Nurturing Sanity Through RajutKejut Craftivism

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Abstract

As people in almost all countries in the world, Indonesians are currently struggling to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic by making their activities more selective and prioritizing their needs based on needs. Mental health is also a priority, and more attention needs to be paid to personal and environmental hygiene issues. The RajutKejut Community is a group of female crocheters who ‘yarn bomb’ in public spaces using crochet works. Given pandemic conditions, where most activities are limited, and loneliness and social isolation have become major concerns, this group remains connected using advanced digital technology to share news, views, and stories. And in doing so, they have supported each other in the best possible way: through an activity characterized by meditative nuances practised in a quarantined atmosphere. Thus, a new space for both contemplation and reflection has been created. This has preserved the quality of the community’s work but it has also resulted in other benefits as well. For example, the body’s immune system can be strengthened by maintaining good mental health and especially by generating feelings of happiness and joy. To this end, the community has held yarn bombing activities in their respective neighbourhoods and then shared their collective and individual experiences. The research question that arises then is, how can a communal craft-related activity like crochet raise awareness and understanding of the human condition amid a pandemic? This study uses the phenomenology of perception developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as an analytical method to better comprehend the world of the RajutKejut community, with special reference to the current pandemic. Amongst other observations, this research illustrates that the pandemic has encouraged many people to look to the past and, in doing so, realize that their existence in the present can be defined by structured craft projects, which caused them to make better-informed decisions about the future. In this process, human beings begin to chart their existence using their bodies and, in doing so, awaken mindfulness of self.

Keywords: rajutkejut, craftivism, covid-19, mindfulness

Memelihara Kewarasan Melalui Kraftivisme RajutKejut

Abstrak

Seperti halnya di hampir seluruh negara di dunia, masyarakat Indonesia saat ini sedang berjuang menghadapi pandemi Covid-19, mengharuskan membatasi aktivitasnya lebih selektif, dan memprioritaskan keperluan berdasarkan kebutuhan.

INTRODUCTION

In Jakarta, there is a crocheting community called RajutKejut. One of its activities is yarn bombing. The community was founded in 2014 by five mothers: Harjuni Rochajati, Yulina Achrini, Wahju Hardjanti, Vidhyasuri Utami and Elisabeth Tata. These individuals are all from the middle class. They are also aware of current social issues. And they love to crochet. This has inspired the yarn bombing project. The group yarn bomb using the crochet technique to respond to objects found in various public spaces. Over time, this community’s membership has been fluid and open. The result has been the participation of hundreds of crocheters throughout Indonesia (Wulandari et al., 2020.) At this time, RajutKejut’s activities mostly involved political statements related to the 2014 presidential election but,’ then expanded to incorporate more universal humanitarian projects. At the same time, they began to use social media platforms such as Instagram and to organize online crocheting events (Wulandari et al., 2021.) In the process then began to advocate ‘craftivism.’ The term craftivism was first introduced by Betsy Greer in 2007. It describes a form of activism and third-wave feminism centered on the ‘domestic arts.’ The term is well defined by Tal Fitzpatrick in her book Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology (Fitzpatrick, 2018).
The work of the RajutKejut yarn bombing community is characterized by the production of relatively small crocheted modules which are then spliced and combined into one large collaborative work. These modules are knitted together at the place of an ‘initiator.’ (They call this kopi darat or meeting up.) Then the huge artwork is installed in an open public space.

During the pandemic, with all its restrictions, RajutKejut could not carry out yarn bombing as usual. The first case of Covid-19 was discovered in Depok Jakarta on 28 February 2020. The Jakarta provincial government then closed schools and workplaces and restricted public events. (This was known as Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, PSBB.) This severely limited activities to prevent the spread of Covid-19 (Covid19.go.id, 2020). Indonesia has now entered the third year of the pandemic. In March 2021 this has resulted in a spike in cases of the Delta variant (Sofa, 2021). As the pandemic situation has changed so too have members of the RajutKejut community who now utilize the Google Meet platform.

According to Aryan Torrido, the Covid-19 epidemic has not only produced changes in the health status of the global population but fundamental economic conditions as well. Significantly, the latter has been driven by profound changes in personal consumption. This has forced people everywhere to adjust their domestic consumptive activities and in doing so shift the patterns of their lives from material self-actualization (a characteristic of modern humans) to a more needs-based pattern. In part, this is a response to managing the stress associated with the pandemic within a restricted social environment characterized by long-term feelings of uncertainty (Torrido, 2021). The Indonesian Psychiatric Medicine Specialists Association (PDSKJI) conducted an online survey on mental health issues from April to August 2020. Some 1,552 respondents were asked to reflect on three psychological problems: anxiety, depression, and trauma. Most respondents were women (76.1%) with a minimum age of 14-years-old and maximum age of 71-years-old. A total of 64.3% of respondents reported that they had experienced a psychological problem with 63% suffering from anxiety and 66% experiencing depression (71% women and 29% men) (Fauziyyah et al., 2021.) As established, an individual’s immunity can be improved with a positive outlook and a happy mood. According to World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, there are many ways of addressing the stress and anxiety associated with the pandemic. Some of these are related to the venting of negative feelings by engaging in community-based activities that also serve as a broader source of support in helping manage difficulties faced by individuals and families (Kaligis et al., 2020).

In support of the WHO guidelines, clinical psychologist Sustriana Saragih wrote in Koran Tempo that positive engagement in a hobby has been proven to treat mild depression. The personal pleasure associated with such activity has been shown to reduce feelings of psychological hopelessness and physical weariness so
often associated with the condition. Her study suggests that hobbies can reduce depressive symptoms by 30%. In this way, crocheting is proving to be a practical option to support mental health, both individually and collectively (KoranTempo.co, 2021). A craft teacher, Kiki Puspita, again writing in Koran Tempo, said that when she started online crochet classes it was confirmed that many of her students were involved for therapeutic reasons, especially to help them feel more mentally stable during the pandemic. Completing a Crochet served as a source of personal motivation and happiness. Despite the uncertainty associated with the pandemic, the number of class participants increased significantly with most being beginners (KoranTempo.co, 2021).

This context has further refined the research question: how can engagement in the production of communal craft create a better understanding of the individual and their social environment? How do the concepts of body and consciousness affect the way we understand ourselves and others? The answers to these questions show how this process not only builds awareness of self but brings joy to the lives of participants which, in turn, boosts natural immunity.

METHOD

The subject of this research is the RajutKejut community with the object being craftivism. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method with the perceptual phenomenological analytical approach created by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Here bodily experiences help people to better understand their world, especially during these difficult times. Merleau-Ponty’s thinking reveals the original relationship between man and the world he or she lives in. It is through an understanding of the body that the world is perceived as being-for-itself and being-in-the-world. As stated by Thomas Hidya Tjaya, in Merleau-Ponty's view, the body is the anchor for human consciousness because, in the absence of a body, human existence cannot be understood. Merleau-Ponty’s view is that the body makes human consciousness of self always focus on the world and its objects, including other people, as it moves to access the past, realize the present, and project into the future. The concept of the body and the existence of consciousness affect the understanding of self and others, including the shared world (M-Ponty in Tjaya, 2020). Data obtained through interviews with crocheters and associated literature show this work in progress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pandemic has impacted on the mental health of the entire community. For many, the body felt 'imprisoned' at home, producing a feeling of both torment and depression caused by limited interaction with the outside world. This included
meeting other people or transacting with natural or cultural objects as a form of recreation. These feelings of stress and depression appear in the mind of human beings when they are prevented from connecting with the world. Given all these limitations, human beings must restrain the ego and rather choose the essential first and then, prioritize needs over wants. According to Novita Siswayanti, in Javanese culture, the proverb eling lan waspodo, warns one to be mindful of this by always being aware of every action, move, step, word, and deed (Siswayanti, 2013.)

Advances in information and communication technology have then been utilized by the RajutKejut community as a device to share news and tell stories about people’s circumstances, but also, of course, to organize online crocheting events (such as making masks) and in turn, bombing their neighborhoods with crocheting works while sharing stories about the positive impact this has had. This includes discussing health tips, sharing the benefits of good nutritional intake, exchanging news from sick family or friends, and explaining the various symptoms experienced and vaccines. This is in addition to issues that are generally discussed during ‘kopidarat’ such as sharing crochet patterns and telling stories about individual projects and domestic matters. Significantly, RajutKejut also discussed several yarn bombing projects conducted in their respective local areas to coincide with World Yarn Bombing Day on 11 June 2020, Valentine’s Day 2021, and the celebration of Indonesian Independence Day 2021.

Figure 1. World Yarn Bombing Day with RajutKejut
Source: RajutKejut – June 2020
Figure 2. Valentine’s Day with RajutKejut
Source: RajutKejut – February 2021
Research into RajutKejut’s projects for World Yarn Bombing Day 2020, Valentine’s Day 2021, and the celebration of Indonesian Independence Day 2021 using craftivism have shown that RajutKejut’s works strengthen social connection, enhance community resilience, and build awareness of self and the environment, which in turn has brought joy to the lives of members which has boosted their immunity against Covid-19.

Collaborate/Co-create. RajutKejut relies heavily on collaborative work using volunteering crocheters. This is not only to support the realization of the work but also to spread fresh ideas through cooperation. For this reason, RajutKejut carefully manages each project, especially in terms of the involvement of volunteering crocheters whose numbers are now expanding throughout Indonesia. With the active involvement of volunteer crocheters, and given the membership’s diverse profiles, members invariably produce works of varying quality. Qualified works are used immediately, meanwhile, other works will be adjusted by experienced crocheters. Anyone who can crochet can join even those who are completely new to the craft. This is achievable because it uses a system module system to create works. The module can be easily completed, even for a beginner. For those who have no crocheting skills but want to get involved, RajutKejut
accommodates them to engage during the installation. (The more help, the better and the faster the project is completed). In addition to open donations, RajutKejut also provides free training in some projects for those interested in crocheting to extend new networks and human resources in supporting its activities and future projects. RajutKejut also often collaborates with other artists. Apart from the need for other skills, it also considers the potential for wider dissemination of the narrative with the followers of collaborating artists, which also brings mutual benefits. As explained by Fitzpatrick:

“Do-it-together creates unique opportunities to engage and collaborate with others. It is possible to maximize the impact and scope of craftivism projects, as well as develop more ambitious projects. A few things you need to consider include how your collaborative projects will be managed, what is expected of each collaborator, and how you are going to manage questions of authorship and ownership ethically” (Fitzpatrick, 2018: 17).

Indeed, the world outside RajutKejut appreciates RajutKejut's existence. RajutKejut exists because of its members. The world outside RajutKejut indirectly respects RajutKejut's crocheters. Appreciation is important to positively raise self-awareness, self-existence, others’ existence, as well as the world’s existence. According to Merleau-Ponty:

“I understand the other person through my body, just as I perceive “things” through my body. The sense of the gesture thus ‘understood’ is not behind the gesture. It merges with the structure of the world that the gesture sketches out and that I take up for myself. The sense of the gesture spreads across the gesture itself – just as the signification of the fireplace in perceptual experience is not beyond the sensible spectacle nor beyond the fireplace itself such as my gaze and my movements find it in the world” (Tjaya, 2020:191-192).

People who participate in RajutKejut also enjoy references that are varied due to the historical experience of each member. This condition enriches RajutKejut. Moreover, the crocheting concept has broadened how RajutKejut perceives a crocheters’ differences and diverse backgrounds as a power. This is in line with what Merleau-Ponty says:

“There are neither any natural signs nor any purely conventional signs ... gesticulation is not merely the gesture that is contingent concerning the bodily organization, it is the very manner of meeting the situation and of living it … Having the same organs and the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects. What matters is how they make use of their body, the simultaneous articulation of their body and their world in the emotion … Just like words, passionate feelings and behaviors are invented. Even the ones that seem inscribed in the human body, such as
paternity, are in fact institutions. It is impossible to superimpose upon a man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called ‘natural’ and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, in the sense that there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being” (Merleau-Ponty & Landes, 2012:193-195).

The crocheters can better understand themselves (self-knowledge) when they interact with the crocheting setting, namely, not only RajutKejut’s world but, any world around them, including interacting with crocheting objects and people in the RajutKejut's environment. According to Merleau-Ponty the world (self) is a way to express relationships with objects (intentional relations.) Therefore, self-knowledge can only be achieved through action which is interaction with any objects in the world, including with other subjects (Tjaya, 2020:135).

*Take Your Time.* The activity of ‘making’ something manually gives awareness and builds confidence that participants are capable of making something, and making social change in a creative, different, and acceptable way. Works that are formed slowly give awareness to the RajutKejut crocheters and this change may happen through a slow yet consistent process. For this reason, RajutKejut realizes the need to carry out routine activities as a continuous effort to activate the community and narrate the aspirations of the initiators through their projects while providing space for the expression of its members. RajutKejut also believes that the small, passionate, and sustained contribution made by crocheters produces tangible results. Therefore, RajutKejut’s work often surprises the public, not only because the work suddenly appears in a public space, but also because of the quality and the patience exhibited by working projects. This surprising effect steals the public’s attention so that it has the potential to become a medium for conveying many messages. According to Fitzpatrick, the process of making something by hand provides us with the time and space necessary to think deeply about the issues we are concerned about. Audiences can recognize the time and care one invests in craftivism projects, meaning that the time and care is taken in making craftivist objects becomes embedded in the finished piece (Fitzpatrick, 2018:13). Making works in the form of objects then gradually creates a sense of ‘making’ as an activity that builds awareness where people become acquainted with their world, interact with their world, and understand their world. By patiently making works step-by-step, people realize that every work is formed through a journey, some stages are passed, and each stage is part of a process that should be appreciated.

*Play.* The RajutKejut community is made for fun, yet it builds and improves communal social sensitivities. Works are done in a group in an enjoyable situation that is experienced together. This joy attracts crocheters to join in and be involved.
Crocheters yarn bomb simply to fulfill their desire to create works in public spaces. During the pandemic, RajutKejut made works in public space collectively, with participants happily responding to RajutKejut's invitation to yarn bombings in their respective neighborhoods and individually. There is, for example, a sense of joy in the creation of a fun childhood playroom. Participants can choose the shape, pattern, or color that they like and that looks challenging to try. There is also space to experiment, apply new techniques or new patterns, share on social media, and talk about this. This is explained by Fitzpatrick:

“Play is a type of exploration, a methodology for learning, that people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities can engage in. You can make changing the world seem like fun both for yourself and for others, then more people are likely to engage with your work. Craftivism enables us to physically play with materials and provides us with endless opportunities. Making use of craft’s inherent playful logic is an effective way to disarm audiences and to spark their curiosity” (Fitzpatrick, 2018:14).

RajutKejut’s work is driven by the intention of making a beginning on something. Therefore, the work is the result of the expression of an aesthetic that manifests when the crocheter responds to external conditions. Meaning can then be depicted in the work and the work becomes the external existence of meaning. This condition can be explained through Merleau-Ponty's view that the crocheters use the body as a way of engaging in the world, perceiving the world, and expressing themselves in various gestures. Merleau-Ponty also argues that the body is not a tool attached to oneself so that one can use it for any purpose. The body is rather a way of expressing thoughts, feelings, hopes, and desires (Tjaya, 2020:137). The body is the origin of all expressive space. It also gives birth to objects that are the result of the body's work. Thus, it can be considered that the work is an extension of existence that has its journey, as Merleau-Ponty said, our body is not merely one expressive space among all others, for that would be merely the constituted body.

Our body, rather, is the origin of all the others; it is the very movement of expression, it projects significations on the outside by giving them a place and sees to it that they begin to exist as things, beneath our hands and before our eyes (Tjaya, 2020:147). Since work activities (as a result of expressive activities) are successfully carried out, the impression on the crocheter (as well as the crowd) is not only in the form of memory, the expression (work) significantly exists as an object (it becomes concrete) at the core of the work and opens a new dimension of experience for both crocheters (and the crowd). It attaches a new meaning in that crocheters are given the freedom to determine their work. This is in line with what Merleau-Ponty said that freedom shapes the sense of existence to be concrete and
realize themselves as free human beings to choose, decide to act, and determine their history (Tjaya, 2020:141). Within the crocheter lies a free spirit that is eager to play without judgment and prejudice, like a peaceful childhood (Tjaya, 2020:152).

_**Social Media.**_ RajutKejut uses social media in the majority of their activities. Regardless of their ages and maturity, the imitators are reliable in utilizing social media, not only for posting images with captions and replying to comments but also for utilizing simple instant research tools. RajutKejut always mentions those who are involved in a project be it on social media or in the exhibition catalogue. Likewise, during the pandemic, social media has assumed an important part because invitations are issued and work exhibitions are held on social media as well. The crocheters upload their works on their personal Instagram accounts, along with tags, mentions, and hashtags under RajutKejut’s direction. Afterward, these works were reposted on RajutKejut’s Instagram account embedded with acknowledgment of people who participated in the project. As explained by Fitzpatrick social media also enables craftivists to take part in critical conversations that enrich the practice of craftivism and in turn consider how one can most effectively use online tools and social media platforms to engage, connect, document, and share the practice of craftivism practice (Fitzpatrick, 2018:20).

**CONCLUSION**

Getting through the pandemic with the support of crocheting activities in a quarantined atmosphere has created a space for reflection and contemplation. This makes people look to the past and realize their presence today and then project themselves into the future. Through works that are made consciously through body activities, people then realize that they can fulfill their own needs and desires so that self-awareness and self-existence are awakened as something valuable. This shows with confidence that they can live in their world. Doing this together with the community strengthens the feeling that one is not alone. Many people value their existence and care about themselves. A feeling of security is then awakened. The result is that they accept their existence. This makes them feel comfortable continuing work. This is very much in line with what, Merleau-Ponty states, that feelings can define self-existence.

The appreciation of self and others is different. It is important to foster both to continue to develop within the wider community the awareness of the existence of individuals within their respective conditions as subjects communicating with each other to build their world. Crocheters are comfortable being with RajutKejut because they can feel themselves and their world as an inseparable unity. As
expressed by Merleau-Ponty crocheters feel comfortable because they understand the world where they live in. They know their existence in the world is real by interacting with the world. It is then that they realize the world understands them (Tjaya, 2020:107).

Craftivism in the pandemic supports and maintains mental health by making creative works for both personal pleasure and peace of mind – individually and collectively. Therefore, there is an understanding among crocheters that by sharing feelings and encouraging each other, thinking positively, and expressing joy together, and by amplifying a positive spirit of togetherness the RajutKejut community is defined through a process of cooperation, encouragement, and support. Through the qualities found in craftivism, individuals can better live their days and understand themselves and their world as something that can be, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, emotionally stable.

REFERENCES
