

# The Vernacular Typography of Street Vendors: Migrant Cultural Identity in Surabaya

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*Abstract: Street vendors in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia, are a part of informal sector of businesses undertaken by migrants. They are considered as a social phenomenon. Their presence is often considered to reduce the beauty of the city as it occupies public areas. Nevertheless, street vendors are recognized for their support of Surabaya's economy. They appear with their visual identity on their cover stalls that are often made from striking color fabrics. Generally, the stall design shows pictures of food menu along with typical information in large fonts that dominate the cover stall's surface. The main topic of this research deals with how migrant communities in Surabaya develop a visual culture through street vendor cover stall design, especially through their use of unique graphic style typefaces as their cultural identity. Vernacular typography on street vendors creatively serves as a local visual culture and also performs an issue of interest between authority and power orientation.*

*Keywords: Street Vendor, Vernacular Typography, Cultural Identity, Migrant*

## Street Vendors in Surabaya

Special stalls of street vendors (named as Pedagang Kaki Lima or PKL in short) that sell food and drinks in Surabaya are easily found in many corners of the city. Most of them occupy the sidewalks or shoulders of the roads that are actually intended for pedestrians. Street vendors sell from morning until night, and some are open nearly 24 hours. PKL has an important role in Surabaya's urban culture. Although the size of the PKL stall tend to be small and cramped, they have become a medium of information that is typical and nowadays is fighting with many kinds of media information to get public attention. These stalls usually attempt this through their use of strikingly colorful covers which serve as food list menus as well. Their structure style is a form of visual expression that shows graphic design as a visual culture. Sunarto, a scholar and practitioner of design, has indicated that the existence of street vendor stalls is suitable for tourist destination because of their artistic value (Rustan 2010). The construction of PKL in Surabaya generally consists of iron poles and wooden or bamboo beams. These materials are arranged in such a way to be able to support the tents that serve as a roof and cover. Generally, the stall design shows pictures of food menu along with large fonts, and dominates the whole fabric. The cover functions as a menu list as well as a sign board. Each stall has at least 3-4 pieces of covers that surround almost all sides of the stall.

PKL is important for Surabaya people for its ability to lure buyers from all levels of society. From time to time, the street vendors have various experiences of continuous physical forces from authorities. The state's economic instability gives direct and indirect impacts on their work because they have to make adjustments in order to exist. In connection with the government's development policy, repeatedly, the government's official squads perform disciplinary actions towards street vendors. Even though the control of the street vendors is a regular agenda, the street vendors can never be completely removed from the city. Their reaction is moving from one place to another to avoid the government officials' pressure. These conditions contribute in shaping the mobile PKL stalls as they are today.

PKL has been considered as a social phenomenon. How migrant communities in Surabaya develop visual culture through street vendor stall design especially the typeface as a cultural identity on the stall cover that shows a unique graphic style becomes the main topic of discussion.

Visual culture analysis in this research is using the Gillian Rose perspectives, which are sites of image and of production (Ida 2012). Those two perspectives are the basis for seeing the phenomenon as a part of design in an urban culture. The subsequent discussion will focus on a production area that allows researchers to observe and interpret the visual object in a wider context such as how the visual forms are produced by a group of people and have meaning for them.

Surabaya is a metropolitan city and also the second largest city in Indonesia. Originally Surabaya was formed from a collection of villages. These villages are scattered in all parts of the city (Hidayat 2010). These situations give Surabaya a distinctive identity, especially at village areas where there are urban poor population migrants who have come from different regions. Most of them work in the informal sector, such as street vendors who are selling food and drinks. This profession has a low level of business security. They are the target of curbing abuse of the authority, related to the use of public spaces (Romdiati et al. 2007).

Now, Surabaya has PKL centers that are set by the city government for the food vendors with registration certificates. However, most street vendors in Surabaya are not registered yet. They do not have any license and usually occupy public areas that are restricted. They often have to deal with the municipal police, the agency who is responsible for the law enforcement. Therefore, the street vendors' equipment is mobile and make it easy for them to move or simply avoid the municipal police. However, their presence seemingly is not decreasing.

The basis of the government policy towards street vendors is set out in Surabaya Regulation No. 17 of 2003 concerning the settlement and empowerment of street vendors. The first point is that the government sees that the number of street vendors in Surabaya has caused disruption to traffic movement, aesthetics and cleanliness of the city and the city environmental infrastructure functions. Therefore, the next point mentioned is a necessity of empowering the informal sector in order to support the growth of the society's economy such as providing public food for a relatively affordable price. The empowerment goal is that the street vendors are protected in doing their business, and thus a harmony between the street vendors and the city environment may be created.

### *Visual Culture Manifestation*

Graphic design is one form of culture based on the definition proposed by Koentjaraningrat (2002). In line with Talcott Parsons, Koentjaraningrat defines culture as a course of action and human activity pattern. There are three cultural phenomena, namely: the ideas, the activities, and the artifacts. These three forms are interrelated in social life. For example, the idea or ideas will produce a certain action, which then can also produce a culture that is physical or material. Physical culture can shape a particular environment which in turn will affect and determine patterns of human action and also change the way of thinking. Every society has norms and values that are related to social concepts and are considered ideal which drive individual behaviors as a part of a cultural community.

Visual culture is an area of research that focuses on visual images as well as the process in which meaning is produced within a social and cultural context (Dikovitskaya 2006). Visual culture can be seen from many sides. One is viewed by Nicholas Mirzoeff. He sees visual culture as an important subject that has a historical value, based on the knowledge that continues to change shape and also influences the relationship with certain facts in the modern world. An image appears to be dialectical because it demonstrates the relationship between the present and the past, or a certain time period in which it represents. According to Mirzoeff, most of our visual experiences are based on when and how we encounter them (Mirzoeff 1998). Thus, visual culture is talking about how someone interprets something, and that it is obtained through how he consumes mass culture through his daily experience. Understanding visual culture can be a start to understanding the object representation and the subject interpretant.

This research study area is related to the cultural phenomenon that occurs in Surabaya, which has high and dynamic urban problems. In this research the object is the typeface on the PKL stall cover. The functional value and aesthetic value translate a condition that is implied in a verbal communication. Its effectiveness depends on the medium and composition especially when combined with other visual elements such as illustrations, photos or colors. Size and proportion of typeface will greatly affect the message. Thus, all elements that create letters are visual expressions that have a special meaning. When typography is arranged to form words and then sentences with a particular language structure, this can be readable for other people (Sihombing 2001).

Design as a visual discourse is assessed by using Foucault's perspective that all humans are related to the results of a particular process (being produced) and all subjectivity is the construction process from the previously experienced (Rose 2012). Through discourse analysis, the power model of institutions that have established the role of subjectivity and how knowledge is acquired and subsequently submitted to the truth value for the community can be known. The area of production and reproduction of knowledge and the truth value which is circulated to many people depends on how knowledge and truth are delivered. Knowledge and truth are considered the property of an authority, and power is everywhere (omnipresent), at all levels, and is expressed through a relationship that is created to support it. Power itself operates through a variety of knowledge construction (Eriyanto 2003). In other words, the truth depends on who is delivering or producing it. Received truth finally comes to construct knowledge that helps shape the identity of the recipient.

### *PKL as Representation of Java Culture*

Physically Javanese culture can be found on the street vendor groups' position, lined up and faced each other like forms of villages in Java (Koentjaraningrat 2007). PKLs' building form also shows the adaptation of the non-aristocrat Javanese class, namely "Serotong" or "Srotong". According to Heinz Frick, construction of the roof on the traditional Javanese house shows a social position of its occupants (Frick 2001).



Figure 1: Serotong House versus PKL Stall  
Sources: Koentjaraningrat 2007( left);Damajanti (right)

Furthermore, PKL's way of living shows a Javanese cultural philosophy that characterizes Javanese aspects of life, namely: *Food*: Eating activity for Javanese people means balancing the cosmos, so they have to be in a relaxing atmosphere with soft lighting. *Clothing*: In Javanese philosophy people have to cover themselves when they are eating, therefore the PKL stalls are always covered by fabrics. This becomes their identity. *Housing*: PKL stalls represent Javanese people's house, which is in the form of "Serotong" (*Java: building=serotong, private=Gadri*).

Javanese people in their hometown usually live in groups. This habit is reflected in the PKL area in Surabaya. The PKL location on the side walk used as their temporary shelter usually consists of several PKL. Because of the limited capital of their owners, they create a unique covering fabric which functions as a protection and as well as an identity.

## **PKL, Profiles and Authority Relations as a Part of Urban Society**

Most of Surabaya's migrants work in the informal sector. They are called temporary migrants and they do not have Seasonal Resident Identity Card. Most migrants come from East Java areas such as Gresik, Bangkalan, Mojokerto, Pasuruan, and Lamongan, especially from the village, as many as ninety-five percent (Romdiati et al. 2007). During their stay in Surabaya they live in rural areas. Those migrants have an attachment to their hometown and usually are members of their own ethnic community. It is difficult for them to integrate with the urban culture and ultimately they are alienated from the culture of Surabaya. That condition makes the face of Surabaya vary widely. There is a modern metropolis filled with lots of tall buildings, or luxury residential complexes, side by side with disadvantaged areas, while each of these groups develops its own culture. However, the government acknowledges this mixture to have mutual supporting economic activities in Surabaya.

Usually, street vendors in Surabaya occupy the sidewalks without the government's permission. Only some of them have legal license. Sometimes they occupy the space adjacent to the drainage as seen in Nginden and Jemur areas. They also occupy the pavement as shown in Menur street. These places are permitted by the municipal government only for temporary uses. Nevertheless, in that area, street vendors that have survived for more than 10 years can be found. Related to the migrants' life style as street vendors, they pay much attention to the front of the stall. They have less attention to their surrounding environment as shown on Dharma Husada region where the front side looks neat but not so with the back side. It is one of the reasons that causes PKL to have a negative image in the view of Surabaya Government.

This situation generates a condition where the PKL becomes an exploited object of informal authority. Those vendors do not have any power to protect themselves. They do not know exactly what their rights are. Several interviews found that there are always a feeling of oppression and insecurity. This condition stimulates PKL to create an informal organization that brings their aspirations to the government. Therefore, every area of street vendors has a community (Paguyuban PKL) and a leader. They negotiate with the government for location-use permit or to administer the license for the vendors, but the other problem is that sometimes the leader acts as a government representative for his own benefit. Another kind of oppression is that everyday they are asked for money for various reasons by multiple informal actors who consider themselves authority. The payment is perceived by the vendors as a mandatory contribution for security fee and as a permission to occupy the location.

The fact is until 2012 there has been no retribution legislation for street vendors. Officially, the City Government does not collect any fees from the vendors. Toward the case of increasing street vendors in Surabaya, the municipal police is always restraining their spread especially while occupying public areas. The main task of the municipal police (called Satpol in Indonesian language) is to control the PKL deployment. Since the existence of the city street vendors is considered to be very disturbing towards security and order, the vendors continue to be the target of the law enforcement.

Therefore, in the street vendor activities there are important actors who are involved, namely the government in one side, and the PKL community and society on the other side. Those actors have created an interdependent relationship (as shown on the diagram below). It becomes a PKL discourse in an urban context. As a visual cultural agent, their stall artefact is assumed to be developed by those groups of people who are a migrant community. With the mobile stall and fabric cover displaying those large font menus and pictures in striking color, they attract the buyers' attention. It is a distinctive identity especially when compared with other eating places like restaurants. They have developed a special vernacular typography. Therefore, it can be concluded that PKL is one of cultural discourses that shows a persistent effort to survive in urban areas.

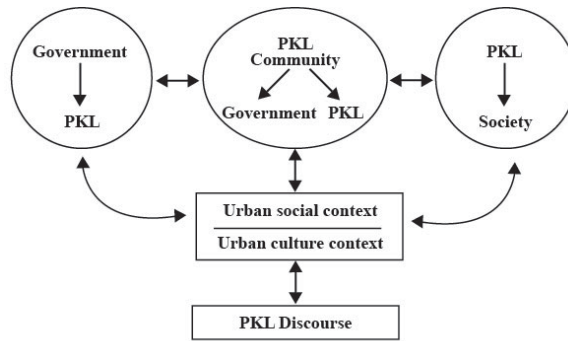


Diagram 1: Actors in PKL Discourse

### Vernacular Typography of Street Vendors in Surabaya

An English dictionary defines “vernacular” as a distinctive local language used in a particular community, derived from the Latin vernacular “vernaculus,” used in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, which means domestic, native. It may also mean a terminology of informal language (dialect) used by certain groups to interact (oxforddictionaries.com). Based on the second definition above, it can be concluded that the vernacular design means a work of art that is domestic, which lives and thrives in a community group. Then, it can be interpreted as a vernacular typography letter form, which develops in certain communities, that is used by, and for their interests. Therefore, PKL’s vernacular typography can be referred to as the community’s identity. The creation of vernacular art is done freely by anybody in the sense that it is not constrained by any scientific theory.

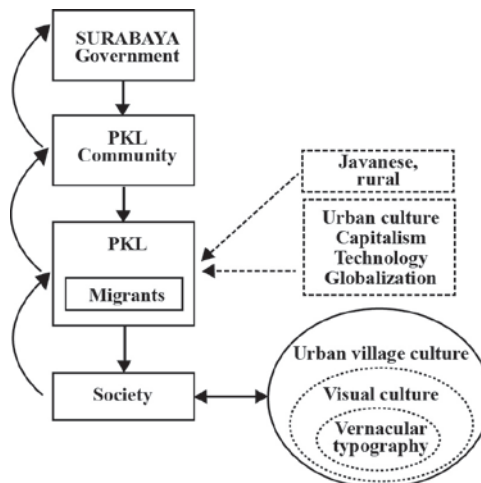


Diagram 2: Street Vendor Vernacular Typography Schema

PKL cover shows designs that seem simple without much ornamentation. All sides are dominated by fonts. The stall cover consists of the food names and with or without the stall owner’s name. Sometimes it shows food drawings or paintings of various food such as fish or chicken. The type of writing on a stall cover can be identified as follows :

1. Food name  
 Examples: “NasiBebekandTempe Penyet,” “Soto AyamLamongan,” “Sate Kambingkhas Jakarta,” etc.
2. Stall name  
 Example: “Sari Laut,” “Warung Jaya Abadi,” “Mr. Mustache,” etc.

3. Owner's name  
Example: "CakYadi," "CakHary."
4. Supplementary information  
Example: "Prepared," "Specials," name of cuisine objects located below or above the illustration as "Chicken," "Duck," "Crab," etc.



Figure 2: Variations of PKL Stall Cover  
Source: Images by Damajanti

Those texts and images are manually painted using Rose and Aga (common paint brands in Surabaya). These two paint brands can be easily found at low prices and they have a special uniqueness that they create striking colors more so than others. The illustrations on the cover are adjusted according to the basic ingredients of food. If the main dishes are grilled fish, then fish images would be there. There are no more images besides some small and simple symbols such as dots, stars, flowers, circle, or abstract frames which are placed around the main texts, or just to fill the empty space which serves to balance or aid to an aesthetic layout. The use of those images is not an obligation. Based on an interview with a migrant artist and PKL owner, it seems there are no specific rules for the graphic composition. Creation of a cover design involves the owner and the artist as well. Usually their topics of discussion are what kind and what color of fabric will be used and how many images would fill the space besides the main texts. Every single font or image has its own price. How a stall cover will look like depends on the owner's budget and also the artistic style of the artist. Thus, the whole process of making a visual design of a certain group community is called vernacular culture. Their needs are fulfilled by themselves.

The graphic composition of the landscape design is dominated by the two distinctive patterns of centered composition alignment, or the left-right alignment (justified). The overall arrangement of the text is in horizontal format. Sometimes italic/script fonts are used for accentuation in horizontal or diagonal position. Typography is always dominant at the top of the cover. In particular, it contains the name of the shop or stall owner. Furthermore, the space will be filled with smaller information based on the appropriate level of information priority.



Diagram 3: Paragraph Style Alignment Centered and Justified

Hierarchically, the text and visual elements on the cover are structured as follows:

- 1 ) Stall name (owner's name / food name)
- 2 ) Images of food / cuisine object / additional ornament (if any)
- 3 ) Owner's name / food name
- 4 ) Additional information, price information, the origin of the dish, telephone number, etc.



Figure 3: Formal Composition Layout  
Source:Image by Damajanti

The composition has shown the importance of an identity through its formal and modern style. The composition of capital letters in that graphic style is usually used in newspaper's headlines to emphasize the importance of the information and to attract people's attention. Street vendor cover gets more dramatic impression through its limited interior lighting. According to the Lawson's classification, a basic form of typeface uses the "old style," "modern" and "slab serif" category (Rustam2010). However, it has a unique style development. The letters found are dominated by capital letters in fat or bold style. These letters are not original or the vendor's property. The style is an adaptation of Latin letters (Roman). Examples of the typeface development are shown below:



Figure 4: Variations of Capital Letter Effect on Street Vendor Covers  
Source:Images by Damajanti

Most of those letters are made in an outline style, with shadow effect, three dimensional effect, or with texture on the surface by applying striking colors. Sometimes it looks more expanded or condensed than the original family type. This development reinforces the impression of decorative and attractive typefaces. The development and character of vernacular typography on street vendors are identified in Table 1.

Table 1: Typography Identification

Typography Style	
1	 <p>The basic font is <b>Helvetica</b>, san serif (originally created by Eduard Hoffmann). This font is developed to become rounded terminal (round shape) which is similar to the Arial typeface family. When this font is adapted by street vendors, it is pulled to be condensed, and has dimensional effects.</p>
2	 <p>The basic font is <b>Caslon</b>, serif (originally created by William Caslon), which is developed into a very thick and curved terminal culminating into Cooper Black typeface. When this font is adapted by street vendors, it appears increasingly thick with thin shadow and outline. Its visual strength is the flashy colored fabric base.</p>
3	 <p>The basic font is <b>Clarendon</b>, serif (originally created by Robert Besley) that tends to be thick and short. Then it looks condensed as the Century font (created by Benton, Linn Boyd, 1894). On the street vendor cover the terminal becomes round and its stem thick. The strong effect is made by putting an orange fluorescent outline, so it looks heavier.</p>
4	 <p>The basic font is <b>Garamond</b>, serif (originally created by Claude Garamond). The terminal of this font becomes simple like Century typeface. On the street vendor cover this font becomes thick and fat. Then, its strong effect is made by putting an orange shadow and glowing/fluorescent green.</p>
5	 <p>The basic font is <b>Bodoni</b>, slab serif (originally created by Claude Garamond). The serif looks thick on Clarendon typeface. When this font is adapted by street vendors, it has three dimensional effects with heavy slab serif.</p>
6	 <p>The basic font is <b>Bauhaus</b>, san serif (originally created by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy). This font has many innovations in its family typeface and becomes thicker by the orange fluorescent outline.</p>



## DAMAJANTI: THE VERNACULAR TYPOGRAPHY OF STREET VENDORS

Another application of fonts is found in small numbers that use script and cursive style type. These fonts resemble handwriting or brush strokes or a calligraphy pen. There are also decorative styles that are textured using colors. The font size of the main text as shown above is very large. Overall those letters are filling the cover. Typeface that is often used is also known to display letters. Regarding the uses of letters there are 2-5 different kinds of typefaces on a cover.



Figure 5: Script and Cursive Style on PKL's Cover  
Source: Images by Damajanti

The original purpose of the creation of a display letter for the title or headline such as on the print media is to convey the hierarchy of information. Now, in street vendor stalls, the uses of such letters serve as a focal point for readability and legibility. The display style, used to accentuate the stall to stand out from a distance, is made by using a color projection. Optically it is very powerful, so inevitably people will glance at it. This approach shows the typography's function is to attract maximum attention. There are a number of prominent characteristics of the vernacular typography as described below:

- Likely to have a major stroke that is fat/thick
- Tend to have round terminals
- Tend to be wide and elevated
- Tend to be decorative in style (especially in the main text)
- Tend to dominate large expanse
- Tend to favor coloring with glowing effect or using fluorescent paints
- Tend to favor 3-dimensional effect
- Tend to favor outline effect
- Tend to favor shadow effect
- Tend to favor texture effect or patterns of font
- Tend to favor prominent effects arising from the contrast between the color of the letters and the fabric base
- Tend to favor incorporation of multiple types of fonts on a stretch
- Tend to favor formal composition (horizontal and the left-right)



Figure 6: Decorative Style  
Source: Images by Damajanti

All typography design development in the PKL group marks a distinctive vernacular style that has a strong character. From a design style perspective, it can be concluded that the street vendor stalls have a modern style, but the typographic vernacular style tends to be attractive decorative. About the growing aesthetic distinctiveness among street vendors, some stall owners say their stall covers 'should' look like that. They have a kind of conviction that the style cannot be changed to another style. They learn from one another (as it shows everyday) and become their aesthetic standard to be followed. This belief is shared by their community.

Various diversity of vernacular typography (and illustrations) found on street vendor covers above are elucidating the function of graphic design, of social, cultural and economic site. It is closely related to how street vendors challenge in performing the entire practice, regarding a number of restrictions obtained as a consequence of its existence among the power relation with

the authority. Knowledge that is accepted as truth leads the street vendors to specific actions. The style of street vendor promotion through the cover fabric which is typically typographic is a unique way to exist. The types are developed from common fonts. Eventually they become the peculiarities of typography identity known to the public.

Referring to Graphic Design as Communication (Barnard, 2005), there are at least three major aspects of graphic design that stick out, namely:

- 1) Aspect of information. PKL stall design is a formal style because it is designated to attract buyers and is also intended to give positive impressions to the authority in relation to their existence. The impressions revealed through visual characteristics are as follows:
  - Style of upper case type (capital letters) means something important. The selection of typeface is also meant seriously, and not something that is playful or trivial.
  - The overall style cover is simple but firm and strong. This marks the migrants' character in struggling for life, firmness, and strength.
  - Typography composition styles use centered and left-right alignment composition. This composition is a formal composition in academic writings. Typographically it means open to the public judgment, reliable, in a serious attitude.
- 2) Aspect of persuasion. This aspect is closely related to the decorative aspects into a visual unity. This aspect is addressed more to entice the prospective buyers. This can be seen by the following visual characteristics:
  - Font color is made prominent, conspicuous, in contrast with its background. This is done to get the attention of potential buyers, mostly in mobile conditions in motor vehicles. This fact is clearly correlated with the location of street vendors on the sidewalks, and that they sell mostly at night.
  - Typography and illustrations and all other graphical elements on PKL are made as attractive as possible. This is achieved by bright colors and graphic elements that are done well by experts. Even then it seems to be the arena of competition among vendors in an area of street vendors.
- 3) Aspect of decoration. This aspect aims to reinforce the nature of persuasion that is typical of the way to attract attention. Surely it is intended that they are still allowed to sell because its existence is quite neat and representative so as not to interfere with the beauty of the city. It also implicitly suggests that PKL may be responsible in conducting their business. Visually it can be seen through the things below:
  - Form of a standard letter (Roman font) changes such as through the provision of motif/textures, giving an outline, shadow effects, or three-dimensional effects, so it is aesthetically more interesting.

Thus, the presence of a stall cover here meets the above three aspects. So what is displayed on the street vendor's stalls is seen as a visual solution for the real need of the owners. The information is developed on a light color fabric, so it will stand out more when it gets interior light. The PKL operational time is not long, and it causes them to find ways to attract buyers. Economic and political pressures about their existence make their visual culture and can be seen as a sign of identity of migrants who work as street vendors.

## Conclusion

PKL actors represent social dynamics as a result of interactions of social groups that are distinctive. Javanese cultural roots meet with urban culture in Surabaya is indicated by street vendor stalls. The representation of urban village through street vendor stalls shows an independent economic power. Vernacular typography on street vendors serves as a local visual

culture and also performs an issue of interest (between authority and power orientation) that creatively becomes their new cultural identity. The dynamics of migrant life in the informal sector are also sticking out through the phenomenon of visual culture that they develop. It has been proven to be an intention of the urban population living in urban villages.

All of these processes clearly confirm how a writing culture is produced and developed by the processes of social interaction that occur in the community. Therefore, as a medium the stall cover gives rise to vernacular typography of street vendors. PKL visual culture especially spawns a distinctive form of street vendor stalls, and the vernacular typography itself becomes a medium of communication to the authority (or the government), to the potential buyers, and to the society. The spreading street vendors also influence the city's appearance through the adaptation of the migrants' original cultures to the urban culture. PKL especially supports the sustainability of the economic life of Surabaya. Those facts confirm a discourse based on Foucault that the PKL actors (permanent or temporary migrants) who live in the urban village with a wealth of social and cultural backgrounds participating today are also taking part in the formation of urban culture uniqueness.

Visually all forms of typography expressions on street vendors can also be said as a form of cultural aesthetics offered and communicated to the public by migrants. Long periods of the migrants' backgrounds have generated a collaboration between the street vendor visual arts with the artists making the stall covers as a way to communicate with others. This is evident by the strong form of vernacular design that brings a sense of authenticity and independence to grow and thrive among the migrants. However, there are many variations that occur in the vernacular battle, which show how unlikely it is to make a distinctive line between the vernacular and not the vernacular. Therefore, it is worth underscoring here that the understanding of the visual vernacular as a cultural identity of the migrant community has such a local spirit of an independence that is still strongly felt, even the ability to survive in the current global economy. This condition will potentially be a bargaining power that will distinguish its existence as a product of local culture from other cultures around.

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