For Artists, By Artists: Understanding the Community Value of the Philippine Artist Alley

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The "Artist Alley" is defined as a location where local artists can set up their space and sell handmade merchandise. Comic Conventions coined the term Artist Alley, which refers to the "alley" of artists who sell handmade merchandise. These events can also be seen in the Philippines, where pop culture events host artist alleys, as well as the appearance of dedicated art markets. However, beyond the economic value of these events, it is seen that there is an internal community built by artists who frequent these events, which aim to provide guidance and support to fellow artist sellers. With the rise of Netnography as a methodology to understand the culture of online communities, the study will utilize a Blended Netnography to understand how the members value the Artist Alley Community based on Seraj's characteristics for value creation in online communities: intellectual, social, and cultural value (210-213). These will be gathered from an observation on an Artist Alley-centric Discord community, observations from three in-person Art Market events that took place from February to March 2024, and surveys with artists who are experienced in the Artist Alley setup.

Keywords: Artist Alley, Community value, Artist, Netnography

Introduction

The term provided to venues that host opportunities for local artists to sell handmade original artworks varies depending on the context of the event. The term "Artist Alley" is given to a specific area in a pop culture convention that allows local artists to sell their items. There, buyers may find unique items such as stickers, jewelry, and prints, among other forms of merchandise (Wu, 2, 33-36; Valentine 12). Additionally, events that focus solely on featuring artist sellers are known as 'art markets', where the entire venue is dedicated to providing a space for artists to sell and exhibit their work (Morgner 40-41). Both these concepts derive from the trade fair, where vendors are given a temporary time to sell and exhibit their goods to an audience, setting up and packing up their goods before and after the provided selling period. While the economic value of this form of market is considered, it is also noted that a form of participatory culture takes place between artists and fans (Wu 10).

However, this modern artist scene was greatly changed due to the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Lyman discusses the struggles that artists experience with the forced shift of the event to the online setting. However, interviews reveal that these artists struggle with the shift to e-commerce sites to market their goods. However, it is noted that these artists were able to band together to support each other in helping boost sales and even being companions to other artists who are isolated (2020).

This has led to the prominence of online communities. Online communities are identified as socio-technical systems where members interact with one another. The concept of communicating online started with emails–which was the first evidence of user communication. However, the establishment of the first online community was identified through online interactive gaming worlds and themed forums in the early 1990s. This has led to the establishment of the 'third place' where the first two places are identified as 'home' and 'work' (Preece et al. 86).

Despite the existence of multiple studies on the arts scene, specifically in the contributions of local artists in the Philippine arts scene, there are currently no studies that exist on the topic of the culture of the "Artist Alley" or similarly-themed art markets despite a surge of these types of events after the descent of the pandemic in 2022. Additionally, while studies on Netnography focus on various niche communities and have successfully identified cultures and values formed within these said communities, there are still currently no studies explicitly looking into Artist Alley-focused groups despite these communities existing both in the local and international sense, with Artist Alley Friends being established in 2022 for International and US-based Artist Alley artists, and Artist Alley PH Group Order established in 2016 for local Philippine artists, among other artist groups which cater to a similar niche.

With this, the study aims to investigate the Artist Alley community in the Philippines. Using Seraj's characteristics for value creation in online communities as a basis for the theoretical framework. Seraj identifies the importance of making the community members establish value to retain the said community, coining three pillars used as a basis to identify the established values: intellectual value, social value, and cultural value. These are connected to activities within the community–intellectual value focusing on knowledge-sharing spaces, social value focusing on conversational spaces, and cultural value focusing on the retention of certain behaviors (210-213). While Seraj's framework is mainly utilized to retain interaction and engagement for business purposes, the researcher also acknowledges the cultural value that these pillars may provide in other studies.

The study aims to answer the main research question–" What are the values identified in the Philippine Artist Alley community?". The following research questions will guide the study:

1. How do other artists view these Artist Alley communities?
2. What are some notable themes found within online interactions within the Artist Alley community?
3. What are some notable themes found within in-person interactions within the Artist Alley community?

Methodology

The study will use a mixed-method survey and a Blended Netnography to obtain the required data. The survey was distributed through two prominent online Artist Alley communities and distributed in person during Komiket May 2024. On the other hand, the Blended Netnography took into consideration the activities and interactions from a prominent Artist Alley Discord server for online interactions, and in-person interactions made during three art market events from February to March 2024.

The survey was distributed through a Google Forms link. Questions were formulated on Seraj's definitions of the three pillars that establish value in an online community: intellectual value, social value, and cultural value, connecting them to the activities that take place in the community, such as identifying knowledge-sharing spaces, conversational spaces, and the retention of professional behavior (210-213, 219). These questions are contextualized based on the common goals identified by the online community and the explicitly identified purposes found in formal announcements addressed to all community members. Additionally, the survey aims to identify the online community the respondents are most active in to identify the motivating factors that led to these individuals remaining in the online community. The survey requests short-form essay responses and responses from a Likert scale.

Another method used is Netnography. Robert Kozinets coined the term "Netnography" to refer to a new type of ethnography that is specific to the online landscape, integrating elements of ethnographic research being the study of social interactions and behaviors of

people belonging in a group within their community, understanding cultures, perspectives, and practices. Kozinets' book, "Netnography: Redefined" takes into consideration various networks where the human interacts, and who they interact with in the social sphere. This also includes the formulation of online culture and various audiovisual communication methods such as videos, GIFs, images, sounds, and others (4-7). This study utilizes Blended Netnography, where the location is online while data gathering is done face-to-face. In this study, data gathering will take place between online and offline venues: The Patrons of the Arts Discord Server and three art market events that took place from February to March 2024: Komiket February on February 10 to 11, Patrons of the Arts March on March 2 to 3, and Komiket March on 23 to 24. These events were taken into consideration as they were the events that the researcher participated in as a seller, thus allowing them to conduct whole-day observations to identify the patterns of interactions made throughout the day.

In line with the need to protect the privacy of the respondents and those involved in the study, all respondents will not be addressed by their name or their online username. Instead, pseudonyms will be provided to identify these said respondents.

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion will be grouped based on the established research questions in order to provide an answer for each question before creating a summary to answer the overall research problem:

<u>How do other artists view these Artist Alley communities?</u>

In order to answer this question, a mixed method survey was distributed in three venues: two online Discord servers–the Patrons of the Arts Discord Server and the Artist Alley PH Discord Server–and was distributed in person during Komiket May 2024. However, only seven respondents answered the survey. Nonetheless, the data will still be considered in the study.
Based on the provided results, only two respondents mentioned participating in Artist Alley events for more than one year. However, all respondents stated that they were all members of an Artist Alley-related online community.

When asked to name the online communities that they are a part of, 6 out of the seven respondents listed more than one online community, a prominent one being the "Patrons of the Arts Discord Server." Additionally, when further asked what online community they are the most active in, five respondents stated they were most active in the Patrons of the Arts Discord server.

When asked about the motivations behind their activity in the online community, those who responded that they were active in the Patrons of the Arts Discord Server highlighted the willingness of the community members to provide advice on tabling in Artist Alley events.

Respondent B highlights the features of the Discord platform as a strength when it comes to organizing conversations, leading to better organization of conversations among members.

> "*Whenever I ask for tips, help, and insights, people usually respond and I get a lot of helpful stuff there by reading previous questions and threads, which is organized and easy to access*"
> (Respondent B)

On the other hand, Respondent E highlights the friendliness of the server towards both newbie artists entering the Artist Alley scene and seasoned Artist Alley vendors.

"a lot of local artists to interact with and helpful with the in and outs of boothing/table-ing and just being an artist in general. whether you're there to learn or just engage, it's newbie to veteran friendly! also pretty well moderated too!"
(Respondent E)

These responses highlight the utilization of gates to regulate the community as stated by Baugley (44). While the server has a 'hard gate' that a user has to pass through by undergoing a screening process for artists to access artist-exclusive server channels and rules set by the moderators, a soft gate is established, which includes the treatment of artists toward new members. If an artist is aware of the culture in these conversations, they will feel like they belong in this community and will benefit from the discourse.

To further identify the value of their respective Artist Alley communities, the artists were requested to answer a set of questions by rating them through a Likert scale. These questions were created based on the intellectual, social, and cultural values that may be found within the community. Figure 1.1 displays the scores from the Likert scale from the questions that are related to the questions on the intellectual value of Artist Alley groups.

Fig. 1.1: Questions on the Intellectual Value of the Artist Alley Groups

Number	Question	Score
1	I receive tips on improving my sales tactics as an Artist Alley seller	**3.14**
2	I receive advice on managing online selling platforms (e.g Shopee, Shopify, Etsy)	**2.86**
3	I receive advice on managing partner stores/consignment store slots (e.g Common Room, La Local, ShopBrik)	**3.43**
4	I receive opportunities to sign up to more Artist Alley events (Table sharing or event sign ups)	**3.43**
5	I receive recommendations on how to improve my merchandise quality	**3.14**
6	I receive recommendations for merchandise suppliers	**3.14**
7	I receive opportunities to join Group Orders (GO) for ordering from suppliers in other countries	**3**

These results show that members have received a good amount of advice from these communities in relation to their business, with the lowest one being Question 2 on the topic of managing stores in online selling platforms. This response may be possible due to the restrictions set by the popular online selling platform Shopee, which would require all sellers to be registered under the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) ("Regulations on Creditable Withholding Tax and BIR Registration") as a business, a move that discourages small artists from continuing provided that this is not their primary source of income.

Opposite of this, Questions 3 and 4 are more related to on-site selling opportunities such as consignment store slots and claiming Artist Alley tables in certain events. While the latter is one of the main goals of Artist Alley groups, which informs members of open applications or opportunities to share table space with other artists to reduce costs, the former looks into the concept of having items sold in a permanent space in a physical store.

Understandably, certain practices in these consignment stores differ. With few resources on the topic, this space is used to ask experienced sellers for advice when entering this opportunity.

Figure 1.2, on the other hand, shows the scores from the questions on the social value of the Artist Alley groups.

Fig. 1.2: Questions on the Social Value of the Artist Alley Groups

Number	Question	Score
1	I have made new friends in this community	**3.14**
2	I am comfortable in talking to people in the community about general topics outside of the Artist Alley experience	**3.14**
3	I am comfortable venting or ranting to people in the community about negative Artist Alley experiences.	**3.3**
4	I believe that this online community is a safe space for me as an artist	**3.9**
5	I am comfortable in talking to people in the community about sensitive or personal topics about my personal life	**2.43**
6	I am willing to physically meet the people I befriended in the online community if an opportunity arises	**3.29**

One notable feature is how the respondents consider the online community as a safe space for them as an artist, as indicated in the results in Question 4. However, the lowest score can be seen in Question 5, which shows that as a person, the respondents do not feel entirely safe speaking up about sensitive topics within the community, thus creating a notable distinction between their identity as an artist and their identity. This can be related to the findings on Mallestone on the establishment of online social status, which is related to the identity established by online users due to the option of one to withhold certain personal information, thus creating an ideal identity depending on the online space (9).

However, the researcher acknowledges the small number of respondents. Therefore, these results will be connected to observations made both in the online and offline Artist Alley community spaces, which have higher rates of participation and thus may be used as a basis to support the findings made in the survey.

<u>What are some notable themes found within online interactions within the Artist Alley community?</u>

In order to provide an identifiable and unified theme between the online and offline interactions discussed in this study, the study will once again categorize interactions based on Seraj's three values. In line with the majority of the responses in the survey, the online community that was considered is the Patrons of the Arts Discord Server. This semi-private Discord server was initially created to course announcements to the participants of the art market event. However, with further progress based on the suggestions and recommendations from the members, the server has become an online community with around 1400 members as of the time of writing. With the community's main platform being on Discord, it is noted that there are specific channels dedicated to certain topics, which will be used as a basis to determine the values that are established in the server.

Upon entry, the Discord Server prompts visitors to confirm their identity as an artist, thus having them undergo a screening process that the server's moderators will conduct. Once granted entry, the user can explore an array of channels dedicated to artists. Further, additional verification methods should be done to gain access to other channels such as the 'nsfw-chatting-18-plus-only' channel, which will only be granted access to participants who indicate that they are above 18 years of age.

Channels dedicated to exchanging Intellectual Value are labeled as "suppliers," "tips," "tips-form," and "upcoming-events," which are dedicated to exchanging knowledge about various topics assigned to each channel. It should be noted that the "tips" and "tips-form" are two different channels, their main difference being "tips-form" acting as a form of organized directory of frequently asked questions and queries to further organize the channel of questions being asked in the form, which is a sign of constant interaction among members, prompting the use of an organization system to further organize an already organized system in distinguishing what type of information would be shared in each channel.

There are also discussion channels dedicated to sending announcements concerning the Patrons of the Arts event series. An announcement channel informs all members of the upcoming events, registration dates, deadlines, and transparency statements regarding the events series. Along with these are private channels meant to disseminate specific announcements meant for artists who will sell in the mentioned events series. However, even though dedicated channels already exist for information sharing, it cannot be helped that queries will be asked in other channels.

There are also channels dedicated to socialization, including "casual-chatting-and-nonsense" for casual discussions and the "nsfw-chatting-18-plus-only" section dedicated to more explicit topics. Other channels exist to organize further specific topics, such as "games," "food," and "pet-pics," which focus solely on gaming-related conversations, and "public-con-cerns" which focus on discussions regarding issues with convention organizers, focusing on the rising table rent prices, oversaturation of Artist Alley events, and the treatment of artist sellers.

Lastly, regarding the culture, it should be highlighted that the overall culture the server pushes for is the culture of kindness. In the channel labeled "rules," only one rule is listed. "Be kind to others." This positive attitude can be seen in some specific channels, such as "con-wins", an entire channel dedicated to posting accomplishments shared by the members. From there, users can choose to react through image-based reactions or replying to the message.

Other channels would fall under the culture of artists, leaning more toward art sharing and social media promotion. This can be seen under the channels "art-share" for the sharing of various artworks; "displays," which focuses on showcasing Artist Alley displays during events; "budol-budhaul," which focuses on artists showcasing their Artist Alley purchases during certain events; and "promotions" for boosting announcements made by the artist members. These elements can be commonly found in conversations made within the Philippine artist community, specifically those who participate in the Artist Alley setting. It is also observed that there are times when users greet each other with "good morning" every morning to start the conversation. Another identified element is that on the days of significant art-selling events, members would wish other artists good luck in the general chatroom and praise these exhibitors after these said events have concluded.

Additionally, as mentioned earlier, queries asking for specific information are sometimes sent in channels dedicated to socialization. Members then promptly redirect members to the channels that are dedicated to these topics. Alternatively, if members end up engaging in conversations in channels dedicated to information sharing, members then

promptly redirect these members back to the common chat channel to continue the conversation.

It should be noted that these are prompted by members of the group, not the moderators. This further highlights a culture of regulation that maintains the organization of the dedicated channels. A better example of this self-regulation culture can be found within the "food" channel. With the addition of the channel, members were concerned about what the channel catered for, if this would be meant for sharing photos of food or for food-related discourse. Some recommended converting the channel to restrict members to only sharing photos, but instead ultimately decided that the channel would self-regulate by opting to post photos of food similar to the other channels that are also dedicated to sharing related images.

All this aligns with Baugley's discussion on gates and channels (44), where soft gates are enforced to guarantee that rules are followed, even without the direct request of the moderators. These soft gates also help reinforce the culture of kindness in the area, which tends to lead those who are more harsh in conversation to either change their ways or to feel excluded by the group if they do not comply with others' requests. However, the latter only happened once, around February, when a heated argument broke out between two members, where other members first reprimanded the offensive party until the moderator implemented stricter rules to prevent such scenarios from happening again. While the offensive party was not banned from the server, they were discouraged from engaging in conversations.

Overall, the activity of the mentioned servers are active, with the most activity taking place under "casual-chatting-and-nonsense". It is also noted that if this channel is not active within the day, some users would either start the day's conversation greeting everyone or asking how everyone is doing.

With this said, it is noted that all these actions managed to solve all five challenges that all online communities face as stated by Kraut & Resnick (2012) being (1) motivating contribution–solved by members motivating members to engage in conversation, (2) encouraging commitment–with the constant activity and numerous opportunities to engage in conversation, (3) regulating behavior–where members themselves remind others of the rules, (4) recruiting new members–from invites both from the organizers and other members, and (5) achieving critical mass–with a growing member base of around 1400 members as of the time of writing.

While all these observations are noted in the online space, the study will now compare the in-person interactions made during in-person events, identifying the themes found within such interactions.

<u>What are some notable themes found within in-person interactions within the Artist Alley community?</u>

In the survey, the researcher asked the respondents if they were willing to physically meet their online friends from this community in person, with all seven respondents saying 'yes.' Additionally, five respondents stated that they met more than one online friend in person. However, these meetings only took place within Artist Alley-related activities such as visiting their booth in person during events and sharing a table with these people if invited, still maintaining the distance that was established between their personal life and their online artist persona. When asked about the topics they discuss when they meet in person, 3 out of the five respondents only discuss Artist Alley-related topics to these people, while the remaining 2 mention that they talk about both Artist Alley-related topics and personal topics.

Additionally, in-person observations took place on selected events from February to March 2024, being Komiket February at Centris Elements, QC from February 10 to 11; Patrons of the Arts March at Centris Elements, QC from March 2 to 3, 2024; and Komiket March at Megatrade Hall, Megamall from March 23 and 24. Observations spanned from ingress hours

of the event on the first days of each respective event until egress hours of the event on the last day.

All observations on all three events are the same. During ingress hours, it is noted that the online community members wake each other up and wish each other luck with their respective events. Additionally, members of this community would use the term "moneyfesting" –a portmanteau of 'money' and 'manifesting'- to wish others high profits during the event. This element of online interaction cannot be separated from these in-person events. This is especially true even if members are noted to be selling in the same event.

However, if members of the Artist Alley community finish setting up early, they would take this time to visit their friends and engage in a short conversation. These conversations normally talk about expectations for the current event, merchandise production, complaints about previous events, and plans for merchandise selling. Mostly, these conversations end with wishing the other party the best of luck with the event.

Within the day of the event, all events have common occurrences in Artist Alley events. One is the trust given by one artist to their neighboring artist to watch over their booth if they are to leave their post due to certain circumstances–commonly to get food or use the bathroom. Sometimes, this trust extends to the point that the artist tasked to watch over the other person's table ends up performing transactions for their neighbor to prevent a lost sale, informing them of the sales made. It is noted that this action is done without the request of the artist, and is done mostly by a complete stranger they have just met.

Another is artists visiting the tables of their friends during events to engage in short chats with them. However, this only happens within the day if sales in the venue slow down, normally during early mornings or a few hours before evening. These conversations would talk about how their day has gone and even discussions on sales. However, limits are set when discussing earnings, as most artists would not provide exact numbers to describe their situation.

If taking into consideration Seraj's pillars, the Social and Cultural pillars are more prominent in these events compared to Intellectual Value. It is hypothesized that this is because at this time, the artist should have learned everything they needed to know prior to the event, especially since around a week before the event proper, orientations are hosted by the organizers of the mentioned events.

Nonetheless, there is still evidence of an artist community based on the interactions and friendships formed during these events.

Conclusion

This study focused on identifying the values of the Philippine Artist Alley Community based on Seraj's three characteristics for value creation in online communities. Based on the identified results, it can be concluded that all three characteristics–Intellectual, Social, and Cultural Values–can be found in the Philippine Artist Alley community. However, these values are more prominent in the online community due to the reach of the online venue, with the community's mode of communication being described as organized. It is also noted that online community interactions seem vital as these play a significant role in communication, even if the artists themselves can be found in the same events. These organized channels further enhance the Intellectual and Social values, while culture can be seen through both conversations and certain dedicated channels that help solidify artist culture. Despite this, these pillars can still be found at in-person interactions, with unique cultural interactions taking place in relation to assisting other artists in making sales.

Nonetheless, despite the results gathered in the survey and the observations being almost similar, the researcher recommends replicating the study with a larger number of respondents to answer the survey in order to fully verify the experiences that most artists in

this field experience. Thus, the outputs can be used as a good point of reference on the personal experiences of these artists when comparing this to the results of the observation.

Additionally, the researcher would recommend further studies on the attitudes and cultures presented during Artist Alley events not only in the Philippines, but also in other places where these events take place in order to note the various cultures exhibited by local artists of this nature. Given that this topic is rather novel in the field of art, it is best to look into this new aspect of culture to gain a better understanding of the direction of modern artists and the venues in which these events take place.

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