
The Perceptions and Participation of Younger Generation in Cirebon Brai Art: A Sufi Psychological Analysis

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Abstract

This article analyses young people's perceptions and participation in practising Cirebon Brai Art using a Sufi psychological approach. The involvement of young people in this study (namely millennials and Gen Z) is to examine the extent to which local wisdom values affect their mental health. The urgency and relevance of this research stem from the fact that millennials' and Gen-Z's interests and attention are largely absorbed by popular art forms that are not deeply rooted in national values. There is also the temptation and addiction to the internet, social media, and online games, which, according to recent findings, have caused mental health problems among young people. Many teenagers, from early adolescence to early adulthood, experience anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses. This research uses quantitative methods with the research locus at Sanggar Sekar Pusaka Cirebon. The analysis in this study is based on questionnaire and interview results with young respondents involved in Brai art. The findings of this study confirm that the younger generation involved in Cirebon Brai art show positive mental health conditions; their levels of anxiety and depression decrease when they regularly participate in Cirebon Brai art activities. Most young people stated that their spiritual and psychological conditions improved after participating in Brai art. However, the practice of Cirebon Brai art has not received full attention from young people in Cirebon and its surroundings due to a lack of socialisation and seriousness on the part of regional policymakers in West Java.

Keywords: *brai_art, local_wisdom, sufi_psychology, young_generation*

INTRODUCTION

Brai Art, as one of the heritage of Cirebon's local wisdom, can actually inspire millennial youth and Gen-Z in programs to cultivate authentic Indonesian characters. However, for the contemporary context which is instant and massive, the interest and attention of the millennial generation and Gen-Z is absorbed a lot in the realm of popular art that is not rooted in Indonesian values. Moreover, if we studied the research (Parhan & Dwiputra, 2023) dan (Lestari et al., 2024), the interest and attention of Indonesian millennial and gen-Z youth is so high in modern art and global issues than the rich traces of local wisdom in Indonesia; Those who like traditional arts and local wisdom issues are very minimal and concerning. In fact, youth from Gen-Z have the potential to be uprooted from their cultural ancestral roots (Media Indonesia, 2023).

Ironically, the youth population in Indonesia is not small. Referring to the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the number of this group is around 64.14 (23.18%) million people. On the other hand, many studies show the mental health condition of adolescents to be compromised as previous studies have done (Kemenkes BPKP, 2023), (Subu et al., 2024), (Yani et al., 2025), (Ampuni et al., 2020) dan (Brooks et al., 2021). The results of these studies and phenomena are indicators that one of Indonesia's human resources in the future is youth. This means that the challenge of introducing, growing, and empowering local wisdom in youth circles is very relevant and significant.

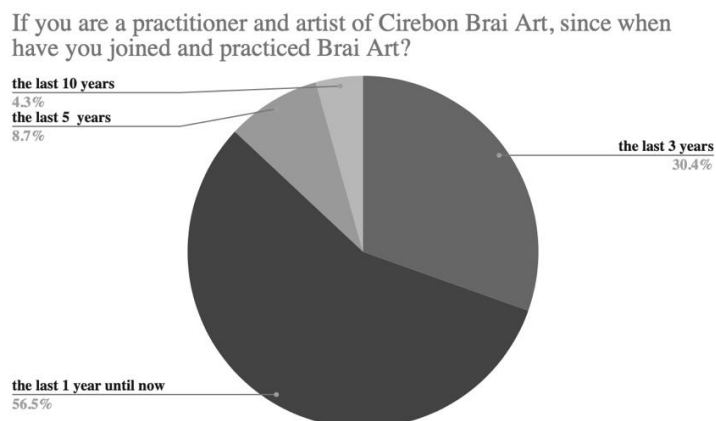
For this reason, it is interesting to investigate the Art of Brai Cirebon which is practiced at the level of the millennial and Gen-Z generations. The reason is, if referring to the potential and values of local wisdom, Brai Cirebon Art meets the criteria of local wisdom that deserves to be investigated and considered. This art can be a forum and mouthpiece for strengthening Indonesian identity, as well as a medium for strengthening the character of the millennial and Gen-Z generations in the future as examined by (Al Fazri, 2019), (Zulkarnaen, 2022), and (Suyono Suyatno, 2022). Meanwhile, from the aspect of mental health, to stem and anticipate the impact of modernity and digital technology that makes some millennials and Gen-Z often unstable, disoriented, and stressed, the practice of Brai Cirebon Art can be a surefire alternative (Ariani et al., 2018) (Kaligis et al., 2021). Moreover, the values of Sufism are strongly attached to Brai Art in Cirebon so that it is able to invite the goodness of the character and psyche of the actors (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019).

Research related to Brai Art in Cirebon has previously been conducted by Ikfal Al-Fajri, Hajam and Mathew Isaac Cohen (Al Fazri, 2019) (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019), (Jaelani, 2020), and (Didin et al., 2016). The research emphasizes more on the historical and cultural aspects of Brai Art in Cirebon. Meanwhile, this study focuses more on the internalization aspect of Sufistic values based on the Sufistic psychology paradigm (Frager, 1999). Even if there is a review of the teachings of Sufism in the Brai Art of Cirebon, the research narrates more about the doctrine of Sufism in the Art of Brai (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019). Meanwhile, we focuses on the impact of practical Sufism that occurs if the Art of Brai Cirebon is practiced. Especially, for millennials and Gen-Z.

There are two things that are problematic in this research: **first**, to what extent does the influence of Brai Art Cirebon have an impact on actors and connoisseurs of Brai Art among millennials and Gen-Z? In this case, the locus of Brai Cirebon Art that we observed at the Sekar Pusaka Studio in Wangunharja Village, Jamblang, Cirebon Regency, West Java. The young people who were actively involved in the studio led by Sukarno Muhammad Ace (Kang Ace) were also on average 20 people. The rest are the older generation. **second**, how does the analysis of sufistic psychology photograph the actors and connoisseurs of Brai Cirebon Art in the locus?

We found several significant findings related to the perception and participation of the Millennial Generation and Gen-Z in Brai Cirebon Art at the locus of Sanggar Sekar Pusaka, Wangunharja Village, Kertayasa Block, Jamblang District, Cirebon Regency, West Java. These findings are based on quantitative methods. To dig deeper into the meaning, we conducted a direct interview process with respondents. The process, we first used a quantitative method by submitting a questionnaire to be filled out by the connoisseurs and performers of the Brai Cirebon Art at the Sekar Pusaka Studio. Based on the results of the interviews, the average audience and actors from among the youth has never been many. There are about 20 people. Even on some occasions, it is smaller than that number. The respondents in their 20s were actively involved on average in the past year as shown in the following diagram:

Diagram 1. Length of Involvement in Brai Art



What is unique and interesting, most of the connoisseurs (spectators) and practitioners of Brai Cirebon Art know and involve themselves in this local art not because of publication or socialization on social media and other digital platforms, but through communality factors: friendship and kinship. As one of the local wisdom in Cirebon and West Java, Brai Art should be improved by using digital technology innovatively and creatively to make it more affordable. The reason is, although 79% of these young people participate in disseminating Brai Cirebon Art with social media applications and other digital applications, it does not seem significant.

DISCUSSION

The Overview of Brai Art Profile

Brai Art is one of the typical traditional arts that grow and develop in the Cirebon and Indramayu areas, West Java. According to some scholars (historians and cultural experts from Cirebon), the word “*brai*” is derived from the Arabic word “*baraya*.” Other experts argue that the word originates from “*birahi*” (Sundanese language) or “sexual desire” in English. Both terms are interpreted in a Sufi context as the pinnacle of the spiritual connection between a servant of Allah and the Creator, the Almighty. In the Sufism tradition, to attain the highest spiritual station (*maqam* in Arabic), one must go through various stations (*maqamat* in Arabic). The highest station called *mahabbah* (love station), for example, is described when a servant of Allah is able to open the *hijab* (barrier) between himself and the Creator. Meanwhile, *birahi* is explained as a situation (or *hal* in Arabic) when in the highest

station. At that station (*maqam*) and situation (*hal*), a Sufi's heart is already filled with the boundless joy of union with God (Didin et al., 2016).

The content of Brai Art is in the form of the recitation of *shalawat* (praises to the Prophet Muhammad SAW) or the recitation of songs accompanied by Middle Eastern music by a group of Muslim communities. Historically, this art is thought to have emerged around the 14th century AD. Initially, it was used by Islamic leaders as a da'wah medium to spread religion. As an ancestral heritage, Brai Art is performed by a group of people together through songs that contain praises and invitations to get closer to Allah SWT (Jaelani, 2020).

The unique characteristic of Brai Art lies in the combination of Sufism-nuanced lyrics that use Cirebon and Arabic, with the accompaniment of musical instruments such as tambourine, percussion instrument (*ketipung*), or drums. This performance is traditionally performed in the courtyard or courtyard of the house, especially during the light of the full moon, and is complemented by dance movements that are in tune with the music and verses. These elements provide a distinctive identity for Brai Art as a cultural asset that is very integrated with the religious life of the local community (Jaelani, 2020) (Al Fazri, Ikfal, 2019) (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019) (Didin et al., 2016).

In its development, Brai Art which was initially displayed in the Cirebon Palace environment began to expand until it could be enjoyed by the general public. Entering the 19th century, this art was widely played by students in Cirebon Islamic boarding schools as religious entertainment until it finally spread to various villages in Cirebon. Now, Brai Art is commonly performed in various religious events and thanksgiving, such as the commemoration of the month of Muharram, the night of Lailatul Qadar, the Prophet's Birthday, the birth ceremony of a baby, and salvation at the grave. According to a survey by Didin et al, there are three places that often practice the Art of Brai; *Terbang Manguneng Group* in Purwawinangun Village, Kapetakan District, Cirebon Regency; *Brai Group* in Wangunarja Village, Klangean District, and *Brai Group* in Bakung Lor Village, Klangean District (Didin et al., 2016). Philosophically, every element in the Art of Brai contains a symbolic meaning and a high moral message. The lyrics and songs have a certain level that aims to praise the majesty of God and enhance the spiritual qualities of the perpetrator. Although Brai Art has a very deep cultural order value, this art is basically not intended as a stage entertainment art to be watched by a wide audience, but rather as a form of spiritual devotion (Al Fazri, Ikfal, 2019) (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019) (Jaelani, 2020).

However, in the current era of globalization, the existence of Brai Art faces the threat of extinction due to the interest of the public, especially the younger generation, which is declining towards ethnic arts. The problem of regeneration is the main obstacle because this art is generally only pursued by the older generation who are over 40 years old. To anticipate this, several Brai Art groups have now begun to introduce this art at public events that are crowded with visitors so that the local history and culture of Cirebon is preserved for future generations (Jaelani, 2020) (Al Fazri, Ikfal, 2019).

The Perceptions and Participation of Younger Generation in Cirebon Brai Art

Our data indicates that young people (Gen-Z and Millennials) have great interest and interest in Brai Cirebon Art. This can be seen from the emotional and spiritual effects felt by the youth respondents at the Sanggar Sekar Pusaka Cirebon. Based on the five choices we offered (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree), 62.5% of respondents preferred to agree that the emotional impact was very noticeable (**see Diagram 2**), And similarly, regarding the spiritual and philosophical impact, the majority of respondents strongly agreed (62.5%) and agreed (37.5%). No one hesitated to answer the options of undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree (**Diagram 3**). In fact, this art, for these young people, can actually help their emotional control. It seems that there are 52.2% who answered very agreed (**Diagram4**). Meanwhile, their perception is also very positive regarding the local wisdom aspect of Brai Cirebon Art is very influential in shaping national identity. There are about 66.7% strongly agree regarding this aspect (**Diagram 5**). This can be seen in the following chart of perception and participation levels:

Diagram 2. Personal Emotion Perception Level

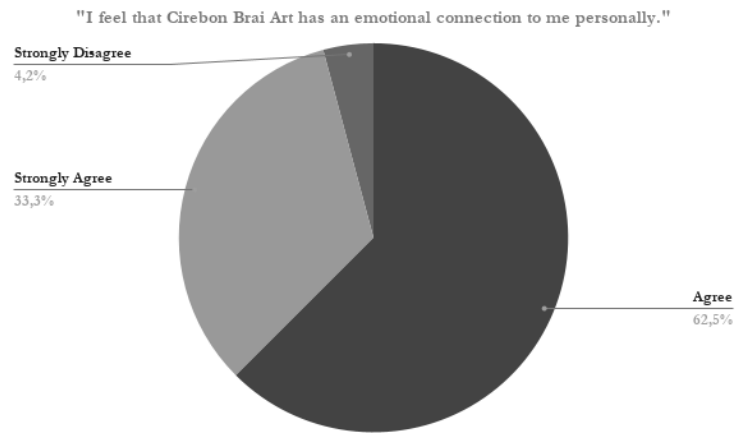


Diagram 3. Spiritual and Philosophical Perception Level

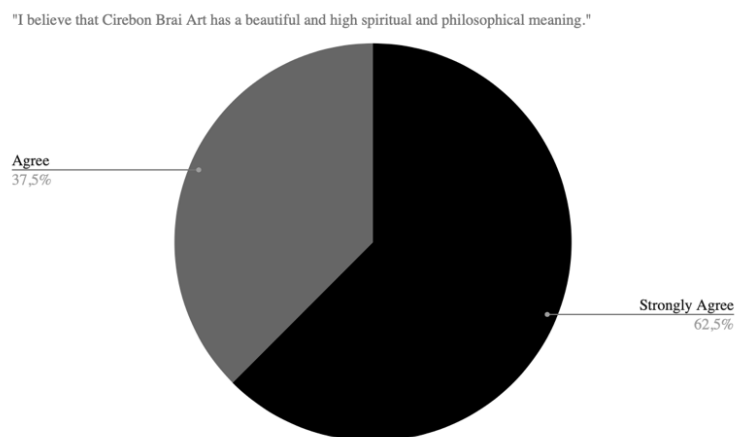


Diagram 4. Emotion Control Perception Level

"For me, Cirebon Brai Art has an impact and contributes to managing my emotions in making decisions in my life."

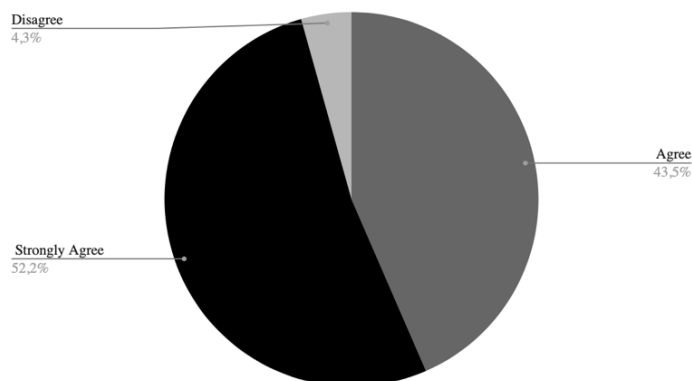
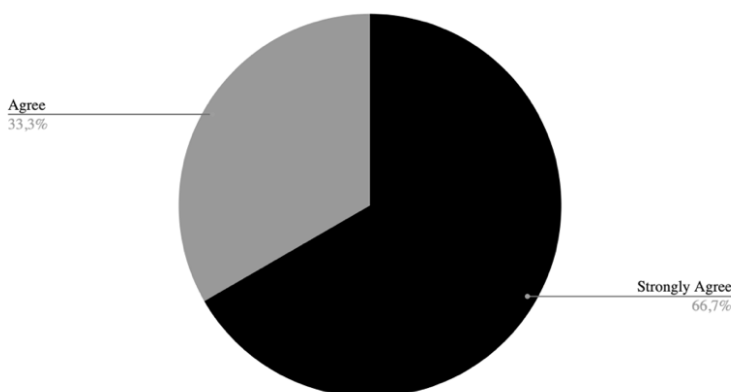


Diagram 5. The Importance of Local Knowledge

"Cirebon Brai Art is one of the local wisdom arts that must be preserved as the identity and character of the Indonesian nation."



The findings confirm the role of local wisdom in contributing to adolescent mental health. This fact supports Carl G. Jung's theory that engagement with local art can evoke positive psychological resonance; a person experiencing mental fragmentation can be healed, and this can give rise—to borrow Jung's terminology—to individuation (a state of spiritual wholeness and balance)(Jung, 1968). Indeed, in the modern context, where people frequently experience identity crises and mental health crises, local art—as Newberg explains—can influence the brain to create a sense of spiritual oneness (Newberg, Andrew, D'Aquili & Rause, 2001).

Meanwhile, if referring to the three fundamental concepts in Sufistic psychology, namely the concept of the soul (*nafs*), the concept of the heart (*qalb*), and the concept of spirituality (Robert Frager, 2014) (Wahyudi, 2018), the involvement of Gen-Z and

Millennials in Brai Cirebon Art indicates the process of internalizing these conceptions. This is seen in a large percentage in these three domains, as illustrated in the following diagram:

Diagram 6. Psychological Aspects (Nafs) 1

"My tendency to be selfish has started to diminish since I joined Seni Brai Cirebon."

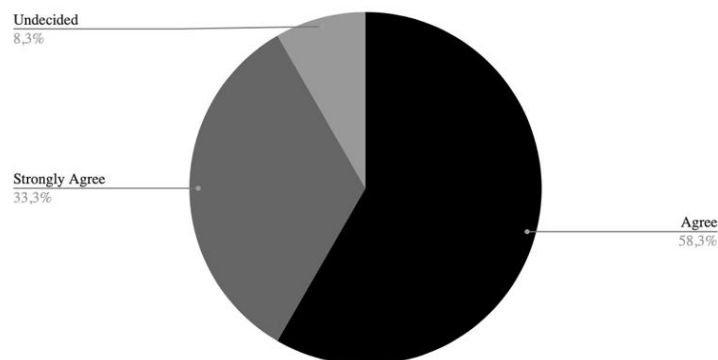


Diagram 7. Psychological Aspects (Nafs) 2

"I used to feel so overwhelmed thinking about the bad things that had happened to me, but then I started to feel a sense of calm after joini..."

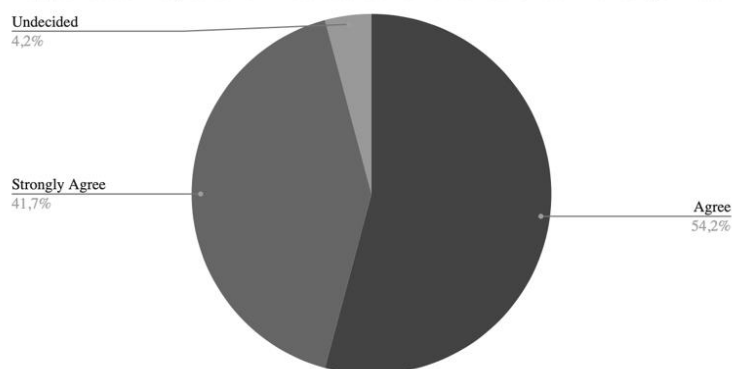
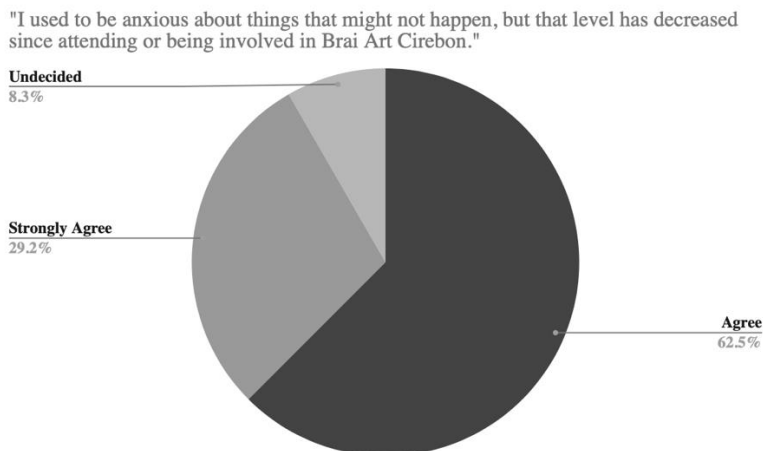


Diagram 8. Psychological Aspects (Nafs) 3



Based on our data above, the youth involved in the practice of Brai Cirebon Art show approval of the influence of this art on their psychological condition. The bad traits and attitudes that bully their souls in the category *of nafs ammarah bil-su'* (the soul that commands to do evil) turned out to have experienced a drastic decline after actively participating in local arts. A total of 58.3% agreed that Brai art can reduce *ananiyyah* (selfishness) attitudes. Usually, referring to the teachings of Sufism, this attitude occurs because a person obeys lust. Then, there are 54.2% who agree that their level of depression decreases if they are present in this art. In addition, there are also 62.5% who agree that their anxiety level decreases after participating in this Brai Art. This condition was acknowledged by a young artist named Alham (24 years old) when following and practicing this Brai Art. He shared his experience as follows:

"I learned about Brai art from a close friend. Strangely enough, I felt more at peace and focused the first time I participated in Brai art. Since then, whenever I've been feeling anxious or worried, I've often taken part in Brai art. In my opinion, practicing Brai art once a week or every two weeks seems to be more beneficial than doing it once every two or three months."

In psychological discourse, we understand that depression and anxiety are two psychiatric symptoms that often afflict a person. This phase, ironically, occurs a lot among youth as mentioned in the World Health Organization (WHO) release (World Health Organization, 2018) that youth in the age range of 15 to 24 years old is a critical phase of the human age; this age is a bridge between adolescence and young adulthood.

It is in this period that youth groups must meet many expectations from various parties, such as their families and social environment. (Purborini et al., 2021). It is not surprising, if poor and negative mental health problems often occur in this phase of youth, such as depressive behavior and anxiety. The findings of the poll (Muhamad, 2024) and the release (Kemenkes BPPK, 2023) related to Indonesia's Gen-Z who are depressed confirm this. Not to mention, if depression and anxiety are associated with digital behavior in cyberspace, many young people are in psychological instability (Poerwandari, 2025). In the midst of such a situation, a number of young people who are members of the Brai Cirebon art choose mental "treatment" to overcome, to borrow a term (Robert Frager, 1999), their tyrannical lust (*nafs ammarah bil-su'*). The content of Brai Cirebon Art, which is indeed full of Sufism speeches and teachings as researched (Aditia Muara Padiarta, 2019) (Jaelani, 2020) has become a "Sufi healing" in this youth group.

Likewise, if we investigate the aspects of healing of the heart (*qalb*) and spirituality in Sufi psychology, we find that the young generation in the Sekar Cirebon Sanggar group experiences positive things. There were 54.2% who agreed that their mood was calmer and more peaceful after participating in the Brai Cirebon Art activity. A number of variable statements that we propose from this aspect of calmness and peace of mind are not only from the mood, but also from the aspect of behavior and actions afterwards; There were 54.2 felt that their empathetic attitude and affection increased after participating in the Cirebon Brai Art. This is shown in the following diagram:

Diagram 9. Aspect of the Heart (Qalb) 1

"My heart feels calm and at peace when I attend, enjoy, or participate in a Brai Cirebon performance."

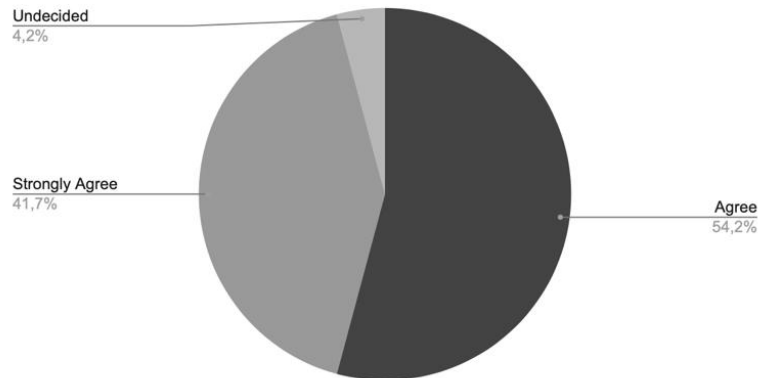
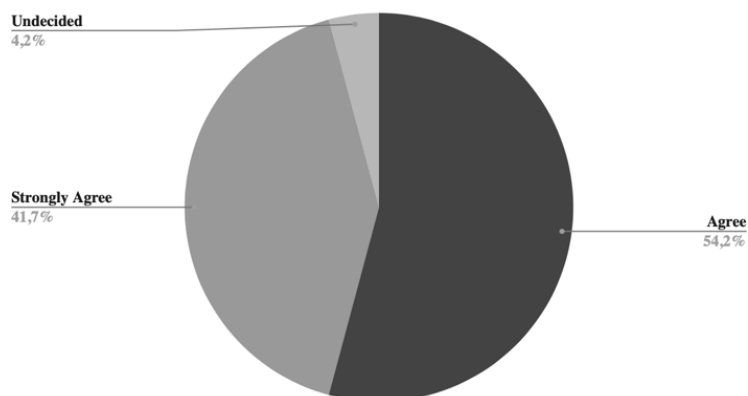


Diagram 10. Aspect of the Heart (Qalb) 2

"When making decisions and taking action, my heart is filled with love and empathy after attending/enjoying/participating in the Seni Brai Cirebon performance"



When referring to the data findings above, we conclude that the art of local wisdom is no longer just a physical performance, but also a means of healing the heart. Someone can transform the heart that was originally full of fear and anxiety over all the problems his/her faces. This proves that the theory of local art contributes to improving mental health and psychiatric problems as written by (White, 2024) (Karkou et al., 2022) is true. Similarly, the transformation of the heart that develops well after being involved in art performances as emphasized by (Lesley & Jaiswal, 2025). From the perspective of Sufistic psychology, a person whose heart has developed better with a state of calm and peace, then he has transformed himself into *nafs muthmainnah* (peaceful and serene soul). This status, of course, is obtained after the

process of refining negative egos and the process of self-regret (*nafs lawwamah*) for all the mistakes and sins that have been committed. Tamsil is interesting to describe this condition as described by Javad Nurbakhsh and quoted (Robert Frager, 1999) as follows:

At first the ruling nafs (tyranny or nafs ammarah bil'su) were governed by fire. When he descends from the realm of fire and becomes a self-blameless nafs (full of regret or nafs lawwamah), he becomes governed by the air. When he descends from the air realm and becomes an inspired nafs, then he is governed by water. When he descends from the water realm and becomes a peaceful nafs (*nafs muthmainnah*), he is governed by the ground, and gains a balance, in which he becomes imbued with humility, self-respect, gentleness and submission. When the vicious and animal qualities of the devil have been transformed into humans, then one will enjoy the common dreams of man, such as believers, zahids, doers of good, upright people, peacemakers, holy people, obedient servants, and peaceful possessors of lust.

One of the basic principles of Sufi psychology, clearly (Robert Frager, 1999), is that this relationship with God is always present in every human being, and therefore, every individual deserves to be treated with respect and compassion. This is also what the young Brai art activists experienced at the Sekar Cirebon Studio. Their spiritual aspects were forged indirectly after participating in this Brai Art. Our data shows 50% strongly agree that these Genz-Z and millennial youth are spiritually improving; their faith increases implicitly. It is not strange if there are 54.2% of votes who strongly agree that the Art of Brai is not just an artistic realm, but also a spiritual realm that transforms oneself, heart, and spirit at the same time. This is seen in the following diagram:

Diagram 11. Spiritual Aspect-1

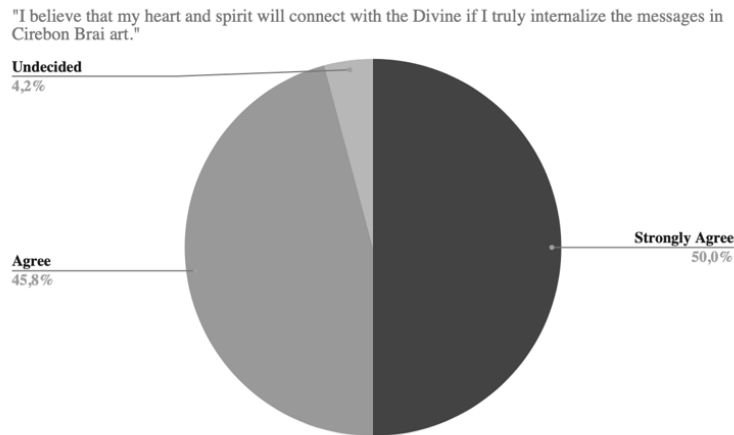


Diagram 12. Spiritual Aspect-2

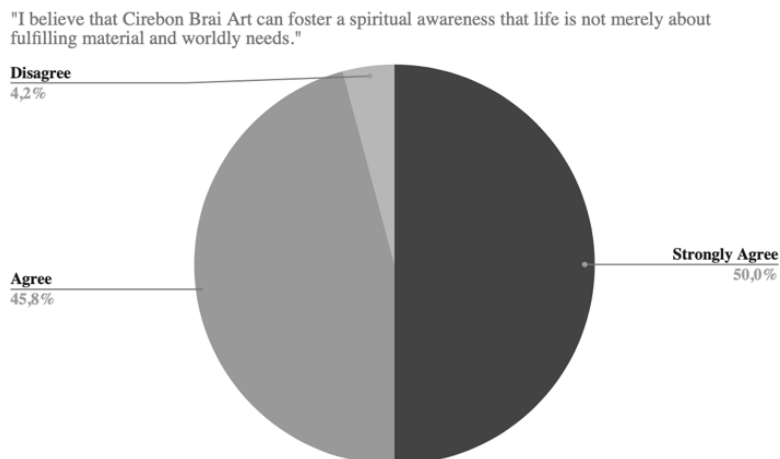


Diagram 13. Aspek Ruhani-3

Indeed, the situation and status of *nafs mutmainnah* experienced by young activists of Brai Cirebon Art are not always constant; There is a process of ups and downs and intertwining to achieve it. Nevertheless, they believe that this local Cirebon art can be a testament to psychological and existential transformation.

The result of this research proves two important aspects: *firstly*, the integration aspect of Sufism and local art; and *secondly*, the Aspects of local wisdom rooted in Sufi teachings as a means of spreading Islam. In the first aspect, youth (Gen-Z and millennials) can actually internalize sufistic values as long as the medium used is in the form of art that they like. Examples of this aspect are not only in our research findings, but also in other research, such

as those studied by (Bimantoro & Jamaluddin Miri, 2024). The research confirms that Sufi Dance (or Whirling Dance) can contribute to enhancing the spiritual intelligence of its practitioners. Studies conducted by Malviya et al also confirm the same thing. That within a religious context, practices such as prayer, singing, and body movements help individuals connect with a higher power, providing a sense of security and fostering a sense of belonging through social connections with fellow believers. Furthermore, the repetition of physical elements—such as the vibratory effects of vocal chanting (mantra) and the regulation of breath—has proven effective in stabilizing the mind, enhancing concentration, and helping individuals achieve a deeper state of self-awareness, which ultimately alleviates anxiety and stress. This reinforces the argument that the integration of Sufism and the arts contributes to a person's mental well-being (Malviya et al., 2025).

And if we delve into the analysis of Sufi psychology as a critical model of previous schools of psychology, the case we are studying shows a representation of the inner reality in the people of Cirebon (also perhaps in other areas in Indonesia) that cannot be separated from religious life. That the approach to analyze the psychological condition of youth in Cirebon is not enough with the general psychological theory tool. Moreover, in the West itself, the tendency of general psychology devices has begun to be criticized, as once emphasized by (Chittick, 2000), (Frager, 1999), (Bozorgzadeh & Grasser, 2022), (Wilcox, 2014), and (Larsen, 2022). Meanwhile, in the second aspect, elements of local wisdom can serve as an alternative medium for outreach to Gen Z and Millennials in conveying the beautiful messages of Islam—free from political and identity-based barriers. Moreover, in the recent context of Indonesia, there has been a rise in the trend of non-moderate Muslim youth due to the instantaneous flow of information and knowledge through various digital media (such as social media) (PPIM UIN Jakarta, 2018), (UIN Jakarta, 2021), (Atamimi et al., 2024), (Yasir et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Based on the above findings, the Brai Cirebon Art which is currently still preserved by the Sanggar Sekar Pusaka not only shows the full value of Sufism as studied by previous studies, but can also become: *first*, the will of strengthening national identity from the aspect of local wisdom as reported; *second*, anticipating the impact of modernity and digital technology that makes the young generation psychologically disoriented, stressed, and

anxious; *Third*, efforts to transform individuals continuously from the aspects of soul, heart, and spirituality in the discourse of Sufistic psychology.

The main contribution of this research lies in the case study of Cirebon Brai Art using a Sufi psychological approach. Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, we also discovered that a region's local wisdom can serve as a model for Sufi healing and Islamic outreach among Gen-Z and millennials. A key consideration for future research is to analyze Seni Brai not only at a single location—Sanggar Sekar Pusaka—but also at several other sites in Cirebon and Indramayu. And due to a lack of public awareness and digital exposure, local art forms in Cirebon, such as Seni Brai, should be a serious priority for policymakers—such as the local government of Cirebon and the West Java Provincial Government—to study further.

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