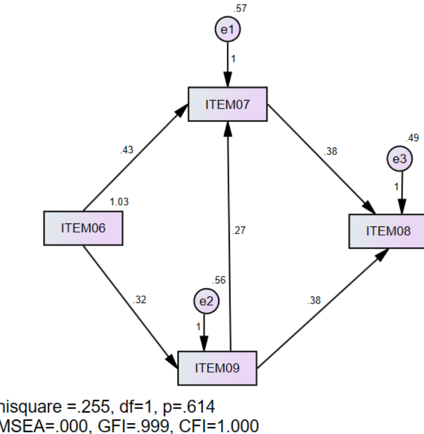

Figure 2. Cloud Ghost Kitchen model of component 2 with parameter estimates (compiled by authors)

Figure 2 shows the PLS path model of component 2 with path coefficients. The critical ratios of H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 are 4.78, 5.87, 3.02, 5.19, and 4.56 respectively.

Table 10 shows the goodness of fit of component 2 and fit indices. The Chi-square value is 0.255 which is less than twice the degrees of freedom. The p-value is 0.614 which is between 0.05 to 1.00. The RMSEA is less than 0.05, the GFI is 0.999 which is between 0.95 and 1.00 and the CFI is 1.00. All values of different fit measures suggest a good fit model.

GOODNESS OF FIT	VALUES	REMARKS
Chi square	0.255	Good fit
p-value	0.614	Good fit
Chi square/df	0.255	Good fit
RMSEA	0.000	Good fit
GFI	0.999	Good fit
CFI	1.000	Good fit

Table 10. Goodness of fit and fit indices of Component 2 (compiled by authors)

DISCUSSION

Each of the hypotheses presented in Figure 2 was supported by the data, indicating that working in a ghost kitchen was largely perceived as a positive experience by the participants in the study. Compared to the work of Giousmpasoglou et al. (2024),

ghost kitchen work was not perceived to be exploitative but instead as a sound working environment for employees, at least in the case of the Filipino sample in this study. Correspondingly, this resulted in stronger word-of-mouth recommendations for ghost kitchens as employers of choice. The hypothesis of employee loyalty was also supported in this study. The benefits of the study from employee loyalty can lead to higher employee retention rates and reduced labor hiring costs. This may be attributed to the specialization of labor evident in ghost kitchens, thereby reducing employee requirements to handle numerous work tasks, as well as customer interactions that would be present in a full-service restaurant (Tayeb, 2021). Contrary to the findings of Giousmpasoglou *et al.* (2024), this research suggests that employees in developing nations like the Philippines may gravitate toward working in ghost kitchens because they may be afforded higher wages and operating conditions as compared to other kitchens, prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Crucially, this outcome triggers further studies to unpack whether such assertions are consistent elsewhere, especially in countries of the Global South.

The research findings can inform subsequent management decisions (Deepak *et al.*, 2022; Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022). For example, employers may benefit from individualized onboarding and training programs designed to capitalize on the enthusiasm and new perspectives of this young workforce. Similarly, this may also advocate increased worker rights, unionization efforts, or other forms of worker empowerment as a response to the challenges posed by labor exploitation in platform-based economies. It could discuss ongoing efforts to address gaps in ghost kitchen operations, such as layout, task specialization, cleanliness, and employee health and well-being.

CONCLUSION

This research workshop highlights employee relations within the context of ghost kitchens. The major findings include the fact that many employees in ghost kitchens are new to this type of employment, with less than a year of experience. However, many stated that they intend to continue working in such situations for at least four years. The study unveils a positive correlation between the adoption of ghost kitchens by young employees as hospitality workplaces of choice.

This research workshop adds to our understanding of how ghost kitchens work and how they might be efficiently handled within the broader context of the hospitality industry. It interprets the experiences and perspectives of 'invisible' staff working behind the scenes to prepare food. From a research standpoint, this study enhances current information on ghost kitchens. It is an acknowledged limitation that this research offers insights from 125 employees surveyed solely in the context of the Philippines. Future researchers can use this information to further examine and comprehend the mechanics of ghost kitchen operations elsewhere, especially from a qualitative perspective which could offer more diverse perspectives.

Further insights into the demographic and educational backgrounds of employees in this sector are provided. Theoretical contributions in the form of decent work and employee relations in a ghost kitchen setting provide more nuanced insights, addressing gaps in existing literature, which has predominantly focused on questions of business models or customer experiences. From a managerial perspective, current

and future ghost kitchen operations should emphasize the positive attributes and favorable working conditions that can attract a wider pool of potential employees. This study provides a foundation for future research into ghost kitchen employee relations, particularly data about the demographics, perspectives, and experiences of people employed in such establishments, and calls for more empirical investigation in this field.

Future studies should explore and analyze ghost kitchens' staff relations in more detail. This could involve conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups with employees to learn more about their perspectives, difficulties, and levels of satisfaction with this business model. It might also be beneficial to investigate how customers feel about ghost kitchens and their interactions with the 'invisible' staff. This might offer suggestions on enhancing the customer experience and dealing with other potential issues.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Female Solo Travel Experiences: An Autoethnography on Social and Emotional Challenges With Tourism Industry Stakeholders

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Received: 17 March 2024 / Accepted: 27 August 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Rostami, A., Trupp, A., & Stephenson, M. L. (2024). Female solo travel experiences: An autoethnography on social and emotional challenges with tourism industry stakeholders. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 201-212.

www.seas.at 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0112

creative commons

Solo travel can contribute to women's social and psychological empowerment, aligning with the broader goal of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment within the tourism industry. However, there is a lack of studies grounded in personal experiences investigating the challenges and constraints of female solo travelers during interactions with tourism stakeholders. This research note presents an autoethnographic study conducted in Penang, Malaysia, by the first author, documenting and analyzing her personal encounters and emotions during solo travel experiences. The study combines both evocative and analytical autoethnography. Employing an evocative autoethnographic approach extracted three main themes related to emotions: disgust and loneliness, unwantedness and defectiveness, and stress and fear. Through an analytical lens, the study further identifies and examines the inadequacy of social-emotional expertise among tourism stakeholders, particularly concerning women's empowerment and gender equality. Consequently, the study advocates for targeted interventions to enhance tourism stakeholders' social-emotional proficiency. It posits that training and fostering awareness can mitigate gender stereotypes entrenched within societies. This research thus offers valuable insights into the complexities of gender dynamics within the realm of solo travel, emphasizing the pivotal role of tourism industry stakeholders in shaping female solo travelers' perceptions and experiences.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Female Solo Travel; Malaysia; Tourism Stakeholders; Women's Empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Solo travel can empower women socially and psychologically by confronting gender stereotypes, challenging patriarchal norms, and breaking free from traditional

taboos (Hassan & Damir, 2022). Such empowerment gained from women's solo travel aligns with the tourism industry's role in promoting gender equality (UNWTO, 2023). However, the literature indicates gender-based constraints limiting women's choice of solo travel destinations or participation in certain activities (Nematpour et al., 2024; Wilson & Little, 2005; Yang, 2021). Accordingly, the probability of unwanted male attention, sexual harassment, violence, and perceived fear affect female solo travelers' mobility (Su & Wu., 2020; Yang et al., 2016). Moreover, Bianchi (2016) highlighted how unfriendly service providers can dissatisfy female solo travelers.

Consequently, to achieve women's empowerment in tourism, collaboration among governments, businesses, civil society, and individuals is crucial (Baltag et al., 2021). Nevertheless, limited research exists on how tourism stakeholders' practices engender negative experiences during solo travel. This information deficiency hinders understanding tourism stakeholders, whose actions can provoke undesirable experiences for female solo travelers.

Henceforth, there are two objectives of this research note: 1) to decipher the potential negative feelings and emotions of female solo traveling during interactions with other tourism stakeholders, and 2) to examine the shortcomings within tourism stakeholders resulting in the emergence of unwanted experiences among female solo travelers, with a particular focus on gender-related factors. As part of her ongoing PhD research, the first author conducted an autoethnographic study to investigate people's reactions to encountering a female solo traveler and to conceptualize her emotions and experiences in Penang, Malaysia. Subsequently, this research note introduces and highlights findings focusing on the challenges of female solo travel stemming from the actions and practices of tourism industry stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although women's desires to travel solo have attracted increasing scholarly attention in the past few years (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2019), pioneering works were established almost two decades ago (Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Wilson & Little, 2005). The literature essentially comprises topics such as solo travel motivations (Seow & Brown, 2018), constraints and risks of solo travel (Yang et al., 2018), solo travel behavior across generations (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024), heterogeneity in female solo travel by country (Bernard et al., 2022), and solo travel experiences (Su & Wu, 2020). Further research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic led individuals to choose solo travel to mitigate the risk of virus transmission through limited physical interactions (Sánchez-Pérez et al., 2021).

Scholars have investigated push and pull factors as motivators for solo travel (Teng et al., 2023; Terziyska, 2021). Push factors encompass internal desires that encourage individuals to embark on solo journeys (Dann, 1981; Hosseini et al., 2021). After initial motivations (push factors) arise, external influencers become pull motivations when choosing destinations (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024). Pull factors, as also identified by Bianchi (2016) and Prayag (2010), encompass attractive attributes of destinations. In addition, existing research analyzed women's economic empowerment through tourism employment (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020; Trupp & Sunanta, 2017) and emotional empowerment via adventure tourism (Saffari & Heidari, 2022). However,

limited studies have analyzed specific destinations' unique resources and attractions for female solo travelers (Sebova et al., 2021).

There is a further gap in understanding how tourism industry stakeholders contribute to deterrent factors in women's empowerment in tourism. Consequently, there is a need to examine how the tourism industry can support women's social empowerment by challenging patriarchal mindsets and respecting women's authority to make their own decisions relating to travel and tourism (Kabeer, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology has become increasingly popular among scholars (Cohen, 2012; Stahlke Wall, 2016; Yang, 2013). In an autoethnographic approach, researchers immerse themselves within a social context (Butz & Besio, 2009), scrutinizing their own behavior and experiences to explore the deeper meaning of the phenomenon under study (Ellis et al., 2011). Nevertheless, autoethnography encounters criticism for being individualized, self-indulgent, and lacking systematic methodology, thus, raising ethical concerns (Atkinson, 1997; Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016). At the same time, autoethnography can potentially enhance sociological understanding, particularly regarding marginalized cohorts in societies (Richards, 2015). Despite a few notable exceptions, autoethnography remains underused in tourism studies (Best, 2017; Cohen, 2019). Notably, Yang (2016) regards autoethnography as a valuable tool for illuminating the "dark side" of personal experiences in solo travel (p. 76), while Tham (2020) conducted autoethnographic research to explore mobilities from the perspective of an Asian male solo traveler during the Rugby World Cup in 2019.

Building on this foundation, autoethnographic studies include evocative or analytic approaches (Anderson, 2006). Evocative autoethnography helps writers come to terms with emotions, especially horrific situations like rape (Chakraborty, 2023), domestic violence (Fletcher, 2018), and illness (Andersen, 2023). Analytic autoethnography contributes to the growth of new topics of inquiry by shedding light on certain elements of studied phenomena that are challenging to study through other means. This study uses both evocative and analytic approaches. In an evocative approach, memories and emotions related to solo travel in Malaysia are expressed. Utilizing the analytic approach, these emotions are then analyzed to identify negative experiences resulting from the interactions with tourism stakeholders in female solo travel. This combination of evocative and analytical autoethnography helps mitigate the criticism of self-indulgence often associated with the method (Stahlke Wall, 2016).

I (the first author), a 35-year-old Muslim Iranian female PhD student at Sunway University, Malaysia, collected the data during my first (solo) trip to Penang, Malaysia, from 16 to 26 September, 2023, a field trip financially supported by my university as part of my PhD program. While exploring solo travel among Muslim Iranian women, I immersed myself in the journey to enhance my interpretive abilities and empathy with interviewees during data collection, employing photo elicitation and serial interviews (Vazquez Maggio & Westcott, 2014; Yang, 2016). My first domestic trip in Malaysia was as a tutorial assistant on a field trip to Malacca City with degree students in June 2023, lasting two nights. This experience sparked my desire to explore another

UNESCO heritage city and tourism hotspot in Malaysia, Georgetown in Penang, which represents an ideal site for studying female solo travelers. The city is known for its multicultural heritage, including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and European roots. I opted for a ten-night stay in a small three-star hotel in Georgetown. Penang hosts numerous attractions. I focused on visiting museums, temples, and historic sites, indulging in local cuisine, walking along the streets, and admiring the old buildings. Additionally, I watched the sunset twice at Batu Ferringhi Beach.

My initial intention was to observe the reactions I encountered as an Iranian female solo traveler and document my behaviors and thoughts in various situations. However, my professional background in tourism – holding bachelor's and master's degrees in the field, five years of industry experience, and currently pursuing a PhD in hospitality and service management – persuaded me to study the role tourism stakeholders played in my experience. This approach is relevant because it highlights the dual perspective of the researcher, combining personal experience with professional expertise. By documenting the reactions and challenges faced as an Iranian female solo traveler, the study provides a unique, firsthand account of the social and emotional hurdles encountered. Furthermore, my background in tourism allows for a critical examination of how industry stakeholders influence these experiences.

I documented my travel experiences using various data collection methods: taking field notes, audio-recording my emotions and experiences, and taking photos. Though I initially drafted comprehensive memos and field notes during the trip, I revisited this task in-depth upon returning to my university to reflect critically on these observations and experiences. To validate this information, I had to cross-reference and compare manually recorded data with notes and recordings made on my phone and chronologically arranged photos. However, details about individuals and locations have been concealed to ensure confidentiality (Stahlke Wall, 2016). Research data in the form of field notes and diaries were imported into NVivo 14, where open coding techniques were employed to identify key themes (Figure 1) (Charmaz, 2006).

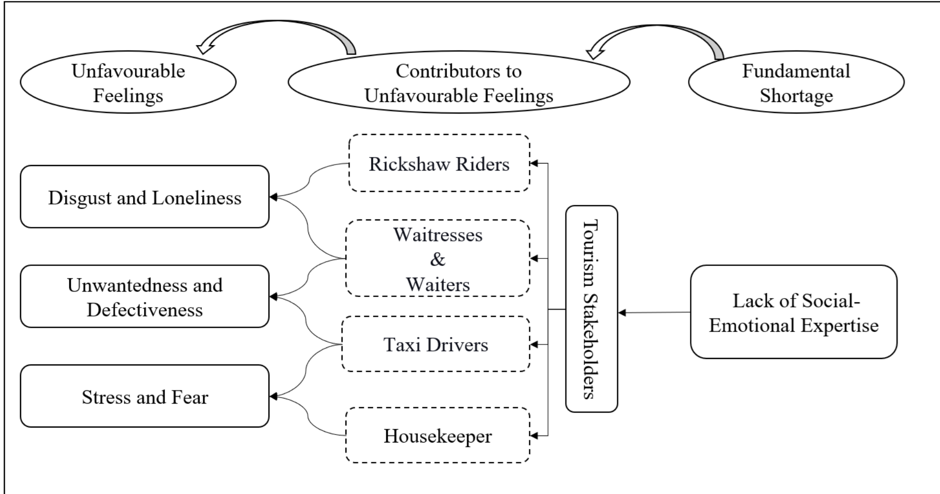

Figure 1. Negative feelings and their contributors during solo travelling. (authors' compilation)

EVOCATIVE APPROACH: UNFAVORABLE FEELINGS AND CONTRIBUTORS TO UNFAVORABLE FEELINGS

This section discusses the negative emotions experienced by the first author as a female solo traveler across different tourism contexts. It illustrates three categories of unfavorable feelings: disgust and loneliness, unwantedness and defectiveness, and stress and fear.

Disgust and Loneliness

Rickshaw Riders or Catcallers?

While exploring Georgetown's UNESCO Historic Site on the seventh day of the trip, I faced unwanted behavior from two rickshaw riders. An older man, initially talking in a non-English language, attempted to convince me to take a ride in his rickshaw, but I gracefully rejected his invitation. However, his parting words were, "Bye, sweetheart!". Approximately two hours later, as I was heading towards a location in Little India within the same area, another rickshaw rider commented: "Nice to meet you, Princess Diana." Consequently, I contemplated how they dared to catcall me, a female tourist, who was potentially their customer.

Passive Waiters and Restaurant Staff Against Harassment

I was passing by a restaurant on the evening of the seventh day when I heard a man loudly speaking about the delicious taste of the food at the restaurant. I decided to take food away. As I placed my order, the same man stood beside me, commenting: "You are so beautiful." I responded politely by saying: "Thank you." However, he started leering at my face and body from different angles and loudly repeated: "You are so beautiful; I want to have you right now, but I cannot!" He had conducted this perceived insult in front of seven men, who did not attempt to intervene against his disrespectful conduct, including four restaurant staff and three customers. Feeling isolated and unsupported, I eventually shouted at him: "It is none of your business if I am beautiful. You are so impolite, and you are not allowed to speak about my appearance. Your behavior is disgusting."

As the man left, he continued shouting inappropriate remarks on the street. I questioned the cashier about the man's association with the restaurant, expressing my reluctance to make future purchases. Consequently, the cashier, a young man in his 20s, persuaded me to sit. Then, he expressed his fear of encountering such intrusive men at night, considering them criminals who could harm him. However, his efforts to alleviate my loneliness and defenselessness as well as protect the restaurant's innocence were ultimately unsuccessful.

To observe people's reactions to the harassment of a female solo traveler, I initially remained passive when the impolite man started his annoying behavior. However, stemming from my prior experiences and perceptions of the world (Kamlongera, 2023), autoethnography allowed me to strongly engage in this situation and express my emotions by shouting at him (Bunde-Birouste, 2019). Growing up in a Muslim country

where people, particularly men, are expected to intervene and deter harassers in similar situations, I anticipated witnessing bystander intervention due to Malaysia's similar religion as a Muslim country. Additionally, a belief in assertive responses to harassment encouraged me to take an active role. Hence, holding an in-between position facilitated me to explore the research context and my emotions (Kamlongera, 2023).

Unwantedness and Defectiveness

Unfriendly Waiter & Waitress

I perceived a sense of unwantedness because of the behavior of some waiters and waitresses while I was keen on trying food and enjoying the 'vibe' of one local café and another well-known restaurant, both recommended by three friends. During my initial experience on the fourth day, after a thirty-minute wait, the waiter directed me to a table in the kitchen area, where staff moved around to access items. Also, a waitress on the final day told me to sit at a smaller table close to the door even though larger, empty tables were available. She said this was due to a company policy that preferred solitary customers to occupy smaller tables, while the table had limited access to the interior decor and atmosphere of the restaurant. Ghadban et al. (2023) noted that some female solo travelers find solo dining a strange practice. Despite dining solo almost five times a week without issues, these situations made me feel that waiters and waitresses were hesitant to serve solo customers. Such experience could contribute to negative perceptions of solo dining among female solo travelers.

Safe Transportation or Interfering Taxi Drivers

Registered taxis are generally viewed as a safe mode of transportation for women when traveling within and between cities (Jafarova et al., 2014). During the trip, I chose to use taxi rides through a popular ride-hailing company. While some drivers offered helpful advice about tourist attractions, others displayed unwarranted curiosity about my personal life, asking questions about my age and marital status, such as "Why are you alone?" and "How do you travel without a partner?".

Two drivers behaved unpleasantly during my trip. On day ten, a middle-aged driver questioned why I, a 35-year-old woman, was single and childless. This was frustrating, as on my last night, another driver around my age criticized me for traveling alone and being single while also seeking my attention. In response, I pretended to have a boyfriend in Canada whom I would join after completing my PhD. These attitudes, including undue excitement about my childless single status, implied a sense of defectiveness for not conforming to the idealized image of a 'perfect woman'.

STRESS AND FEAR

Housekeeper with Dark Danger Alarm

On the fifth day of my solo travel, a conversation with a female housekeeper in the hotel pantry raised my anxiety about enjoying the nightlife in Penang. She warned

about the risk of drunk drivers at night, though she assured me of the area's safety from theft and robbery due to surveillance cameras. Her cautious tone left me contemplating safety measures, particularly regarding the risk of car accidents while traveling on foot in the evenings. As a result, I felt a sense of fear and unease, even on seemingly quiet streets near my hotel. Nevertheless, Wilson and Little (2005) identified the fear of being in unknown environments, especially at night (Figure 2).

While this section illustrates three categories of negative feelings and emotions, representing the evocative approach of autoethnography, the following section analyzes shortages in the tourism industry concerning female solo travel, fostering an analytical perspective.

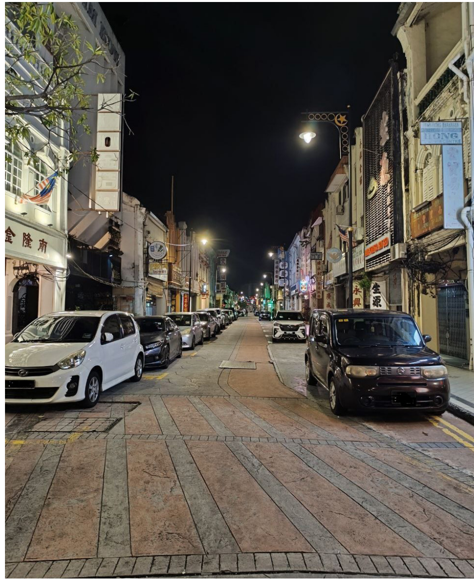

Figure 1. Quiet street at night in George Town Heritage Site, Penang. (photo by the author))

ANALYTIC APPROACH: FUNDAMENTAL SHORTAGES

My challenging experiences and negative feelings concerning solo travel often result from a fundamental shortage among tourism stakeholders, particularly in restaurants, accommodations, and transportation services, including taxi drivers and rickshaw riders. A lack of expertise in dealing with social and emotional concerns can lead to undesired experiences among female solo travelers. These deficiencies of tourism stakeholders contribute to sociocultural constraints on female solo travel, manifested in unwelcome or unfriendly behavior (Wilson & Little, 2005). It is crucial to note that the negative emotions and experiences mentioned above occurred within direct interaction and communication with tourism stakeholders. Despite my negative experiences triggered by stakeholders' reactions and behavior, I recognized that their actions likely originated from a lack of social and emotional management training in international tourism contexts.

Employee training programs are essential for organizations, offering opportunities to enhance service delivery, customer loyalty, and consumer satisfaction (McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997). Ana Paula Pais (n.d.), Head of Education at Turismo de Portugal, emphasizes the importance of enhancing social and emotional skills among hospitality and tourism professionals. The attainment of emotional skills involves adopting competencies to cognitively process emotions into behavior involving the use of appropriate language and facial expressions (McBrien et al., 2020). Individuals with high social-emotional expertise demonstrate proficiency in using appropriate language and expressions tailored to specific social situations and interpersonal communications they experience (Yaşar et al., 2023). Such training initiatives can address deficiencies among tourism stakeholders regarding female solo travel experiences.

The inappropriate behavior of the rickshaw riders and the indifference of the restaurant staff suggest that both groups were unaware of the impact of their actions and lacked understanding of appropriate practices, particularly in facilitating anti-harassment strategies. Street harassment is defined as undesired behavior by men, including comments and actions, leading to being insulted, scared, annoyed, and threatened. Therefore, women's mobility in and navigation of public places can be impacted (Kearl, 2010). Kearl (2010) insists on prioritizing safety and countering perceptions of women as sex objects, which is crucial in the promotion of gender equality. Accordingly, she emphasized the importance of increasing public and male education concerning the prevention of female harassment. Therefore, implementing training courses for tourism stakeholders on appropriate conduct towards women and providing guidance on intervening in cases of street harassment could prove beneficial.

Unwanted encounters in cafes and restaurants and intrusive questioning by taxi drivers persist due to the stigma attached to women being alone or single (Alonso-Vazquez et al., 2024). In certain Asian societies, women are expected to have a partner for protection (Seow & Brown, 2018); otherwise, they may face insulting labels like 'leftovers' (Gaetano, 2014; Ji, 2015). Nonetheless, female solo travel actively challenges these stereotypical roles. Consequently, tourism stakeholders should strive to alleviate these challenges instead of exacerbating the daily burdens faced by female solo travelers, given that tourism is recognized as a key engine for women's empowerment (UNWTO, 2023). Thus, training taxi drivers and service staff on diversity, cross-cultural interaction, effective communication etiquette, and delivering services tailored to the needs of women can empower women's status in societies and help abolish gender-based stereotypes among locals and tourists. Cafes and restaurants are suitable places for female solo travelers to connect with others (Neluhena et al., 2023). Hence, fostering a welcoming atmosphere enhances their experiences and increases spending.

Research shows that safety is the primary concern for female solo travelers (Hassan & Damir, 2022), particularly in selecting accommodation (Herjanto et al., 2020). Herjanto et al. (2020) identified criteria female solo travelers use when choosing accommodation establishments. Good service delivery provided by hotel staff, including friendliness and going beyond required duties, was crucial. In my experience, the housekeeper tried to be friendly but unintentionally conveyed intimidating information. This underscores the need for hotels to implement communication guidelines so that staff can be helpful without causing unfavorable feelings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined underexplored aspects of the tourism industry related to female solo travel. Findings show that a lack of social-emotional skills among tourism stakeholders, particularly in restaurants, accommodations, and transportation services, results in dissatisfaction among female solo travelers. This suggests that certain stakeholders can contribute to sociocultural constraints on women solo travelers by perpetuating gender-based expectations. While existing research has explored women's experiences and challenges (Neluhena et al., 2023; Wilson & Little, 2005; Yang et al., 2019), this study analyzes these challenges directly related to tourism industry stakeholders. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing targeted interventions and training programs that can enhance the social-emotional proficiency of tourism stakeholders, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and empowering environment for female solo travelers.

The findings carry implications for destination managers, policymakers, and stakeholders in the tourism industry. The study pinpoints the importance of gender-specific training for tourism stakeholders to enrich services for female solo travelers, thereby improving their emotional, psychological, and social empowerment. Well-trained stakeholders can serve as a pull factor to attract more female solo travelers to destinations. While Yang's (2016) notable study focused on the risk perception of female solo travelers, our approach of combining evocative and analytical auto-ethnography facilitated the researcher's documentation of negative emotions and personal experiences, particularly regarding the shortcomings of tourism stakeholders. The ongoing phase of this PhD study involves conducting and analyzing creative interviews, including serial interviews and photo elicitation, with Iranian female solo travelers. Such an approach can capture and distill vivid memories and experiences of female solo travelers with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by Sunway University PhD studentship. We gratefully acknowledge their financial assistance, which enabled us to conduct this study.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Emergency Activism: Indonesia's Eroding Democracy, Activist Students, and the Art of Protest. An Interview With Frans Ari Prasetyo

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Received: 3 September 2024 / Accepted: 13 September 2024 / Published: 28 October 2024

▸ Lengauer, D. (2024). Emergency activism: Indonesia's eroding democracy, activist students, and the art of protest. An interview with Frans Ari Prasetyo. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies, 17*(2), 213-228.

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www.seas.at doi 10.14764/10.ASEAS-0111

creative commons

On 22 August 2024, thousands of students took to the streets of Indonesia's larger cities to protest against the Legislative Body's proposed revisions of the Regional Election Law (UU Pilkada) that would, as protesters argue, only serve the continuation of power of Indonesia's ruling elite. On social media, the hashtag #TolakPolitikDinasti went viral.

The protests, and particularly the state's response towards protesters, reignite memories of the 1998 student movement, that succeeded in ending the 32-years-long authoritarian regime and marked the beginning of a transition towards full democracy (Aspinall, 2020). However, this achievement, just as Indonesia's democracy, is gradually fading, and for commentators, it only seems natural that the force of the student movement is regaining power.

In a column for the national newspaper Kompas' website, appraising students' natural inclination towards justice, Indonesian sociologist Jannus Siahaan (2024) writes a day after the nation-wide demonstrations: "Welcome back students and common sense. Indonesia, the country we love, has already been missing you." But is it really true that students have been absent from the political field in the past two decades? Who is the "political vanguard" (Sastramijaja, 2019), now raging on the streets?

Frans Ari Prasetyo, an independent researcher, photographer, and activist himself was at the site of the protests in Bandung, West Java. In this interview, he reflects on Indonesia's current political situation, the protesters' grievances, but most importantly also the new dynamics in Indonesia's cultures of protest. This interview was adapted from an email correspondence that took place in the days following the August 2024 protests. Prasetyo's photographs, which he took during the protests in an act of documentation and that accompany this interview, take us right into the center of the events.

Keywords: Bandung; Indonesia; *Peringatan Darurat*; Social Media; Student Protests

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Dayana Lengauer*: Frans, can you describe the events that took place on 22 August 2024 and the following days?*

Frans Ari Prasetyo: After the “Emergency Warning” (*Peringatan Darurat*) poster/video emerged on social media on 21 August 2024, there was a great deal of news from the mainstream media about an attempt by the House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*, DPR) to change the Regional Elections Law. This was presented as a sudden attempt to benefit President Jokowi’s family, with suggestions that his youngest son may occupy the executive seat in the region in the 2024 regional elections. In light of this situation, many Indonesians expressed frustration and a desire to avoid a similar pattern of deception. They cited the example of President Jokowi’s appointment of his brother-in-law as chairman of the Constitutional Court, which subsequently altered the criteria for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. This resulted in Jokowi’s first son becoming a vice-presidential candidate in the February 2024 presidential election, which he ultimately won.

The “Emergency Warning” alarm extended an invitation to all members of the public, regardless of their background or affiliation, to participate in a targeted protest action on 22 August 2024. The protest would take place at designated protest points, including the offices of the DPR or the Regional House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD) in each city. In Bandung, I had the privilege to participate in a similar protest in front of the West Java DPRD office on Diponegoro Street, only about 100 meters away from the West Java Governor’s Office – a location that has been popular for public protests since the New Order era.

The protest commenced at 9:00 am. Student groups from a variety of universities arrived, bearing posters, student flags, and alma mater jackets, which served to distinguish them from other groups and symbolize their identity as students. Each student representative took the opportunity to make a public speech, in which they explained the reasons behind their protest.

As the day progressed, groups of students from other educational institutions, including junior high schools, high schools, and vocational schools, arrived. They were part of the Bandung Student School Alliance (*Aliansi Pelajar Bandung*). These students were not wearing school uniforms, but instead black shirts, jackets, and hoodies. However, their trousers still bore the hallmarks of a school uniform. It seems that wearing black has become something of a dress code for young people when there is a protest in Bandung. This was initiated by radical autonomous groups, referred to by the public and even by the police as anarchy groups, or *hitam-hitam* (black) groups. Internationally, they are also known as the Black Bloc movement. This movement emerged in the late 1990s in association with punk groups, joining other civil society groups seeking to challenge the New Order regime.

By the end of the afternoon, the area became a rather somber shade of black. The cooler weather seemed to intensify the protesters' frustration, as there was still no sign from the DPRD. They began to pelt the office with stones from the pavement tiles, including burning objects around the office gate, in an effort to persuade the DPRD members to meet them. By nightfall, the gates had been brought down. The police had fired water cannons, but there were no rubber bullets or tear gas, unlike in previous demonstrations on May Day and #reformasidikorupsi in 2019, Ombus Law in 2020, and on the Criminal Code-KUHP revision in 2022. Following the collapse of

the DPRD gate, the police maintained their position while the protesters continued to attempt to enter the building. Ultimately unsuccessful, as the night progressed, the protesters gradually dispersed.

Despite the crowd having dispersed, the situation remained tense. The police officers were still carrying out searches and making arrests of people wearing black clothing. At least dozens of people were arrested, although they were subsequently released through the help of public legal aid organizations.

It seems that the protests were successful in preventing Jokowi's youngest son from becoming a regional executive candidate. However, there are still several laws considered for revision, and the next most urgent one will be the revision of the Military and Police Laws. Fears are that this would encourage the return of the ABRI *Dwi Fungsi*[1] (dual function), which was eliminated during the political reform era after Suharto.

In response, on 28 August 2024, the protest resumed, this time with a demonstration accompanied by music and poetry performances. These were intended to convey rejection of the proposed revisions to the Military and Police Laws, as well as demands for accountability in relation to past human rights violations by the military and police. These include the abduction of activists during the 1998 protests, military operations in Papua, police violence during arrests in various places in Indonesia, and the resolution of the Kanjuruhan tragedy in 2022, in which hundreds of people died in the football stadium due to tear gas and police actions.

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1 The *dwi fungsi* was a doctrine of the Suharto era that designated both military and civilian functions to the Armed Forces, for instance through positions in the public service and reserved military-only seats in the parliament. For further information, see Kingsbury (2000).

This protest was initiated by an autonomous group identified with the Black Bloc. The protest commenced with the preparation of a street stage in front of a *kolbak* (pick up) car with the DPRD building as a background. The musical equipment was set with electricity obtained from two generators. Protesters took to the streets, putting on a series of performances featuring a diverse range of artists, from folk musicians to poets to hardcore punk bands. The latter proved particularly popular with young people.

The symbol of the protest this time was replaced by the snake hand in a form of a hand holding a poisonous snake with the words "*organisir*" (organize) underneath. The symbol was displayed on a large cloth banner installed at the entrance of the DPRD office. Other protest artifacts with this symbol, including posters, flyers, zines, and stickers, were distributed to the public. On these artefacts, one could find inscriptions like: *Ambang Batas Kesadaran* (The Threshold of Consciousness), *Karena pesta rakyat sesungguhnya bukan pilkada tetapi turun ke jalan!* (Because the People's Party is not really a regional election, but taking to the streets!), or *Siaran darurat bukan hanya perkara Pilkada* (Emergency broadcasts are not only about regional elections).

In this action, there were also several short speeches explaining how dangerous the Police and Military Laws are for civilians, and how the Jokowi regime has also created the criminal code, which will be actively enforced next year, further strengthening state control and making it easy for anyone to be arrested. There were also simulations on how to deal with the police if arrested, including the introduction of outfits and personal equipment, such as helmets, masks, thick clothes that can withstand rubber bullets, and other personal protection that must be prepared if one wants to join a protest.

As the evening proceeded, the protest took on more vibrant aspects, with colored lights, flares, and lively music. The crowd engaged in a variety of activities, like dancing in a style reminiscent of the punk culture, playing with plastic balls, and enjoying food provided by the informal sector or from food solidarities. The protesters dispersed peacefully, but it seems that the struggle is not yet over, as the DPR is still trying to pass the problematic law by October 2024.

Lengauer*: Images accompanying official media reports painfully bring back memories of 1998. What is similar and what is different from the mass protests back then?*

Prasetyo: The images appear to convey a sense of frustration and discontent towards the Jokowi government, the DPR, and its affiliated parties. A similar situation occurred during the New Order regime of General Suharto and his associates in the DPR, dominated by the Golkar Party. There was a great deal of frustration and anger about the Asian economic crisis, which occurred without any significant efforts by the government to solve it, especially in terms of food supplies. Instead, instances of corruption, collusion, and nepotism ("KKN", *korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme*) could be observed among government officials and businessmen.

Following the reform, in 2014, Indonesia elected a president who was initially held in high regard by the people, largely due to his approachable demeanor and emphasis on *kerakyatan* (being close to the ordinary people), rather than on party-centric policies, oligarchs, or supporters of neoliberalism. President Jokowi was in power for two terms (2014-2024). However, in the early days of his first term, there were already concerns that his approach might be similar to that of the New Order regime. His second term was a different experience for many. Some have drawn comparisons between this period and the New Order regime. My suggestion is that Jokowi could be regarded as a civilian version of Suharto. Suharto conducted his activities in a covert manner, whereas Jokowi is more transparent in his approach.

I propose that what sets the protest back then and the current protests apart is the fact that, in 1998, many were initiated by students and pro-democracy activists, as well as labor organizations. This resulted in difficulty in identifying a specific identity perspective. In the Jokowi era, protests encompass a diverse range of civil society groups. It is also notable that junior high school, high school, and vocational school students have joined the protests, highlighting concerns about the future and the affordability of education. Furthermore, a number of other civil factions have emerged, based on a variety of identity formations. These include religious groups, musicians, punks, and even left-wing radical groups.

The advent of democracy has afforded Jokowi to serve two terms in office. At the same time, it has also provided civil society with the chance to engage in political discourse, participate in the political process, and even protest on the streets, print media, online media, and social media. Democracy is occurring at the lower levels of society, not only among elites and activists. However, there is also a growing polarization based on differences regarding issues, political framings, *blok politik*- (political bloc-), parties, civil organizations, as well as identity-related differences. For instance, in demonstrations held during the Jokowi administration, labor organizations have often been present, particularly when expressing their opposition to the enactment

NEVER TRUST GOVERNMENT
TANTANG TIRANI
BUBARKAN DINASTI JOKOWI!
1.3.1.2 FOREVER
ORGANISIR
COPS ARE THE GUARD DOGS OF CAPITAL
COPS ARE THE GUARD DOGS OF CAPITAL
cops are the guard dogs of capital
POLISI
SAMPAH
REFUSE · RESIST!!!
1312
NEVER TRUST GOVERNMENT
MELINDUNGI MELAYANI SIAPA?
1312 FOREVER!
1.3.1.2

of the Omnibus Law, as it has a direct bearing on their interests. However, in the Emergency Warning or Criminal Code-KUHP Protest, it would have been beneficial to see more labor organizations participating. But, the majority have become part of the Labor Party that is now in Jokowi's circle of power.

Lengauer*: How was it possible that thousands of activists organized and took to the streets in a collective act on such a short notice? I've heard people lament the organizational power of students today. But apparently, it was possible to stage (once again) massive, nation-wide protests. How is this possible?*

Prasetyo: The internet and social media play an important role in the dissemination of information, which can sometimes lead to spontaneous protests, even in the absence of organized planning. It seems that the public is increasingly aware of its desire to be involved in a protest action. It is possible that this might not have occurred in an era of activism without mobile phones, the internet, and even social media. During the New Order era, protests were typically preceded by numerous meetings between activist groups. These meetings were held with the aim of reaching agreements on the timing and issues to be addressed. In the era of the internet and social media, public mobilization can occur spontaneously, and is joined by individuals or small groups who feel they have the right to speak. Individuals who previously engaged in diverse activities can readily participate in a protest. Similarly, school students who have finished their classes can also join a protest. Even those who work in the informal sector and who are dispersed in various locations can swiftly unite to organize themselves and contribute to a larger protest.

However, in the Jokowi era, students are viewed as future leaders who should dedicate their time at university to studying. Curriculum changes resulted in students having less free time to organize, let alone protest. Students are now facing significant financial challenges due to changes in the governance of public state universities by changing their status to PTN-BH (*Perguruan Tinggi Negeri-Badan Hukum*, State Legal Entity Universities), which are profit-oriented following a neoliberal university system. This has led to increased pressure on students to complete their studies within a shorter timeframe if they wish to avoid additional costs.

This bears resemblance to the NKK/BKK (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus / Badan Koordinasi Kemahasiswaan,* Normalization of Campus Life/Body of Student Coordination) system implemented by the New Order to universities in the mid-1970s, which had the aim of preventing students from interfering in government affairs and political activities, and limiting students' freedom of expression, including the elimination of student councils (Sapiie, 2016). This policy emerged following the Malari[2] incident in 1974 (involving ABRI violence), the first significant student movement to challenge the New Order policy.

The protest is a reflection of the frustration and discontent felt by many, particularly university students, school student, young people, and people who are facing challenges in various aspects of their lives. The current economic, educational, and political situation is creating uncertainty and instability, and it is concerning to see that the government and members of parliament are not addressing these concerns adequately.

2 *Malari*, acronym for *Malapetaka Lima Belas Januari* (Fifteenth of January Disaster) was a student demonstration and a subsequent riot in January 1974, when students protested against the visit of the Japanese prime minister, against foreign investment and corruption.

Lengauer*: There have been a series of images circulating on social media calling for action under the slogan "Peringatan Darurat" (emergency warning). These images are full of symbolism. As a photographer, what do you consider the value of this art? Was it circulated by a particular group? Who is the audience of these images? Who is able to decipher the message?*

Prasetyo: On 21 August 2024, an "Emergency Warning" poster/video with a blue-screen background began circulating online. A number of social media users have been sharing a mock-up of an emergency alert system to express their concern over a potential constitutional crisis following the DPR's move to subvert a Constitutional Court ruling that lowers the electoral threshold for the November regional head elections. The image, which features the national state emblem Garuda Pancasila, was taken from a video of a hypothetical emergency system uploaded by the YouTube channel EAS Indonesia Concept in 2022 as part of an analogue horror movie project. From a visual perspective, the blue background with the prominent white Garuda Pancasila emblem and the text "Emergency Warning" creates a striking contrast and is both eye-catching and photographic when displayed in public spaces, particularly in a dynamic demonstration setting, whether mounted on a wall that is typically white or held by demonstrators. It is likely that the public is able to easily recognize it. It establishes a visual identity and history of the mass movement.

In terms of sound, the tone accompanying the image on social media is reminiscent of television from the New Order era. At that time, there was only one television station in Indonesia, namely TVRI (Republic of Indonesia Television), and all programs were subject to state control. In my memory, the screen used to shake with a rough, hoarse, intermittent sound, which indicated that the broadcast is being disrupted by the government. Such instances typically involved a speech by the

president or the minister of information, wherein the government's achievements, state emergencies, or natural disasters were reported. Such sudden interruptions effectively disrupted the ongoing broadcast, which could be perceived as an indication of government control over the media. This blue screen never happened again as broadcasting technology has become more sophisticated and there is no longer a state monopoly on television. However, when entering the computerization era with Windows as the operating system, a blue screen meant that the system is experiencing a critical error, known as the Blue Screen of Death. So, the blue screen symbol in this protest call is on point.[3]

The Garuda Pancasila emblem is not commonly used in public spaces, let alone in protests. It is usually displayed in public spaces as a symbol of nationalism. For instance, one may observe such displays on posters in elementary, junior high, and high school classrooms, flanked on either side by photos of the incumbent president and vice president. Garuda Pancasila posters are also typically located in government rooms or offices. The emblem can also be seen in various sports arenas in Indonesia. This is intended to symbolize a sense of nationalism and that there is something to be won – just like the purpose of this protest: There is something that must be won by the people.

Lengauer: *These are not the first mass protests in recent years. During Jokowi's second term, activists had gathered numerous times in protest against the government. What was the public image of these protests? Did the government try to coopt, ridicule, or corner the protesters in official discourse? What were the greatest challenges activists faced in making their voices heard?*

3 For the role of sound in social media campaigns, see also Jurriens et al. (2024).

Prasetyo: Jokowi's election for a second term and the global pandemic presented significant challenges for the people. This period saw Jokowi and the DPR engage in a series of political maneuvers and policy decisions that introduced authoritarianism into the government system. These involved collusion and nepotism, as well as the hijacking of the reform's achievements. An example is the destruction of the Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi*, KPK). This prompted the biggest protest after the reform, #reformasidikorupsi 2019, which resulted in a decline of public trust in Jokowi's government. The #reformasidikorupsi protest was a significant and widespread event that lasted for almost two weeks and took place in numerous cities. Unfortunately, it resulted in considerable damage to infrastructure and a number of injuries and deaths. It is thought that the protests could have paved the way for a second reform, potentially leading to an overthrow of Jokowi in a similar manner to the first reform which successfully overthrew Suharto. However, Jokowi was able to defuse the situation by reaching out to political parties and the opposition. He also succeeded in fostering a sense of unity and cooperation between the military and police, who were able to provide robust security for the ongoing protests. Given that the majority of the protests were student-led, Jokowi leveraged his influence to encourage the leaders of public universities to administratively suppress students who participated in the protests. This involved addressing concerns over academic performance and university expulsion. This approach proved effective. There was a notable decrease in student-led protests during the second week. However, other civilian groups, who have historically been more independent in their actions, continued to demonstrate.

In the #reformasidikorupsi protests, the DPR was able to successfully pass a new law banning wiretapping, searches, and seizures by the KPK without permission from the supervisory board which is appointed by the president. Jokowi also approved the

appointment of a new KPK leader – a senior police figure who is currently facing corruption charges. Under Jokowi, the police have been permitted to gradually place their representatives in a number of other important state institutions, including the cabinet, the intelligence agency, and the national logistics agency, among others. The destruction of the KPK is thus not an isolated incident.

There is a significant social movement underway in Indonesia that is expressing concerns about the direction of the country under the leadership of Jokowi and his collaborators in the DPR. There is no opposition party in parliament that supports the people's movement.[4] Jokowi is using his power in a way that allows him to exert control over the media, including social media. This is achieved by involving paid influencers tasked with promoting the idea that the country is doing well and that Jokowi is still the best person to lead the country. It seems we must rely on the grassroots – the student, youth, labor, farmers' and the urban-rural poor, indigenous people, and women's movement, many autonomous groups, and other civil rights movements – to continue the struggle against the unjust, repressive state policies under the control of the neoliberal, authoritarian-populist regime.

LENGAUER*: One final question: After reformasi, young people have gathered around local movements, like Jogja Memanggil or Bandung's Aksi Kamisan, building alliances with urban poor, peasants, and human rights activists. Have such initiatives attracted activist students and, if so, how?*

4 During the Jokowi era, there were several parties that were not part of the government, such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). However, they never declared themselves to be in opposition. The PDI-P is the party with the most seats in parliament, but this has not automatically made it an opposition to the government; in fact, in several decisions to ratify important laws, such as the Omnibus Law and Criminal Code, all parties in parliament agreed.

Prasetyo: I believe that initiatives involving cross-organizations, cross-groups – in Bandung we call them cross-hangouts (*lintas tongkrongan*) – play an important role in distributing knowledge, educating, and organizing. They also have the potential to be effective in agitating against power and encouraging the power of civil society. The *Jogya Memanggil* (Jogya Calling) or *Gejayan Memanggil* (Gejayan Calling) movement first emerged when the #reformasidikorupsi protest in 2019 saw the involvement of a more organized student movement through universities, although, in practice, it still received support from civil society. In Yogyakarta, there is also an *Aksi Kamisan* (Thursday Protest) carried out at Tugu Jogja since 2013, though it is not as consistent as the *Aksi Kamisan* in Jakarta, or Bandung.[5]

It is worth noting that the Thursday Protest in Bandung in 2013 marked a significant milestone in Indonesia's history of Thursday Protests, as it was the first such protest to take place in the country, since the protest had commenced in Jakarta in 2007. The Thursday Protest in Bandung was carried out in front of Gedung Sate, which is of great historical significance and houses the offices of the Governor of West Java and the West Java DPRD. This location had also been used as a venue for protests in the New Order era, due to its central location and convenient accessibility. Since the

5 The *Aksi Kamisan* has been initiated by the families of the victims of the Semanggi tragedy, where activists were shot dead at Jakarta's Semanggi intersection in late 1998. Every Thursday afternoon, since 2007 until present, together with the wider public, the families of the victims stand in protest in front of the Indonesian Presidential Palace carrying black umbrellas and wearing black clothes. This protest has spread to many cities in Indonesia, one of which is Bandung since 2013. This protest has been inspired by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo movement in response to the forced disappearance of political opponents in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Mothers protest by unfurling cloths with the names of their disappeared family members at Plaza de Mayo, opposite Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, in Buenos Aires.

West Java DPRD became relocated to a new building situated opposite Gedung Sate, this area continues to be a focal point for demonstrators and is an appropriate place for the Thursday Protest as a spatial-physical movement.

The Thursday Protest in Bandung was not initiated by students or human rights NGOs. It was initiated by an individual who cared about human rights, namely the mime-pantomime artist Wanggi Hood, who first carried out the protest in 2013.

I happened to witness this protest by chance when I was riding a motorbike and stopped to greet an old friend. I attempted to participate, but was more inclined to document the event through photography. In all of his performances, Wanggi has a distinctive style, painting his face white and wearing black or white clothes. He also used a black umbrella symbolizing the connection to Jakarta's *Aksi Kamisan*.

Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* has become one of the most consistent and long-standing Thursday Protests, alongside the one in Jakarta. It has evolved to encompass a broader range of social and political issues, include house evictions, land disputes, police-military violence, labor concerns, sexual violence, women's and children's rights, freedom of expression, and diversity issues. The attendees are a diverse group, although the majority are young people. There is a growing interest in more specific political, social, and economic issues, and the Thursday Protest is becoming a regular weekly event for people to voice their concerns or simply spend the afternoon together, making it more inclusive and free.

Last but not least, in recent years, Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* was 'graced' by the presence of school children still in uniform, the majority of whom were from high school or vocational school, although some were still in junior high school. They were not embarrassed, and did not feel ashamed or inferior to the 'old' people, university students, or activists of the demonstrations. Their presence is a welcome sign of a new generation of activists, who is able to draw on their own experiences and knowledge without feeling pressured by the seniority of the movement. This is an important step forward, both in terms of strategy and practice. This is what sets Bandung apart from the Thursday Protests in Jakarta and even Yogyakarta. Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* has become an open space, less hierarchical, and with a greater focus on inclusivity and a diversity of issues and identities. It is possible for anyone to take part, provided that the issue concerns injustice and inequality. The location is always the same, and there is no risk of intimidation from the police, military, or paramilitary.

Lengauer: *Thank you!*

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.