

**Research Article**

# Surviving During the Pandemic: Lessons Learned from Bandung Indie Music Scene in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract.**

This research intends to study how creative industry players, especially the independent music industry in Bandung responded to the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The creative industry's business pattern, which relies a lot on various face-to-face events, was forced to stop as a result of many restrictions on mobility to suppress the spread of Covid-19. By implementing a qualitative approach, this study conducted in-depth interviews with 8 experienced actors in the music industry in Bandung. This study found that (1) music industry players were hit hard at the beginning of the pandemic; (2) music industry players have many abilities that are very useful in difficult times such as pandemic times; and (3) music industry players initiated other creative businesses. This study also concludes that music industry players were classified as a vulnerable group during the pandemic. However, by capitalizing on the network within their communities, they were able to produce breakthroughs to survive and continue their activities in the creative industry.

**Keywords:** creative industries, music, Covid-19, policy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing demand for music streaming services during lockdown periods, the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has damaged the worldwide music industry [1]. It is estimated that the creative industry in the United Kingdom experienced a 30% decline in music, performing, and visual arts as there were 55,000 job losses during the first 6 months of the lockdown [2]. In the United States, 2,7 million jobs were lost and more than \$150 billion in sales of goods and services in the creative industry [3]. Among all economic sectors, the creative economy has been hit the worst by social distancing policies [4].

In Indonesia, the same trend occurs in many cities. Hastuti (2020) illustrates how the first wave of the pandemic ruined the local music industry, compiled 10 cancelled music

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events in Jakarta from March to October 2020 [5]. This condition led to various kinds of difficulties that stimulate some alternative ways explored by the music industry actors. Several early initiatives emerged, such as online “ngamen”[?], arranged virtual concerts, and intensified their merchandise sale. However, these initiatives were carried out only by some music actors. The other groups had to sell their assets to access their basic needs such as food due to their lack of income [6].

Although the music industry in many regions in Indonesia is now slowly back [7], music industry players have been a vulnerable group for some time during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, from March 2020 to June 2021 [10]. The first wave period of the pandemic in Indonesia, which forced physical meetings to be impossible, made it difficult for music industry players to find events that were previously the foundation of their income.

Following the previous explanation, this paper tries to analyse how the music industry players respond to the conditions during the first wave of the pandemic in Indonesia. Bandung’s independent (indie) music scene is selected to capture how the own-developed music scene facing the pandemic situation. This aims to fill the gap in researching how the Bandung indie music scene, one of the biggest music scenes in Indonesia, in fighting the Covid-19 impact. Furthermore, this article also tries to explore how responses from government or policymakers related to the creative industry actors during Covid-19 limitations.

## 2. THEORETICAL STUDY

### 2.1. Bandung indie music scene

Bandung is one of the places where the music industry develops in Indonesia. Many creative industry events are regularly held in the city, ranging from a small community to an international scale. Various innovations emerged from this city, making music something that is attached to Bandung. One of them, which is considered a big breakthrough, is the existence of an indie label. In contrast to major labels, indie labels provide more space and opportunity for music industry players to express their music freely [7]. At this stage, there is a significant shift in the music industry. This is evidenced by the number of new musicians, from diverse music genres, who are capable of creating new marketplaces that music fans enjoy.

As a community, the breakthroughs of Bandung musicians can be seen at least from a series of collective music events held in the 1990s. By collecting money from each

band and entrance tickets, Bandung musicians managed to organise several events such as Hollabalo (1994), Bandung Berisik (1995), Bandung Underground (1996), and Gorong-Gorong (1997) [10]. This scheme continues persistently to transform music to be one of the major industries that attract corporations' attention to be involved especially as sponsors. Furthermore, the growth of the Bandung music scene also involved other dimensions and perspectives such as politics [11], religion [12] [13], and gender studies [14].

This condition continues to grow to this day. With numerous experiences and supporting ecosystems from the internal and external of the community, the ability of music industry players is getting better, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Not only music players, behind-the-scenes actors are also getting the opportunity to improve their skills. Apart from an audio engineer, there are several other jobs in the music industry, such as event organizer, band management, audio-visual artist, and graphic designer. In fact, some local artists performed in international scale events. This achievement confirms that local talents who have grown from indie labels have unlimited opportunities, something that previously was owned only by major labels. Even though it was stopped temporarily because of the "AACC incident" [15], the Bandung music industry is slowly returning to life as before.

Although it is difficult to find writings that explain how the Bandung music industry in terms income or money circulation quantitatively, the Bandung music industry has the potential to become a larger creative business entity. This has previously been conveyed by Yujin (2017) who explained the rise of the creative industries with Bandung as his focus [18]. Furthermore, the Bandung indie music industry is a generator of other local creative industry subsectors, especially fashion [24]. The more the music industry develops, the more likely the creative industry in general will also develop.

## 2.2. Bandung indie music scene during the Covid-19 Pandemic

When Indonesia declared that Covid-19 had spread in Indonesia in March 2020, various restrictions to limit physical mobility were made to stop the spread of the virus. This policy is commonly carried out by the majority of countries to force activities that previously relied heavily on physical meetings to stop. The music industry event is one of them, where many music shows are stopped because of the potential to gather mass concentration.

In the Bandung indie music context, this causes a multiplier effect on the music industry players. Music professionals are forced to be unable to work as usual, such as

band players, music label management, music engineers, and event organizers. What happened in Bandung also happened in many areas. Jakarta, Surabaya, and Bali, which are some of the cities that actively have a music scene, also experienced the same circumstances. A large number of crowd restrictions created a domino effect that made the music industry players hit hard. It is found that 43% of musicians lost their jobs due to cancellations at previously scheduled concerts [16]. This is very likely to happen in other areas of other countries as well. At this stage, Covid-19 makes musicians vulnerable.

Various initiatives had emerged to find a way out of the existing conditions. The virtual concert is the first option, apart from online singing which is done by musicians to entertain music lovers to pass the time during travel restrictions. A virtual concert is a simple idea: the audience pays something to watch a concert from their own place using their gadget. Some indie bands did virtual concerts, such as Burgerkill, Pure Saturday, The SIGIT, Jeruji, Beside, and The Panturas. Many of them are the result of collaboration with local music media.

Virtual concerts are indeed a temporary solution and become a new trend during the Covid-19 pandemic [18]. For musicians, virtual concerts provide an opportunity to be creative and stay connected with fans. For music listeners, watching virtual concerts helps them to reduce the fatigue experienced during the pandemic. However, virtual concerts cannot completely replace offline concerts [26]. Besides the concert intensity which is not as much as usual, the income generated by virtual concerts is not as much as off-air concerts. Furthermore, the opportunity to conduct virtual concerts is not owned by all musicians. This condition will be discussed further.

Inequality in access to virtual concerts makes musicians look for alternatives to cope with existing conditions. This research will explore what plans and steps they choose to try to survive. Previously, several studies have stated that indie music players apply the principle of "do-it-yourself" which has also allowed them to grow to this day [28] [23]. This research will also answer whether musicians can persist with the values they hold.

### 3. METHODS

The qualitative approach was chosen to investigate how indie musicians in Bandung respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Nassaji [18], a qualitative approach will help to understand individuals, including their opinions, perspectives, and attitudes. This research also applied an ethnographic method supported by the author's background, who has some experience in the local music scene. This led to the advantage that the familiarisation stage is not required from the very beginning. According to Creswell

[24], ethnography entails observing a larger group, particularly through participant observation, in which the researcher observes and interviews members of the group in their daily lives.

To obtain primary data, interviews were conducted involving indie music actors in Bandung as described previously. Through purposive sampling, this research interviewed 8 actors in the Bandung indie music industry, including musicians, indie music managers, and audio engineers. As part of the agreement, the identities and names of the participants in this study were given nicknames without reducing the information and opinions provided.

Ethnography is done directly by conducting interviews and observations at various research locations such as coffee shops, music studios, and bars. In addition, virtual ethnography is used to round out the observation of the music community, which is mostly done through various platforms available on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). Unlike traditional ethnography, which emphasizes face-to-face interaction that can only be accomplished by physically traveling to a location, virtual ethnography allows for greater convenience in making observations [25]. Even in the absence of physical presence, the relationship established in this study was maintained. The data collection process, on the other hand, can be carried out more flexibly with the combination of live and virtual ethnography.

Adopting Creswell (2010) regarding the process of data analysis and interpretation in qualitative research, the data analysis carried out in this study was carried out in several stages, namely (1) transcript of interviews for each resource person; (2) translating local language or local popular term or English into Indonesian; (3) processing and mapping the contents of each interview; (4) grouping the chat themes in each interview; (5) performing data reduction to ensure that the data presented is in accordance with the research discussion; and (6) Interpretation of data with various related studies.

As a tool to triangulate data, the authors conducted comparisons of methods, between researchers, data sources, and theories. The comparison is as presented by Denzin (2015) which emphasizes triangulation as a method in which researchers generate data and then present it to others with several methods of external data collection. These techniques are eventually expected to generate and analyse data, allowing for a more in-depth examination of social, political, and economic processes [26].

## 4. Results and Discussion

Even though they have been harmed by the Covid-19 pandemic, several Bandung major indie music groups were able to find a way out of the difficulty of getting the opportunity to perform live. Some of them rely on album sales, merchandise, and royalties obtained from previous works. ZNR explains how the different impacts of the pandemic on the music industry actors:

*“Some bands already have good financial management, so the monthly salary continues to flow even though there are deductions. (On the other hand) some have completely stopped, having no income during the pandemic.”*

Some band members also have side jobs that make it less difficult for them to make ends meet during the pandemic. This was conveyed by GPM who said that at the beginning of the pandemic he chose to focus on his side business so that even though GPM did not get a job during the beginning of the pandemic, GPM could still meet his daily needs. This condition does not occur in many musicians. The number of fans and how the business is managed by music groups can explain the emergence of differences in the impact of the pandemic on Bandung’s music industry players. In addition to these two things, digital engagement also affects whether a music group can go through the pandemic with sufficient strength or vice versa. This supports Priambodo, et. al (2021) and Agustin (2021) claim that technology readiness will be impactful to deal with volatility [28].

Some of the early initiatives emerged in several ways, such as virtual concerts by several big bands. A band named Jeruji, for example, held a concert entitled “Ripple the Show - Tribute to Crew” which was intended to provide assistance to the band crew. This method is also done by other bands such as The Panturas, Polyester Embassy, Powerpunk. Although it is not necessarily sufficient for their daily needs, this can be seen as the solidarity of musicians as stated by ZNR:

*“Big bands/musicians raise funds in which the proceeds from the fundraising will be donated/given to stage technicians (crew) throughout Indonesia. Although it’s not a big number (of money) and doesn’t help much, (still) the help came from colleagues in the music industry.”*

Moreover, many bands intensified merchandise sales by releasing new articles aimed at fans. Even though it’s not something new, selling merchandise is important for the band’s business activities, especially during the pandemic. This condition seems to be supported by e-commerce and taxi-hailing apps in most of the big cities in Indonesia that help deliver goods from sellers to buyers. This is explained by EDA “... goes along

with the music. Like clothing, most of it goes along with the music and maybe the ecosystem." A similar thing is explained by NGUM, a person who works closely with some big musicians in Bandung:

*"Yes, you can pay the crew and personnel from t-shirts (sale). They made 1000 t-shirts, they (the shirts) could run out in a few hours, many were angry because they didn't get any, and they continued to accelerate so that 2000 t-shirts were sold out again in a matter of hours. So the band doesn't have too much trouble, just annoyed because they don't perform."*

In addition to the methods described previously, it is interesting when some music industry players are looking for a way out by initiating a small culinary business. By applying the do-it-yourself and learning by doing method, they try to sell snacks to the people around them. This attitude is explained by BOR, telling his experience of why do-it-yourself is help him and his friends to learn many new things and how do-it-yourself is associated with his life:

*"(involvement in) do-it-yourself (activities) because everything was done on its own, screen printing itself, recording itself, so it was hand to hand, only after distributions like Harder and Riotic were created, it was a consignment system."*

This is conveyed by GPM, who run a bottled coffee business during the pandemic, argued that "culinary businesses are relatively easy to sell because basically, humans need food and drink." This is similar to ZNR's opinion which tells how he and his community opened a food stall with the concept of profit sharing.

Interestingly, the business of selling snacks received a positive response from fellow musicians. Apart from the quality of the product, some product buyers make buying and selling as a form of helping their colleagues who are having trouble getting music events. Furthermore, it is not difficult to find impromptu food vendors who swap roles with their friends, both as sellers and as buyers. ZNR explains how social media plays a central role in culinary vendors offering their products in creative ways.

The tendency to initiate culinary businesses is believed to be spread for several reasons. First, the culinary business is quite easy to learn because it is quite close to the daily life of musicians. Second, during the pandemic, there are no restrictions on the distribution of food shipments. Lastly, it does not require a large fund to start a culinary business.

Regarding assistance from external parties, GPM explained that there had been assistance from a music shop in Pasir Kaliki Hyper Square, where there were more than 30 crew and other actors in the music world who received assistance in the form

of food. In addition, GPM also told of the existence of direct cash assistance (BLT) in the amount of IDR 1.2 million and IDR 2.4 million which he had never received [29].

## 5. Conclusion

This study found different conditions for musicians in the city of Bandung. Musicians who before the Covid-19 pandemic had business lines other than music tend to have more ability to survive. The group was able to survive by increasing merchandise sales to fans. In addition, some bands still have "savings" in the form of royalties they get from their works.

On the other hand, the music industry players who are not yet established are very hard hit by the pandemic. Previously, they relied heavily on their income from the stages they performed. With very limited opportunities during the pandemic, some of them need to find a way out to survive. This study also found that many musicians are looking for other sources of income by creating culinary businesses, such as selling fast food, coffee, and snacks. Usually, their products are marketed through the circle they already have. Even though the sales and profits are not excessive, the efforts they put in can help them struggle.

This study did not find any policies or programs or assistance specifically aimed at Bandung indie musicians. Some musicians and people around musicians do receive assistance from the government, but this assistance is classified as general assistance which is aimed at the general public. This research also supports further research that can explain how good practices occur in the music industry during the pandemic.

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