

Creative City Making as a Theoretical Research Practice

by Using Soft Systems Methodology

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Abstract

This study proposes a novel conceptual framework for creative city development that integrates cultural and economic perspectives, moving beyond the traditional singular focus of existing literature. It identifies three core variables – culture, creativity, and the creative economy – within a balanced model. Using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) as a structuring tool, the framework conceptualizes these interrelations within a complex urban system. Its originality is demonstrated through a design for application in Bandung, Indonesia, an underexplored context, providing a foundation for empirical validation. The paper concludes with actionable activities for implementation, offering a comprehensive tool for integrated diagnosis and planning by researchers and policymakers.

Keywords: Creative City, Creative Economy, Creativity, Culture, Framework, Soft Systems Methodology

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the 'creative city' has emerged as a dominant paradigm for urban development, seen by policymakers as a pathway to economic resilience, cultural vitality, and global competitiveness (Landry, 2008; Florida, 2002). For Indonesia, this is not merely an academic trend. With several cities like Bandung, Pekalongan, and Ambon joining the UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), the national and local governments have made significant investments in branding and policies aimed at fostering creativity. The underlying promise is that this focus will lead to tangible improvements in urban welfare, economic growth, and sustainable development.

However, this global enthusiasm often overlooks a critical underlying issue: there is no clear, operationalised understanding of what constitutes a 'creative city,' leading to potential policy missteps. Cities risk promoting strategies that are either purely economic, focusing on creative industries and gentrification at the expense of local culture and social inclusion; or purely cultural, supporting arts and communities without building a sustainable economic ecosystem. This divergence creates a tangible problem for urban planners and policymakers: how to develop a city in a way that is both economically robust and culturally authentic, without one dimension undermining the other.

This paper argues that the existing literature has yet to adequately bridge this divide. While numerous studies and technical reports identify the common domains of 'culture, creativity, and economy' (Scott, 2014; UNCTAD, 2010), they often take one (or more) of these approaches. Firstly, they adopt a singular orientation, either critiquing the econ-centric model or advocating for a culture-centric one, without providing a framework for synthesis (e.g., Vivant, 2013 vs. Florida, 2002). Secondly, they remain theoretical, offering definitions but few practical methodologies for how cities can diagnose their own strengths and weaknesses across these domains to inform context-specific policies. Thirdly, they lack a systemic approach, failing to account for the complex, often conflicting, interactions between stakeholders (government, communities, businesses) who all shape the creative city. Therefore, the research gap this paper addresses is the lack of an integrated, actionable, and stakeholder-oriented methodology for defining and assessing a creative city in a way that balances its cultural and economic imperatives.

This study is designed to fill this gap by proposing a new conceptual framework and methodological approach. One way to respond to it is by developing an integrated dual-orientation framework (Figure 1) that explicitly links and balances culture-centric and econ-centric variables. The other way is by employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), an approach designed for precisely these kinds of 'messy,' multi-stakeholder problems. SSM allows us to move from a static definition to a dynamic process of inquiry suited to a specific urban context. And by conducting those two techniques, it is intended to create an operationalizable model and matrix that translates theoretical variables into measurable indicators and activities, providing a tangible tool for urban diagnosis and planning.

We demonstrate the application of this approach through the case of Bandung, Indonesia, not to provide a universal model, but to validate a method that can be adapted to identify the most salient indicators and navigate the unique tensions inherent in any city's journey to become 'creative.'

Creative city orientation	Culture-centric	Econ-centric
Creative city values	Central value = arts, culture, and community well-being, access, and inclusion	Central value = urban economic sustainability and well-being through creative initiatives or industries
Definition of a creative city	Place of diverse and inclusive arts and culture	Place of economic innovation, creative talent, and creative industries

Figure 1. Mapping the value orientation and means to achieve the creative city (Smith and Warfield, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

Analysis of Theoretical Literature and Basis for Framework Development

The construction of our proposed framework is the result of a systematic analysis of existing theoretical literature. The analysis was conducted thematically rather than chronologically or geographically. This approach allowed us to identify and synthesize core conceptual pillars – such as "culture-centric vs. econ-centric orientations," "creative community," and "creative economy" – that are recurrent across global creative city discourse (Scott, 2014; Sasaki, 2010; Landry, 2008; Florida, 2002).

The basis of analysis was to critically examine these global theories and identify their points of convergence and divergence. We then juxtaposed these established concepts with the specific guidance from Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry of Economic Affairs (CMEA, 2017) and the unique socio-economic dynamics of Indonesian urban centers. This process revealed a significant gap: while global literature often presents the culture-centric and econ-centric models as competing paradigms, the Indonesian context, with its emphasis on both bottom-up community (gotong royong) and top-down economic development, necessitates a framework that integrates and balances these two orientations.

The Theoretical Gap and Novelty for Bandung, Indonesia

The primary theoretical gap this study attempts to fill is the lack of a synthesised framework that operationalises the "balanced perspective" called for by scholars like Scott (2014) into a measurable model tailored for developing Asian cities. Existing models often lean heavily towards Western notions of the "creative class" or economic metrics, potentially overlooking the critical role of informal grassroots networks, social capital, and local cultural identity that are paramount in cities like Bandung.

Therefore, the novelty of our proposed framework (Figure 2) is that it acts as a diagnostic tool specifically designed for the Indonesian context. It is not merely a definition but a model that allows researchers and policymakers to assess the dynamic interplay between two polarised viewpoints. Firstly, top-down, econ-centric drivers (e.g., national creative economy policy, city branding, urban regeneration). Secondly, bottom-up, culture-centric drivers (e.g., organic creative communities, grassroots capability, social inclusion).

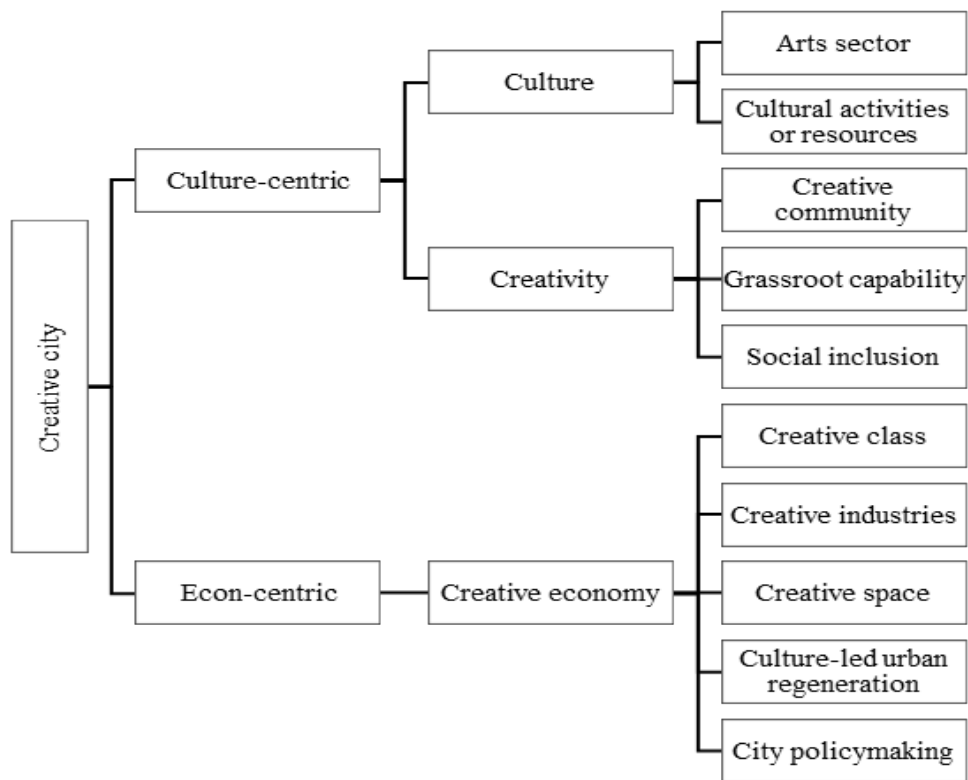


Figure 2. The proposed framework definition of the understanding of a creative city (Source: The authors).

This framework is novel for Bandung because it provides the structure to investigate a central tension in the intention of responding to the issue ‘Does the formal, government-led push for a creative economy (econ-centric) enhance or stifle the organic, community-based creativity (culture-centric) that has long defined Bandung's identity?’ This study will use this framework to identify new, context-specific indicators that measure this balance.

The Proposed Framework

Building on the analysed literature, we propose the following framework as a definition of a creative city in the Indonesian context. We argue that a creative city in Indonesia must harmonize its cultural foundations with its economic ambitions, a synthesis reflected in the CMEA's guidance.

The culture-centric orientation is represented by two intertwined variables (Landry, 2008), which are Culture and Creativity. The variable culture consists of two sub-variables derived from the literature, the arts sector (Jurene & Jureniene, 2017) and cultural resources (Punpeng, 2024; Banks & O'Connor, 2017). The variable creativity refers to human agency and consists of three sub-variables: a creative community (Minty & Nkula-Wenz, 2019), grass-roots capability (built on Flora's (2007)) concepts of human and social capital), and social inclusion (Alsayer et al., 2020; Sasaki, 2010).

Conversely, the econ-centric orientation is represented by the overarching variable of the creative economy (Howkins, 2001). This variable comprises five sub-variables identified from the literature as key economic facilitators: the creative class (Florida, 2002), creative

industries (Leslie & Catungal, 2012; DCMS, 2001), creative milieu/ space (Sawangchot, 2016; Sasaki in Song, 2015; Landry, 2008), culture-led urban regeneration (HaghighatBin et al., (2024); Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2019; Skyllstad, 2011), and city policymaking and branding (Dudek-Mańkowska & Grochowski, 2019; Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2015).

It is crucial to distinguish between the literature we have reviewed and our own scholarly contribution. The definitions, variables, and sub-variables listed above are standpoints derived from other researchers, as cited. Our contribution, and thus our standpoint, is the synthesis of these disparate global concepts into a new, integrated framework tailored to analyse the Indonesian urban reality.

We posit that the unique identity of a creative city like Bandung emerges from the intersection of these variables. For instance, the success of its creative industries (an econ-centric sub-variable) is deeply dependent on the health of its creative communities (a culture-centric sub-variable). Similarly, effective city branding (econ-centric) must be authentically justified by the city's tangible cultural resources and intangible grassroots capability (culture-centric). This framework allows us to move beyond abstract definition and towards an empirical investigation of what makes Bandung creatively unique, thereby filling the identified theoretical gap.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design guided by the principles of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM); an approach developed by Peter Checkland to address complex, real-world problems involving multiple stakeholders with divergent perspectives (Checkland & Poulter, 2007). The research question, which seeks to understand the key indicators for developing a creative city in a context like Bandung, Indonesia, is well-suited to SSM as it involves navigating the different, often conflicting, viewpoints of various urban actors.

SSM has been effectively used in past studies to structure complex policy and urban development challenges, including sustainable tourism development, information systems planning, and organizational change. Its application in creative city frameworks is appropriate as it provides a structured yet flexible way to reconcile the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of such an initiative, moving beyond purely quantitative indicators to understand purposeful human activity.

Data Collection and Validation

The study is based on both secondary and primary data. The initial phase involved an extensive literature review to identify potential indicators of a creative city. This theoretical foundation was then validated through expert interviews. The first interview was conducted with an academic expert in SSM to ensure the methodology's correct application. A second interview was held with an expert in business model innovation within the creative industries, a key domain relevant to one of the investigated indicators.

This study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles for research involving human participants. The following measures were undertaken to ensure the ethical integrity of the research. The first is about informed consent, which means prior to each interview, all participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, the anticipated duration of

the interview, and how the data would be used and stored. Verbal informed consent was explicitly obtained from all participants at the beginning of the interview session before any questions were asked. Secondly, on the matter of anonymity and confidentiality. To protect the privacy of the experts who contributed their insights, we have ensured their anonymity throughout this paper and any associated documentation. No personally identifiable information (names, specific affiliations, etc.) is disclosed. The data collected from the interviews is treated with strict confidentiality and is stored securely on password-protected devices. Thirdly, the right to withdraw. Participants were informed of their right to skip any question and to withdraw from the interview at any point without needing to provide a reason and without any negative consequences. Fourthly, on data management, which means audio recordings of the interviews, where made, were used solely for the purpose of accurate transcription. Fifthly, the interview questions were designed to be non-invasive and focused on professional expertise regarding soft systems methodology and business model innovation in the creative industries. The study was designed to minimize any potential risk or discomfort to the participants.

Applying the Soft Systems Methodology

The research process follows the two streams of inquiry central to SSM, which are stream of cultural analysis and stream of logic-based analysis. For the stream of cultural analysis, the research began by identifying the "problematic situation": the global phenomenon of cities labelling themselves as "creative" without a consensus on the defining indicators, despite frameworks like UNESCO's Creative Cities Network (UCCN). This situation was expressed visually through a rich picture (Figure 3), which illustrates the relationships and conflicts between the various stakeholders in Bandung's creative ecosystem.

The stream of logic-based analysis stage involves a systems-thinking analysis to define the purposeful activities required to address the situation. This was achieved using two tools, the PQR Formula ('Do P, by Q, in order to achieve R'), which shapes the development of a Root Definition – a concise statement describing the system's purpose, and the CATWOE Analysis, which enriches the Root Definition by examining the system's:

- Customers (C): The beneficiaries or victims of the system, i.e., the people of Bandung and its stakeholders.
- Actors (A): Those who would perform the transformative activities, i.e., city government, academics, creative businesses, communities, and media.
- Transformation Process (T): The core conversion of input to output. This process investigates which variables (inputs) most significantly contribute to transforming Bandung into a validated creative city model (output).
- Weltanschauung (W): The worldview that makes the transformation meaningful. This study is based on two orientations: a culture-centric view (prioritizing culture, creativity, communities, and social inclusion) and an econ-centric view (prioritizing the creative economy, creative class, and urban regeneration).
- Owner (O): Those who could stop or change the system, i.e., city stakeholders and decision-makers.
- Environmental Constraints (E): The limitations taken as given, including the geographical focus on Bandung, as well as time and budgetary constraints.

Root Definition

Based on the PQR and CATWOE analyses, the Root Definition for this system is: *A system operated by Bandung's stakeholders to investigate the city's development as a creative city by evaluating the contribution of culture-centric variables (arts sector, cultural resources, creative communities, social inclusion, grassroots capabilities) and econ-centric variables (creative class, cultural industries, creative spaces, urban regeneration, policymaking), in order to identify the most significant indicators and potentially discover previously overlooked factors.*

The final stage of the research will involve developing a proposed activity model for creating a creative city, synthesising all investigated indicators. This model will be presented in a matrix to serve as a framework for further research and practical application.

Findings and Discussion

Following the construction of the model, a final measurement needs to be created to assess whether the model is successful. According to Checkland and Poulter (2007: 42), this can be done using the 3E method, which is:

1. Criteria to tell whether the transformation T [in the making of a creative city] is working, in the sense of producing its intended outcome, i.e., criteria for efficacy (E1);
2. Criteria to tell whether the transformation is being achieved with minimum use of resources, i.e., criteria for efficiency (E2); and
3. Criteria to tell whether this transformation is helping achieve some higher-level or longer-term aim, i.e., criteria for effectiveness (E3).

Efficacy (E1) is measured by whether the model can identify which of the ten elements contributes most to making Bandung a creative city and whether there will be other elements that have not been previously discovered. For measuring the efficiency (E2), the model should also be able to be constructed within the time and budget allocated. Efficiency means the amount of output divided by the number of resources used. Meanwhile, effectiveness (E3) will be evaluated by looking at the impacts that might have emerged in similar cases in other Indonesian cities or overseas. Figure 4 shows the proposed model's human activity system for this research.

The rationale of the model above is that there are three inherent sub-systems. The first sub-system is based on Sasaki's (2007) adapted model. It concerns the cultural mode of the production model, particularly for measuring the culture variable, in which the indicators of the arts sector and cultural activities or resources (which means the arts and cultural production and consumption) are put together and evaluated through the balanced system of cultural production and consumption that uses cultural capital to develop products and services with high economic and cultural value in a system where consumption encourages creation (Sasaki, 2003; 2007). The second sub-system is about the creativity variable with three sub-variables: the creative communities or scenes, social inclusion, and grassroots capabilities. Finally, the third sub-system assesses the creative economy variable, which includes five sub-variables: creative class, creative and cultural industries, creative space or place, culture-led urban regeneration, and city policymaking.

The next step in the SSM is to compare the model with the real world, to structure the discussion about the situation and its improvement. For this study, the comparison in

the previous step is conducted by creating a matrix (Table 2). The objective in comparing the model with reality is, according to Checkland and Poulter, to find a version of reality and strategies to enhance it, so that individuals with various worldviews can live with. (2007:54).

The activity column in Figure 5's table is derived from the activities in the proposed model, with the variables originating from the literature. We identify several indicators to be operationalized further in the research from the activities and the variables.

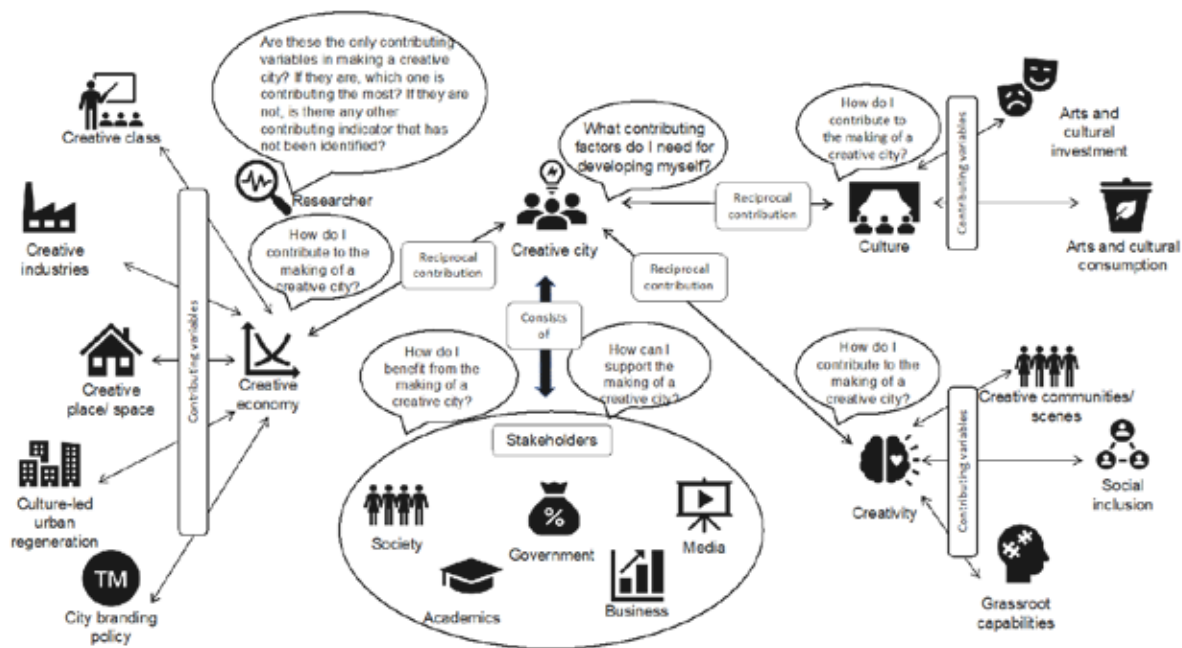


Figure 3. The rich picture of the proposed model in the SSM (Source: The authors).

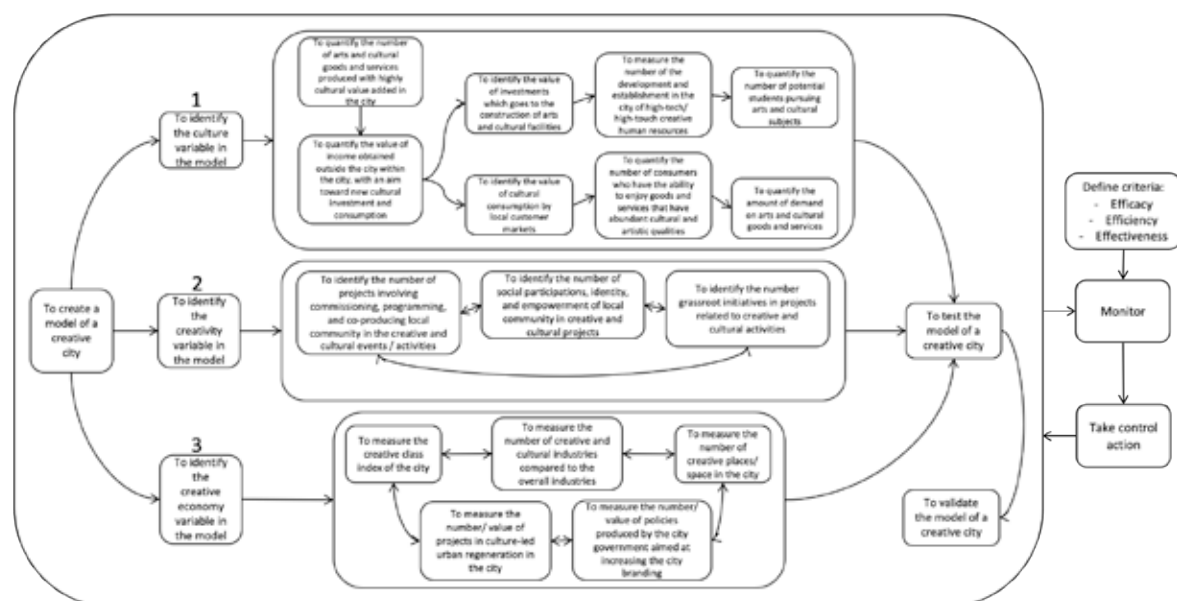


Figure 4. Proposed activity model of the SSM for the study (Source: The authors).

No	Variable	Indicator	Activity
1	Culture (the arts sector and cultural resources or activities) → Sub-system 1	The number of arts and cultural goods and services produced with high cultural value added in the city	Produce arts and cultural products with high technology and creativity
2		The value of income obtained outside the region and within the region, with an aim toward new cultural investment and consumption	Circulate intra-regional incomes
3		The value of investments goes to the construction of arts and cultural facilities.	Invest in arts and cultural resources in the city
4		The value of cultural consumption by local consumer markets	Consume arts and cultural resources in the city
5		The number of the development and establishment in the region of high-tech or high-touch creative human resources	Upgrade cultural capital in the city
6		The number of consumers who have the ability to enjoy goods and services that have abundant cultural and artistic qualities	Upgrade intra-regional consumption in the market
7		The number of potential students pursuing arts and cultural subjects	Attract and train creative and knowledgeable people
8		The amount of demand for arts and cultural goods and services	Increase demand for high-quality goods and services
9	Creativity (the creative communities' activities) → Sub-system 2	The number of projects involving commissioning, programming, and co-producing local community in the creative and cultural events or activities	Assess creative communities or scenes
10		The number of social participations, identity, and empowerment of the local community in creative and cultural projects	Assess social inclusion
11		The number of grassroots initiatives in projects related to creative and cultural activities	Assess grassroots capabilities
12	Creative economy (how the ecosystem supports the city) → Sub-system 3	Creative class index established	Measure creative class index
13		The number of creative and cultural industries compared to the overall industries	Archival research on creative and cultural industries mapping
14		The number of creative places or spaces in the city	Survey on creative places or spaces
15		The number of projects in culture-led urban regeneration in the city	Survey on culture-led urban regeneration
16		The number of policies produced by the government that aims at recognizing the city branding	Archival research on city policymaking on branding

Figure 5. The proposed matrix to construct the model of making a creative city (Source: The authors).

Our preliminary observation found that many art organizations in Bandung are associated with particular communities in the creative sector. Regarding the culture and creativity variables, the respondents will be members of art organizations and involved in related

creative communities. The art organizations should possess all three criteria: based in Bandung, commercially produce art and cultural products, understand the supply and demand of arts and cultural activities in the city, and makes educational art or cultural activities (i.e., workshops and training). Whereas the creative communities first need to be Bandung-based. Secondly, they produce events or activities which involve local communities, including commissioning and programming the events. Thirdly, the projects need to include social participation, uphold the identity of the locals, and empower the surrounding communities. And fourthly, the communities should produce or involve in creative and cultural projects which include grassroots initiatives.

For the final variable, we employ the method of process tracing, which means analyzing the available data concerning the five sub-variables of the creative economy. Referring to the work of Pouzakarya and Bahramjerdi (2019), we see that in a creative city, there needs to be a working situation of the creative economy. Their framework mainly discussed the creative and cultural quarters, which consist of two broad categories, culture and creativity, and two approaches in urban development, namely culture-led urban regeneration and creative city planning, each containing several measures. Based on this understanding, we propose an adapted framework for depicting the creative economy variable for this study.

There are three different uses of the process-tracing method. The first is theory-testing process tracing, the second is theory-building process tracing, and the third explains outcome process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2013). Since investigating the creative economy variable is to assess whether all the sub-variables are evident in Bandung, the process-tracing variant that applies is theory-testing.

The sub-variables of the creative economy are, based on the literature review, the creative class, the creative and cultural industries, creative space or place, culture-led urban regeneration, and city policymaking. Each sub-variable will be observed with a selective method for the process tracing method. For example, firstly, the creative class will be measured by establishing the index referring to Florida's (2002) creative class index. Secondly, the archival research will be conducted on the sub-variables of creative and cultural industries and city policymaking. For the creative and cultural industries, the data collected will map how the industries in the city are distributed among the seventeen sectors, also based on the city's geographical locations and the size of the businesses. Whereas for policymaking, the aim is to find out what the city government has already created concerning initiating policies on city branding. Thirdly, surveys will be conducted for the sub-variables of creative places or space and culture-led urban regeneration to see whether such places and projects are in the city. The survey on creative space observes whether the city has the right combination of 'hard and soft infrastructure' (Landry, 2008). Whereas the sub-variable of culture-led urban regeneration, the survey examines projects in the city that 'improve economic, physical and environmental situation of the regenerated area, [...] putting culture and creativity as effective factors in the middle of urban regeneration approach' (Pourzakarya & Bahramjerdi, 2019).

Conclusion

This study has developed and proposed a comprehensive model for creative city development, constructed through a systematic literature review and validated by expert judg-

ment. The model posits that the development of a creative city is contingent upon three core variables: (1) culture, encompassing the arts sector and cultural resources; (2) creativity, manifested through creative communities, social inclusion, and grassroots initiatives; and (3) the creative economy, supported by an ecosystem of creative class, industries, spaces, culture-led regeneration, and strategic policymaking.

Employing Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), this research frames creative city development not as a problem to be solved, but as a complex, multi-stakeholder situation to be systemically explored and improved. This theoretical research practice moves beyond a static definition to offer a dynamic framework for inquiry, tailored to acknowledge the unique socio-cultural and economic fabric of a specific urban context, in this case, Bandung, Indonesia.

Theoretical, Practical, and Policy Implications

The implications of this study are threefold. Firstly, from the theoretical viewpoint, this research contributes to the creative cities discourse by synthesizing the often-divergent culture-centric and econ-centric orientations into a single, integrated framework. It demonstrates the utility of SSM in urban studies, providing a methodological template for grappling with complex, "messy" urban problems that involve diverse stakeholders and conflicting worldviews. Secondly, from the practical point of view, for urban planners and community leaders, the proposed model and its accompanying operational matrix (Figure 5) provide a tangible toolkit for diagnosis and action. It enables cities to move beyond vague branding and identify specific, measurable indicators to assess their strengths and weaknesses across the full spectrum of creative development. Thirdly, from the policy standpoint, the findings suggest that effective creative city policy must be holistic and integrated. Policymakers are encouraged to move beyond siloed initiatives and develop strategies that simultaneously support cultural production, foster inclusive creative communities, and enable a sustainable economic ecosystem. The emphasis on city branding and policymaking within the framework underscores the need for strategic narratives that are authentically rooted in a city's verified assets.

Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. As a theoretical construct, the proposed model, while informed by literature and expert validation, awaits full empirical testing and quantitative validation in Bandung. Furthermore, the initial application is focused on a single city case study. The findings and the specific weighting of indicators are therefore inherently shaped by the unique context of Bandung, and their direct transferability to other cities may be limited without adaptation.

Platform for Future Research

This study establishes a robust platform for several avenues of future research, such as for empirical application, which means that the most immediate next step is the operationalization of the proposed matrix (Figure 5) in Bandung to collect data, test the model's efficacy, and identify which indicators are most salient in this context. Another area to be explored is to do comparative studies. A compelling future research direction would be to apply this same SSM-based framework in cities with different socio-cultural and economic profiles (e.g., a European capital, a smaller secondary city, or a city in a different developing

economy) to enable comparative analysis and refine the model's universal and context-specific elements. Apart from that, future work could delve deeper into the interactions and potential tensions between specific variables in the model, for instance, investigating the precise relationship between culture-led urban regeneration and social inclusion to understand how economic development can avoid gentrification.

Applicability to Other Contexts

The framework itself is designed for applicability across geographies. The core variables of culture, creativity, and economy are universal pillars of creative city discourse. The SSM approach is particularly valuable because it does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all solution; instead, it provides a methodological process for any city to define its own creative city journey based on its unique assets, constraints, and stakeholder perspectives. Therefore, while the *specific findings* from Bandung may not be directly transferable, the *methodological framework* is highly adaptable. The key to successful application in a different socio-cultural context would lie in repeating the process of contextualization – using the framework as a guide to discover which indicators are most relevant and how the inherent tensions between cultural and economic values are manifested and negotiated locally.

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