

Participatory as everyday life: from creativity-based initiative to the production of networked space in Southeast Asian cities

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Abstract

The notion of creative city has been extensively discussed both in academic debate as well as public discourse, including on Asian context. However, a tendency to study only on strategic government policies in relation to this matter has led many multidimensional aspects being left behind. One of these important aspects is the creativity-based activities initiated and conducted by local groups, communities, or collectives on a daily basis apart from so-called the official city programmes. This paper that derives from participatory paradigm takes into account this kind of practice, and seek the meanings of participatory culture as everyday life in urban context. The participatory initiatives discussed in

this paper as the empirical cases are “Tobucil & Klabs” in Bandung, Indonesia and the street arts in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. Considering the current context that participation is getting more mediated (Livingstone, 2013), I employ digital ethnography and documentary photography as the methodological standpoints to understand the digital media practices – i.e. online engagement – that also intertwine with the offline engagement in these two particular cases. I argue, the creativity-based initiatives in these two Southeast Asian cities lead to new insight in understanding media and creativity in current Asia. Additionally, informed by the work of Henri Lefebvre on “social space” and developed it further, I also argue that this certain participatory culture lead to the production of networked space in relation to city identities. This could contribute in forming a new theoretical model in understanding the interplay between media, participation, and urban cultures in digital era.

Keywords: City identity, creativity; digital ethnography; digital media; documentary photography; everyday life; networked space; participation; Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

The 60th Commemoration of Asian-African Conference (KAA, Konferensi Asia-Afrika) held on 19-24 April 2015 in Bandung, a city in Java, Indonesia, was very busy to be the host of this international event. The municipality government of Bandung along with its city dwellers and many volunteers from within and outside the city were working together to welcome VIP guests and other event participants. The event has become an important milestone for this city, especially regarding its significant role in the history of nation-states relationship in Asia and Africa since 1955.

However, there was a different nuance in the 2015 commemoration compared to previous similar events. This difference mainly demonstrated by the city in terms of the way they portrayed themselves as the “emerging creative city” and “actively takes part on the network of smart cities in the world” (Noor, 2015). The notion of creative city itself is quite new in Southeast Asia as a discourse relatively known in the 21st century. The occurrence of this term cannot be separated from the impact on the growth of creative industries as significant contributor of economic income in the new century apart from natural resources and human resources in the region (Khoo, Samat, Badaruzaman, and Dawood, 2013). Another relevant situation is the moment when this discourse was firstly emerged. The recent century was marked by the development of information and communication technology globally in a more penetrative way. Southeast Asia is one of the remarkable regions that enormously adopted – and absorbed – this technology (Sleigh, Chng, Mayberry, and Ryan, 2012).

Apart from the official programmes organised by the local and national government bodies in regard to perceive their city identity, there are other initiatives made by individuals and collective groups in the so-called creative cities throughout Southeast Asia. They employ various means and strategies in their activities, including digital media platforms being used to expressing

their ideas, movements, even call for participation from others. In other words, creative expressions and digital media have become inseparable elements of their daily life.

Understanding this kind of everyday life in current digital-related age is the main subject matter of this paper. To be more precise, this paper explores the interplay between online and offline participatory activities on everyday situation in urban creativity contexts of the two cities in Southeast Asia, i.e. Bandung in Indonesia and George Town-Penang in Malaysia. Having said this, this paper addresses the main questions, as follows: how has this interplay of participation been related to everyday life in Asian context? How does the form and practice of participation construct the notion of networked space and city identity in this particular context?

2. Participatory cultures in urban context

The theoretical standpoint of this study derives from participatory paradigm. The object being studied is participatory cultures, while the researcher approach to gaining information and understanding this objects are also influenced by participatory research. The type of participatory culture being studied has its root in a sense of creative expression in urban situation. It is intentionally chosen due to for making it relevant with participation, creativity, everyday life, networked space, and city identity as main concepts in the research.

The concept of creativity itself has various meanings and contexts depend on its historical situation as well as its cultural roots. There is one thought that sees creativity, as a concept in philosophical sense, is closed to the idea of “personal freedom”. This idea was introduced by an English philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, in 1926 (cited in Ashton 2015). However, these concepts of personal and freedom and the interplay between the two of them as a foundation of creativity, somehow, have contradiction sense in the context of

Southeast Asian society who are commonly known as a more collective society. When the current situation in the region shows the development of creative industries, in terms of its economical factor and cultural one, then combines with the massive efforts to (re)brand some cities as creative city and also the emergence of many individual or community-based participatory activism, it leads to another level of interesting area to be elaborated more. Creative industries as a result of personal and collective creativity, then, meet the existence of digital media practices as another form of participatory cultures in these cities.

As Kelty notes, now any kind of participatory activism is not only to “primarily benefit the participants”, but also “expected to have an effect on the structures, institutions, organizations, or technologies in which one participates ... it is now a principle of improvement, an instrument of change, a creative force” (2013: 24). This idea resonates well with what happens in several participatory initiatives in Southeast Asian cities that employ creativity and digital media. There is a strong sense in this kind of creative activism, if I may use this term, to promote a different voice before the mainstream discourses. Also, a sense to invite collective and public awareness for improvements and even social changes is part of this movement.

In regard to the type of participatory cultures, we are now in the last phase of it, named “ubiquitous connections” that has been occurred since 2005 (Delwiche and Henderson, 2013: 6-7). Considering the recent development of digital and media technology – also the unimaginably chances in the future – as well as the variety of participatory initiatives, it is likely possible that we are heading to a new stage of participatory

cultures. I think, by studying the patterns and complexities of these Southeast Asian participatory cultures we can draw a better picture in the current stage of participation and its relation with digital media, at least in the context of this region.

Besides, the dichotomy of “formal social enterprise” and “organized public” (Kelty, 2013: 25) has become interesting debate in understanding the structural aspect of participatory culture. According to Kelty, “organized publics differ because belonging and membership is informal, temporary, and constituted primarily through attention” (2013: 25). Indeed, it is still relevant to see this kind of structural aspect behind the common participatory initiatives or movements. However, it is argued, that there are possibilities to see that the so-called “organized public” especially in Southeast Asia has been transformed into different ways. One of them, for example, the mapping study towards the way in which the local cinematic movement in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, who actively engage many kind of participation modes shows that they now develop and transform into the tendency towards “formalisation” of groups and “professionalism” of their members’ role (Saputro et. al., 2015).

Talking about participation deals with the notion of power too, as Kelty reminds us. For her, “participation is about power, and, no matter how ‘open’ a platform is, participation will reach a limit circumscribing power and its distribution” (Kelty, 2013: 25). She addresses concept of power in regard to the openness of organized public structure and practice. That is why we need to understand the multidimensional aspects of structures, actors, and media *within* and *through* participatory cultures in this urban context.

3. The methodology: digital ethnography and documentary photography

I would re-emphasise the statement that says currently “digital media are part of people’s everyday worlds” (Pink et. al., 2016: 10). Thus, in order to study the participatory cultures using a combination between social collaboration and digital media practices, I need to understand the whole aspects of their everyday lives, not only relying on media analysis only. Having said so, digital ethnography would fulfil this intention.

According to Pink et. al. (2016), there are five principles of digital ethnography, starting from “multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, to unorthodox ways of communicating”. These principles also guide me to design the methods, tool of analysis, and more importantly as a methodological standpoint to approach the research subject.

In terms of schematic methods for collecting information, gathering experiences and further analyses, the seven key concepts of digital ethnography, as suggested by Pink et. al., also be elaborated. Without any particular order, they are “(1) researching experiences or what people feel, (2) practices or what people do, (3) things or the objects as part of everyday live, (4) relationships or intimate social environments, (5) social worlds or the groups and any wider social configurations, (6) localities or the actual physically shared contexts, and (7) events or the coming together in public contexts” (Pink et. al., 2016: 14-15). I conduct this by doing physically-in-present observation, go-along interview, and remotely observation by digital media.

Additionally, I also utilise documentary photography as another methodological approach in studying this subject. Documentary photography can be perceived as both a genre in photography and a technique in doing social commentary. Even though the photographs understood as ‘documentary’ can be traced back since the early development of photography medium in the late of ninetieth century, the term

itself coined and introduced to public during the American depression years in the 1930s, when a series of photographs “telling pictures of poverty-stricken farmers awakened Americans to the need for social reform” (TIME-LIFE Books Editors, 1973: 7). A classic yet still relevant definition of this kind of photography proposed by the Editors of TIME-LIFE Books saying that,

Documentary photography: a depiction of the real world by photographer whose intent is to communicate something of importance – to make a comment – that will be understood by the viewer. (TIME-LIFE Books Editors, 1973: 12)

Following its ‘older sister’ in cinema, i.e. documentary film, the main point of this documentary genre is actually as a visual commentary of the world. There are two main elements any documentary photographs should convey. They are (1) its capacity to deliver the truth from and about real world, and (2) its potential to offer the photographer’s comment on this ‘truth’. While conducting every step of digital ethnography described above, I also create photographs in this sense about the subject research from the two studied cities as one tool of analysis. By doing so – combining digital ethnography and documentary photography – more contexts of the cases can be understood deeper, especially in regard to understand the intertwined ideas and practises of day to day routines, the visual aspect of everyday life, and construction of city identities. This is also in accordance with, as Tormey suggests, the capacity of photographs to “speak beyond the literal reference of objects” (2013: xvii) and could lead to elaborate more on the way in which space – as one of main concepts in the study – being transformed and constructed, so to speak.

4. Multidimensional participation: the creativity-based initiatives

The methodological approaches discussed above are implemented in looking at two cities in two different Southeast Asian countries. In each country I select a few individuals or collective group initiatives that work using digital media and participatory principles. For the purpose of this paper, I would describe and present analysis of two cases in two separate cities: Tobucil & Klabs in Bandung, Indonesia and street arts initiatives in George Town, Penang, Malaysia.

In order to provide a bigger picture of the contexts, I would begin with sharing the relevant context of the two cities first, then followed by elaborating each particular subject research. The first city is Bandung in Indonesia. Bandung is the capital city of West Java province, which is located in four-to-five hours drive to the southeast of Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. In the contemporary context, this city is also well known for its arts, youth, and creative activism demonstrated through many expressions and media platforms. Meanwhile, Penang is a state located in the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula. This state, especially its capital city George Town, is known for its diversity in terms of ethnicity, culinary, heritage, and historical spots and stories.

The selection of these two cities for this research is based on two relevant aspects. *First*, both areas declare and campaign themselves as creative city. Their local government have introduced specific policies in relation to their city branding. Coincidentally, they are also part of a consortium called Southeast Asian Creative Cities Network along with Cebu in the Philippines and Chiang Mai in Thailand (SACCN, 2014). *Secondly*, both Bandung's and George Town's articulations as creative city employ the variety of digital media in many platforms either deliberately operated by the state apparatuses or community-based initiatives. For example, BCCF (Bandung Creative City Forum)

that has been established in 2008 is an active group that uses social media, photo and video sharing application, website, weblog, microblogging site and application, mobile application and many other digital platforms to distribute and reinforce the notion of Bandung as creative city in combination with many events and community-based activities (BCCF, 2014).

The similar condition also takes place in Penang by Think City, an organisation in Malaysia that operates the George Town Grants Programme (GTGP) among others. Think City employs several kinds of digital media to support their campaign (SACCN, 2014). Apart from these, there are plenty other organisations and, also, individuals in the two areas who actively involve in this urban creativity initiative using convergent media and in combination with community-based activities. Additionally, George Town - Penang has been granted as UNESCO World Heritage Site on 7 July 2008 (UNESCO, n.d.). Recently, Bandung has been appointed to join the UNESCO Creative Cities Network on 11 December 2015 along with 115 other cities from 54 countries around the globe (Satari, 2015; UNESCO, 2015).

However, the idea of 'creative city' as well as city identity is a contested one. Studying the people who live in the city and their relevant activities in everyday situation could provide us with deeper understanding in this matter. I would now elaborate my selected cases below.

4.1. *Tobucil & Klabs in Bandung*

It was all started in 2001. "Tobucil", an abbreviation for *toko buku kecil* in which literally means 'small bookshop', operated as an alternative bookstore in the city. Initiated by a freshly university graduate at the time, Tarlen Handayani, the bookshop run in a community- and friend-based management style. The following two years, after Tarlen received an offer to move her bookshop activity to a friend's house, Tobucil began to create new activities.

After they have more space – in its physical meaning - Tarlen initiates and invites club activities in Tobucil based on hobbies and shared interest. Then, club activities such as book reading club, do-it-yourself club, crafting, and so forth becomes routine and part of Tobucil activities, beyond selling books as an alternative store. This leads them to self-creating a new ‘space’ – more in its social and cultural meaning – that possibly provides diverse people encounters with various activities. They now put additional term *Klabs*, an Indonesian vernacular expression absorption of English term: club, into their official collective name: Tobucil & Klabs.

In addition, with the existence of digital media, mainly social media, Tobucil & Klabs actively engages such platforms to share their thoughts, activities, schedules, network outreach, etc. They embrace these, such as website (<http://www.tobucil.net>), Google+ (tobucil n klabs), Twitter (@tobucil or <https://twitter.com/tobucil>), and Instagram (@tobucil or <https://www.instagram.com/tobucil>). In many of these digital platforms, they consistently identify themselves as an open space and now focuses to promote “craftivism and literacy in everyday life” (*literasi dalam keseharian; buku, hobi dan komunitas*) as mentioned in their tag line.

Even though now Tobucil & Klabs becomes more as an open space for many groups and initiatives, it is hard to avoid the significant role of Tarlen Handayani, the Tobucil’s founder. She is easily recognised online by her personal brand: @vitarlenology. This is a brand introduced by Tarlen, and she calls herself a freelance writer, but others also know her as prominent figure of crafter, creativepreneur, social activist and visual artist. She has been founding and organising a concept bookstore and community open space named Tobucil & Klabs since 2001. Her new brand, @vitarlenology, are found in various digital platforms, such as website (<http://www.vitarlenology.net>), Instagram (@vitarlenology or <https://www.instagram.com/vitarlenology/?hl=en>), Pinterest

(<https://www.pinterest.com/vitarlenology/handmade-notebook-by-vitarlenology/>), and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/vitarlenology>) among others.

She is one of many female pioneers in Bandung who creates community open space and promotes do-it-yourself (DIY) movement. Tarlen is now well known as crafter of handmade book binding and many kind of homemade stationeries, and she uses this brand name in any of her works. However, what really interested me more is her motivation and the way in which she works, runs her group, and collaborates with other parties in every kind of her activities. In one of her blogposts she writes,

Perjumpaan Cara Pandang Berbeda dalam 'Kultur Membuat'

[...] Semua pengetahuan tradisional (di barat dan di timur) dengan teknologi sederhana, aplikatif dan kebijaksanaan terhadap lingkungan sekitarnya, menciptakan gaya hidup yang seimbang lahir, batin, juga dengan lingkungan sekitarnya. [...] 'Membuat' bukan semata-mata memenuhi tuntutan seseorang untuk menjadi 'produktif', namun lebih jauh dari itu, 'membuat' membangun ideologi dan pemenuhan diri secara spiritual dimana 'membuat' memberi perasaan berdaya kepada setiap individu yang melakukannya. Membuat juga menciptakan pemahaman akan proses yang membutuhkan waktu, toleransi atas kegagalan, juga kesadaran bahwa sesuatu itu tidak bisa diperoleh dengan cara instan. Sikap seperti ini yang menumbuhkan kemampuan untuk menjaga diri dari keserakahan.

An Encounter with Different Views of 'Culture of Creating'

[...] Every traditional knowledge (either in the West nor in the East) has its simple technology, practical application, and wisdom towards the environment. It leads to the balance of life style, both

physically and spiritually. [...] ‘Creating’ is not only an obligatory effort to make someone into a ‘productive’ human being, but most importantly, ‘creating’ builds ideology and spiritually fulfil the self where ‘creating’ is an act that makes everyone feels empowered. Creating also forms our understanding on the principle of process that always need time, tolerance to failure, and the awareness that everything cannot be possessed instantly. These kinds of attitude will grow our ability to prevent us becoming greedy.

(Handayani, 2015, translation by author)

Tobucil & Klabs has transformed into more complex social network. Apart from providing its place as collective meetings and gatherings, Tobucil & Klabs also involves in inter-collective collaborations, for example with a social and urban art initiative in the city named Common Room, as well as with other new media art collectives (Jurriëns, 2013; 2014). In other words, the collective initiative has metamorphosed from a creative and alternative bookshop to the more creativity-based open space for diverse participatory activities. This

notion can be illustrated in one of my ethnographic notes below.

In a hot and humid afternoon in the middle of June 2015, two young guys and a girl were busy with paint, glue and a lot of small items. They put these small items carefully on a large old timber table underneath a shady banyan tree. Apparently, all these small items were the spare parts of aeromodelling figures. The three people there seemed occupied with every detail they work on, while they were also talking to each other: not only about the aeromodelling techniques, but more frequently dealing with current Bandung’s and Indonesia’s political issues, the controversies of the current Mayor of Bandung, and their plan to run an organic food rally at the end of that week. It all happened in the front yard of Tobucil & Klabs house, and this kind of situation occurs in daily basis. The sun has just passed the horizon when Tarlen came out and offered hot tea to everyone for *iftar*, starting to eat after a full day of fasting (it was coincidentally during the Ramadhan fasting month). Then, they drank together and one person just took a picture of us using her smartphone and uploaded it later in her social media account. She jokingly said, that she put caption to this recently taken photograph: “a religious meeting during preparation of the organic food rally” to mocking themselves about the two entities that usually do not happen at the same situation: critical public activism and fasting in Ramadhan month.



Figure 1 – An open space for different kind of activities (Photo by Zaki Habibi ©2015)

People use the place here for meeting, social gathering, working, discussion, and designing collaborative activities. For Tarlen and many people from various backgrounds who regularly come and involve in their online and offline activities, this place has become networked space among anyone who feel themselves belong to Tobucil & Klabs, or to @vitarlenology, hobbyists, also other craft and social activities in Bandung and other cities. Tarlen herself called what she is doing now as part of craftivism. The term coined and famously used by a New York-based crafter-and-social-activist, Betsy Greer. In an article she describes,

[There is an] intrinsic connection between the word craft and activism. [...] Although at times the coinage of the

word craftivism has been attributed to me, I like to think its usage came about thanks to a few phenomena occurring simultaneously, mainly the frustration at the rule of materialism, the continuing quest for the unique, and the rise of the Internet. (Greer, 2011: 178-179)

It seems that the similar situation also emerges in the context of Tarlen's work and Tobucil & Klabs network outreach. Their collaborative activities have now outreached into many fields: craft, online business, community-based activism, and arts exhibition. One of them is when Tarlen and a few Bandung-based crafters collaborated in an art project with other fellow Indonesian and Nigerian artists at Biennale Jogja 2015.



Figure 2 – Tarlen was commissioned by Biennale Jogja X 2015, a biennial art exhibition (left), and she made an interactive random clipping as this collaborative art project (right)

(Right photo by Zaki Habibi ©2015)

The whole contexts of Tobucil & Klabs, including the phenomenon of @vitarlenology, both as collective brand and signification of participatory initiative, lead me to see multidimensional layers in terms of understanding the city identity, i.e. Bandung. Starting from Tarlen's 'ideology' in "culture of creating" to the open space forum and collaborative art project, there is a clear tendency to recall, recognise, and rearticulate – all these are the elements of remembering – several aspects in what their networked collectives believe as the 'true face of being Bandung people in current era'. A few of these signify in such expressions they usually say: "simple way of life" (as opposed to sophisticated one), "applicative" (as opposed to complicated but inapplicable), "technology of our time, but principles of our grandparents" (as opposed to linear growth), "informal and flexible social relationship" (as opposed to formal and fixed one), and "non-hierarchic collaboration" (as opposed to hierarchic organisation and cooperation).

By this I means, what have been demonstrating in and by Tobucil & Klabs network reminds me of "organized publics" (Kelty, 2013) as the very true of participation. It is also relevant to referring back what Greer ever said about the development of craftivism for echoing what they do. Greer assures us,

I see craftivism meant more than just craft plus activism; it meant something more akin to creativity plus activism, or crafty activism. It was about using what you can to express your feelings outward in a visual manner without yelling or placard waving. It was about paying attention and not letting your anger consume you, it was about channelling that anger in a productive and even longing way. (Greer, 2011: 183)

4.2. *Street arts in George Town, Penang*

Around three hours of flight to the northwest of Bandung we will reach Penang, or Pulau Pinang as Malay people call it. This is a state in Malaysia, on a separate island of Malay Peninsula, that has a long tradition as multicultural hub. In 2008 the island gained her new status as the heritage area, followed by a famous tourism destination label afterward. Tourists and other travellers come to Penang for many reason, among them are cultural heritage, local food, and – recently – its famous street arts especially in George Town area, the state's capital city.

Initially, street art in George Town is a governmental-initiated project in 2012 as a part of George Town Festival at the time. The state government commissioned a Lithuanian-born artist, Ernest Zacharevic, and he eventually made eight murals that depicted the unique local stories using the combination of 2D drawing and 3D real object (Tourism Penang, n.d.). These works soon intrigue more art projects that use public space as their 'canvas'. Another government initiative that came later called Making George Town, a series of site-specific art installation in the form of welded iron wall caricatures. In many of their official publications, this city art project intends to,

Blending humour and historical facts, these metal sculptures describe the prevailing colloquial demeanour of the early settlement days that gave memorable moniker to the streets and landmarks that are George Town icons today. Like voices from the past, they creatively symbolise the intimate relationship the people have in their daily lives with these landmarks that stand to this day. (Tourism Penang, n.d.)

By early of December 2015 the local government has managed to display eight commissioned murals and 24 welded iron wall

caricatures as site-specific art installation from 52 sculptures that they are going to install.



Figure 3 – One of the welded iron caricatures that re-enacts the local story about *beca* or trishaw

(Photo by Zaki Habibi ©2015)

The next occurrence regarding these street arts in George Town – Penang is quite interesting. Many local street artists, hotels management, offices or clan associations, and household owners create their own murals and street arts. They did it without any commissioning appointment from the government or any other formal institutions. In

terms of the themes, sizes, and techniques vary from one to another. Thus, street arts become almost-everybody-project and it is now easy to find them in various corners of the city. This tendency turns out to be everyday life visual experience, not only for travellers, but mainly to people who live in this city.



Figure 4 – Artwork by local street artist, yakuzart90, using 3D painting technique.

(Photo by Zaki Habibi ©2015)

Indeed, it is still needed a further elaboration on whether these street art initiatives are independently motivated or there are other business or professional orientations behind it. Especially, it is due to the impact on tourism industry in this island. However, there is also an interesting phenomenon taking place in digital media practices where various blogs and mobile applications are dedicated to be a kind of digital repository of the street arts in Penang. A few of them are organisational initiative, while others are user-generated content platform. Users (or, here participants) can contribute freely if they find a new street art in the city, then add the picture and information about it, including their GPS coordinate. There is an open digital web-based forum that also discuss these street arts, ranging from their locations, themes, current projects, to condition reports.

Reflecting from these occurrences – no matters the street art forms, messages, or motivations – these street arts in George Town–Penang can be understood as another mediated articulation in site specificity. Miwon Kwon, a visual art theorist, proposes the term “site specificity” for referring to the contested notion of space in relation to street art. For Kwon, street art is characterised by its site-oriented art in which ‘site’ has two meanings simultaneously: “(1) the artwork’s relationship to the actuality of the location and (2) the social conditions of the institutional frame” (cited in Bengtson, 2013: 251). By this I mean, the way in which these Penang’s street arts being produced, interpreted, and re-produced is another way of discursive position of them towards their social and cultural contexts.

These street arts and their ‘sites’, then, with all social relations forming them in everyday life situation demonstrate another form of social network. Both mediated by online (digital) engagement and offline activities, I argue, such recent social network leads to the production of new space: i.e. networked space. The street art – as a subgenre of graffiti writing (Lewishon, 2010: 15) – eventually has connecting power beyond its creative expression. This somehow reminds me

to a kind of ‘manifesto’ by Faile, a Brooklyn based artist collective. They write,

Street art is more about interacting with the audience on the street and the people, the masses. Graffiti isn’t so much about connecting with the masses: it’s about connecting with different crews, it’s an internal language, it’s a secret language. Most graffiti you can’t even read, so it’s really contained within the culture that understands it and does it. Street art is much more open. It’s an open society. (Faile, cited in Lewishon, 2015: 15)

5. Closing remarks: an ongoing conclusion

Creativity could play an important role in public participation, from personal interpretation to collective initiative and even social activism. Demonstrated by both phenomena in Bandung and George Town–Penang analysed above, the use of creative approach and combining it with online and offline activities potentially enhance the public engagement. As Dahlgren (2009) repeatedly argues, engagement is a precondition of participation, and engagement as subjective and affective orientation is necessary for further participation in many domains, whether it is the civic, political, or the socio-cultural one.

According to both subjects being studied, the participation occurs and transforms into part of the participants’ everyday life. It becomes their routine, it is their ‘daily performance’ by building the network – both through the social and digital – and constructing their identities as well.

Furthermore, the cities or the ‘place’ where everything happens have also altered into a new understanding for the participants. In such participatory form and practice, the place becomes more social, while at the same time between the mediated and the unmediated are

more intertwined than before. Informed by the work of Henri Lefebvre on “social space” (1991, 2009; see also Goonewardena et. al., eds., 2008), I argue that what happens beyond these participatory activities in Bandung and George Town–Penang respectively can be understood as another way of ‘production of space’, especially in Asian contexts. Lefebvre elaborates the notion of social space as his critique towards modernity and capitalism in the middle of twentieth century. He posits that “space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations, but it also is producing and produced social relations” (Lefebvre, 2009: 186). For him, space is not something natural. Space is not only about material thing, but all relations within it throughout social force, time, structure, and so on. In more contemporary context, I would say, the mode of production (of space) in both cases in these Southeast Asian cities lead to the production of networked space. Both online and offline participants involvement are the articulation of participation towards this production of networked space.

From here, the more problematic questions can be asked further. As in Lefebvre’s social space, power relations play significant role in the process of this ‘spatial practice’ (production of space), then how do the power relations work in this networked space once it has become the site and the articulation of these Southeast Asian participatory cultures? Thus, how have such power relations formed every participant’s perception – as well as imagination – on their city identity? I would sum up my ‘ongoing conclusion’ here as the starting point for any further productive dialogue.

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