



An integrated socio-institutional model for visual arts development and policy formulation in Medan, Indonesia



Zulkifli Zulkifli^{a,1,*}, Anam Ibrahim^{a,2}, Azmi Azmi^{a,3}, Barli Kifli^{a,4}, Lanang Riyadi^{a,5}

^a Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia

¹ zulkiflifbs@unimed.ac.id; ² anam@unimed.ac.id; ³ azmits991@gmail.com; ⁴ barlikifli@unimed.ac.id;

⁵ lanangriyadi@unimed.ac.id

* Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

Visual art activities in Medan City, Indonesia, have a long-standing history, yet over the past decade, the ecosystem has experienced a significant decline, indicated by decreasing artist participation, a lack of periodic exhibitions, and underutilized infrastructure. Previous studies have primarily focused on the creative aspects of local cultural identity, leaving a critical research gap regarding the socio-institutional factors and policy frameworks required to sustain the arts ecosystem. This study employs a mixed methods descriptive-qualitative approach to formulate an evidence based development model and policy concept for Medan. Data were collected through observations, surveys of 36 practitioners, and in-depth interviews with 12 key stakeholders. Empirical findings reveal a severe coordination gap among artists, public appreciators, and local government, as well as a lack of physical and digital infrastructure. To address this, we propose an Integrated Socio-Institutional Model that synergizes the domains of creation, presentation, and art research. The novelty of this research lies in shifting the focus from isolated artistic production to a comprehensive, interconnected ecosystem approach that includes digital integration (NFTs). The theoretical contribution expands the sociology of art by embedding municipal policy frameworks, while the practical contribution provides a hierarchical policy blueprint (prioritizing the establishment of a coordinating body and the revitalization of creative centers) to enhance the sustainability and economic impact of Medan's visual arts scene.



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1. Introduction

The city of Medan has a strong historical track record and fundamental potential within the landscape of visual arts development in Indonesia. Applied art practices have been deeply rooted in local traditions for centuries, while the fine arts have developed dynamically since the pre-independence era [1], [2]. Despite its solid historical foundation, the visual arts ecosystem in Medan has experienced a significant decline in activity over the past decade. This phenomenon stands in stark contrast to established art hubs in Indonesia, such as Yogyakarta and Padang, which continue to demonstrate the resilience of their ecosystems through the organization of national-scale exhibitions, active public participation, and the optimal utilization of creative spaces [3]–[6]. Indicators of this decline in Medan are evident in the scarcity of consistently operating exhibition spaces (galleries), the low intensity of appreciative interactions between artists and the public, and the absence of institutionalized strategic coordination between arts practitioners and the local government. This stagnation indicates structural weaknesses in cultural governance at the urban level, which calls for a comprehensive investigation. In recent years, academic discourse on the development of visual arts in North Sumatra has largely remained focused on the social aspects of artistic creation,

particularly on how artists respond to and represent local cultural identities. Previous studies, have largely explored the integration of cultural values and traditional aesthetics into contemporary paintings and crafts by urban communities [7], [8]. On the other hand, related research has also largely highlighted the individual creative processes of artists as they navigate the challenges of a lack of support from the art market [9]–[11]. Although these studies provide valuable insights into the dynamics of creative production and the preservation of identity, the current literature generally remains descriptive and fragmented. These studies tend to focus exclusively on artworks as isolated end products, thereby neglecting the institutional, managerial, and supporting infrastructure elements that are, in fact, the main pillars in maintaining the sustainability of a visual arts ecosystem [12], [13].

Although there have been various studies on the visual arts in this region, a crucial research gap remains. Previous research has not systematically examined the relationships and interconnections among the three main spheres of the art ecosystem: (1) the sphere of creation (production by artists); (2) the sphere of presentation (distribution through galleries, museums, and exhibition spaces); (3) and the sphere of art research (education, archiving, and art criticism) within the sociocultural context of Medan. Amid technological disruption and global demands for creativity, the art ecosystem in Medan has proven slow to adopt contemporary digital-virtual technologies (Industry 4.0), such as the use of virtual galleries or the integration of artworks with Non-Fungible Token (NFT) technology [14], [15]. The absence of a socio-institutional development model that bridges stakeholders, combined with slow digital adaptation, has resulted in the visual arts ecosystem in Medan becoming unsustainable. Addressing these issues, this study offers a novel approach by mapping visual art activities in Medan not merely as a collection of artistic products, but as a holistic, comprehensive, and interdependent socio-institutional ecosystem. Theoretically, this study contributes to expanding the discourse on the sociology of art and urban cultural governance by integrating the dimension of digital transformation as a key variable in regional art development models. Practically, this research formulates a measurable, hierarchical policy framework for policymakers in Medan. The proposed socio-institutional model is expected to serve as a blueprint for revitalizing creative infrastructure, optimizing institutional governance, and accelerating the sustainable growth of the creative economy in the visual arts sector.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative method, a common approach in cultural arts and humanities research. The research was framed within art sociology, utilizing both synchronic and diachronic perspectives [16], [17]. The synchronic approach allowed for analyzing visual art development in Medan within a specific time frame, capturing current patterns, institutions, and social dynamics. Meanwhile, the diachronic approach examined changes in the visual art scene over time, drawing from both retrospective and prospective insights. These frameworks were enriched by perspectives from historical studies, artistic creativity theory, and visual culture, acknowledging that visual art practice is inherently tied to social and cultural movements [17]–[19]. As such, the research does not treat art as isolated objects of study but as socio-cultural phenomena evolving with public discourse, infrastructure, and policy.

2.2. Sampling and Ethics

Participants and informants for this study were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure they possessed profound knowledge and direct involvement in Medan's visual arts ecosystem. Prioritizing research integrity, ethical clearance and informed consent were obtained from all participants prior to data collection, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive data, five primary techniques were used: (1) Literature Review. A systematic review of scholarly literature, policy documents, and historical records was conducted to understand past and present trends in Medan's visual art landscape; (2) Field

Observation. Observations were conducted at art venues across Medan, including local galleries, community art events, and institutional spaces (UNIMED's Fine Arts Department). A structured observation sheet was used to record consistent elements across sites regarding spatial arrangements, participation levels, and audience engagement; (3) Documentation. Primary documents such as exhibition catalogs, artist CVs, event posters, photo archives, and urban cultural maps were collected to support a chronological reconstruction of artistic activities; (4) Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 key informants: 4 senior artists associated with SIMPASSRI, 3 art educators from UNIMED, 2 independent curators, and 3 cultural policymakers. Interviews were conducted in person and online via Zoom (30–60 minutes each), recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically; and (5) Survey Distribution. A short-answer questionnaire was distributed to 36 art observers and practitioners in Medan. The survey contained 10 concise questions about perceptions of the local art scene and the potential for institutional development.

2.4. Data Analysis and Integration

Data were analyzed using a descriptive-qualitative technique following Miles and Huberman's interactive model: data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification [20]. Qualitative coding was performed iteratively, and survey data were quantified to provide descriptive statistical support for the thematic findings. The diachronic analysis focused on mapping temporal shifts in Medan's visual art scene, while the synchronic analysis compared the present art ecosystem with those of other regional cities such as Padang and Yogyakarta. The baseline data used for this regional comparison were derived from recent national cultural index reports by the Ministry of Education and Culture and peer-reviewed journals detailing the arts ecosystems in West Sumatra and Java.

2.5. Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

To ensure the rigor and credibility of the research, stringent validation measures were applied. The trustworthiness of qualitative data was ensured through source triangulation (comparing interviews, observations, and policy documents) and member checking. For the survey instrument, content validity was reviewed by two experts in arts management. This comprehensive validation and integration process ensured that the formulated development model and policy concepts were firmly grounded in empirical evidence.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of efforts and strategies for the development of artistic activities in Medan, supported by empirical findings derived from literature reviews, field observations, documentation, interviews, and surveys. It formulates an alternative development model and outlines a hierarchical policy concept. The discussion reflects the application of both synchronic and diachronic approaches, integrating historical depth and present-day contextual analysis within the framework of art sociology.

3.1. Empirical Conditions and Infrastructure Gaps

The vitality of visual arts activities in a region is fundamentally shaped by the dialectical interaction between artists as cultural producers and the public as audiences, appreciators, and collectors. Within the social realm of art, artistic production cannot operate in a vacuum of isolation but must be sustained through a continuous network of reception, circulation, and validation [21]. This reciprocal relationship forms the primary foundation of what Pierre Bourdieu conceptualized as the cultural field [22]–[24]. Within this field, the symbolic and economic value of a work of art is constructed through institutional recognition and active public engagement. When a work of art is accepted, appreciated, and acquired by collectors or cultural institutions, the artist gains not only moral legitimacy but also material sustainability that fosters ongoing artistic productivity. However, empirical data collected through observations and surveys of 36 art practitioners in Medan reveal a massive disconnect in the relationship between creators and appreciators. Based on the results of a quantitative survey, 78% of respondents stated that policy support and the provision of visual arts infrastructure by local governments currently fall into the “highly inadequate” category. This situation is exacerbated by data from local gallery managers indicating that the average monthly number

of visitors to visual arts exhibitions has dropped drastically by up to 40% over the past five years. The economic implications of this decline are significant, with 65% of surveyed artists reporting a sharp drop in sales of their works and lamenting the loss of state-funded periodic exhibitions. These physical and structural limitations are a tangible manifestation of infrastructure barriers that threaten the material foundation of the art ecosystem [25]–[27]. Through field observations, it was found that art studios and workshops (which have historically served as cultural laboratories where the transmission of artistic knowledge and values takes place) are now in a state of dormancy or are not being utilized optimally [27], [28]. A systematic summary of the empirical conditions of this infrastructure is presented in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Field Observations of Major Art Spaces in Medan

Location / Venue	Infrastructure Conditions	Level of Activity
North Sumatra Cultural Park (TBSU)	Poor; exhibition lighting is severely inadequate; many display panels and room partitions are damaged.	Low: Hosts fewer than three major visual art exhibitions per year.
UNIMED Fine Arts Gallery	Fairly well-maintained under academic management, but physical space capacity is very limited for public-scale events.	Moderate: Dominated by student project exhibitions; minimal involvement of external artists.
SIMPASSRI Art Studio	A historic building suffering from physical deterioration; lacks digital facilities and modern archiving systems.	Very Low: Routine exhibition activities have been virtually nonexistent over the past two years.

To provide a clearer geographical overview, the spatial distribution of these fragmented art spaces is mapped in Fig. 1.



Fig 1. Spatial mapping of art studios and exhibition spaces in Medan City

While visual documentation of physical infrastructure damage at the observation sites is presented in Fig. 2.

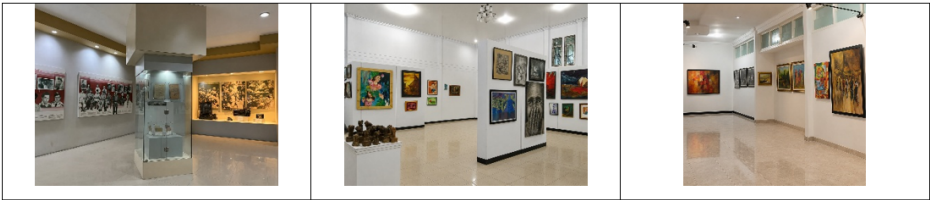


Fig 2. Photographic evidence of the infrastructure conditions at the North Sumatra Cultural Park Gallery, the UNIMED Fine Arts Gallery, and the Simplassri Art Studio (from left to right)

The psychological and professional impacts of this structural isolation are reflected in the profound statement of one of the field informants: “There is a great void when your work simply piles up in the studio without ever engaging with the public. Without an audience, you as an artist begin to question the relevance of your social existence” (Informant B1, Art Lecturer, Interview, May 2025).

3.2. Stakeholder Synergy and Urban Exhibition Strategies

The decline in the visibility of artistic activities in the city of Medan, viewed from a diachronic perspective, is strongly correlated with the reduction in decentralized cultural governance at the city level since 2010; a trend further exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [29], [30]. The main recurring obstacle is sectoral egoism and the fragmentation of collaboration among independent artists, academics (particularly the Department of Fine Arts at UNIMED), government agencies, and the private sector. To address this fragmentation, an urban exhibition strategy is needed that tactically utilizes public spaces. Urban cultural identity can be symbolically activated through the utilization of cultural heritage spaces within the framework of tourism and the creative economy [15]. The city of Medan possesses extraordinary historical assets, such as the Kesawan cultural heritage zone and Merdeka Square, which can be repositioned as hubs for visual art exhibitions. The involvement of the local government is crucial in providing regulatory access and basic restoration for these historic buildings so they can be transformed into hybrid exhibition spaces.

The importance of large-scale periodic exhibitions, such as biennales, cannot be overlooked either. Periodic exhibitions serve as “cultural accelerators” that stimulate artistic production, spark critical discourse, enhance artist mobility, and attract new collectors [31]. In a survey, more than 85% of participants expressed strong support for the establishment of the Medan Biennale, with 65% of them affirming that the event would significantly improve the public’s art literacy. This increase in literacy is key, as a sustainable art market relies heavily on an informed audience capable of recognizing the aesthetic value of a work [14]. The market potential from the private sector is actually enormous but remains untapped, as confirmed by a source: “On several occasions, local hotel and café owners have come and purchased works for their interiors. This proves that the private sector is ready to act as a patron, provided the government can facilitate a representative meeting space in the city center” (Informant A1, Art Lecturer, Interview, May 2025). Plans to build a modern public art gallery near Merdeka Square must be guided by professional curatorial expertise. A total of 72% of survey respondents also support this future gallery’s inclusive integration of works by students and educators. The process of art creation must also be brought closer to the public (for example, by moving UNIMED’s fine arts practice classes to open areas around Kesawan at specific times) in order to dismantle the elitism of art and make it an integral part of city residents’ lives.

3.3. Digital-Virtual Expansion and NFT Integration

Amid massive limitations in physical infrastructure in the city of Medan, the adoption of digital-virtual tools offers transformative opportunities for the democratization of art creation and dissemination. This phenomenon marks the emergence of a dual cultural space, where artistic practices operate simultaneously in both material (physical) and immaterial (digital) environments [32]. Digital technology has proven capable of restructuring the social relations of art by enabling artists to bypass the convoluted paths of traditional gatekeepers (such as conventional gallery owners or cultural bureaucrats) while connecting directly to global cultural networks [33]. It is important to clarify empirically that the inclusion of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) and virtual galleries in this study is not merely a theoretical addition by the author, but a concrete finding from field research. Based on in-depth interviews with young creators in Medan, it was found that several local digital artists have been actively minting and selling their works on global blockchain platforms. This shift in *modus operandi* was driven by a survival strategy; with physical galleries in Medan virtually nonexistent and institutional support minimal, the crypto digital asset market has become a realistic alternative economic channel for them to reach international collectors without geographical boundaries. This newfound freedom is reflected in a statement from one informant: “I no longer depend on the availability of bureaucratic exhibition spaces in Medan. Instagram and NFT platforms have become my gallery, curator, archive, and base of international collectors” (Informant D3, Digital Illustrator, Interview, May 2025). Therefore, the development model proposed in this study must be hybrid; recognizing that physical and virtual spaces do not negate one another but rather complement each other to mitigate the geographical disadvantages faced by artists in regional areas.

3.4. Integrated Socio-Institutional Model

Based on the synthesis of all the empirical findings above, this study formulates an Integrated Socio-Institutional Model for the development of the visual arts in Medan. This model divides artistic activities into three interlocking main domains: the domain of creation, the domain of presentation, and the domain of appreciation/research. These three domains operate on a foundation of physical and non-physical infrastructure and are catalyzed by digital modalities (Industry 4.0). The logical flow of this simplified model is visualized in Fig. 3.

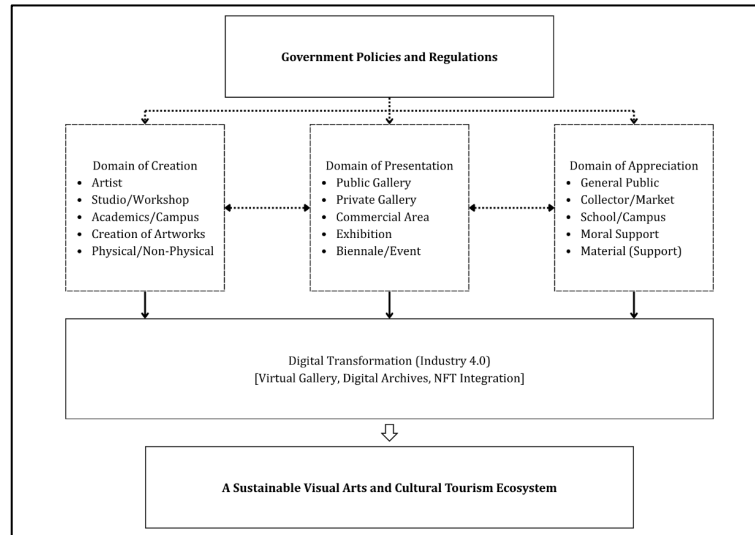


Fig 3. Logical Framework of the Integrated Socio-Institutional Model for the Development of Visual Arts in Medan

This model emphasizes that uneven activation in just one domain (continuously producing artists in the creation domain without providing exhibition spaces in the presentation domain) will only lead to the stagnation of the ecosystem. Therefore, all components must be driven synchronously and maintained diachronically through binding regulations.

3.5. A Hierarchical Policy Framework for the Development of the Visual Arts

To translate the above model into concrete action plans for the City Government of Medan, this study outlines a policy framework structured into a hierarchy of priorities based on timeline urgency:

- **Short-Term Priorities (Institutional Coordination & Physical Revitalization):** The most urgent step is the establishment of the Medan Art Development Forum (MADF) as an official collective body that bridges communication between the Department of Culture, UNIMED academics, and representatives of the arts community. Simultaneously, the government must immediately allocate tactical funding for the physical revitalization of damaged basic infrastructure at the North Sumatra Cultural Park (TBSU) and SIMPASSRI (repairs to exhibition spotlights, air conditioning, and display panels) to restore their minimum operational functions.
- **Medium-Term Priorities (Digital Integration & Spatial Activation):** Policies in this phase focus on expanding spaces through technological tools and urban adaptation. Local governments must facilitate certified workshops on digital asset management, virtual curation, and the use of NFTs for local artists. At the same time, legal regulations must be enacted to permit the use of historic buildings along the Kesawan corridor as hybrid (commercial-cultural) exhibition spaces through partnership schemes with private property owners.
- **Long-Term Priorities (Institutionalization of the Biennale & Regional Museum):** The final phase aims to permanently secure the sustainability of the ecosystem through legal channels. The Medan City Government needs to formulate and enact a Local Regulation (Cultural Regulation) that guarantees a specific annual budget allocation for the periodic organization of the Medan Biennale. The culmination of this policy hierarchy is a political

commitment to establish an independent and professional Regional Fine Arts Museum in Medan, which will serve as a center for conservation and the archiving of the region's aesthetic history, while also acting as the primary driving force for cultural tourism based on the creative economy.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the stagnation of Medan's visual arts scene is rooted in a systemic disconnect among the domains of creation, presentation, and art research, compounded by severe infrastructural and policy deficits. In response, this research introduces an Integrated Socio-Institutional Model that shifts the paradigm from analyzing isolated artistic products to evaluating the entire arts ecosystem. The novelty of this model lies in its integration of physical infrastructure development with contemporary digital realities, such as virtual spaces and NFTs. Theoretically, this study enriches the sociology of art by demonstrating how municipal policy frameworks are critical in sustaining cultural ecosystems in emerging urban centers. Practically, we propose a hierarchical policy blueprint prioritizing the immediate establishment of the Medan Art Development Forum (MADF), followed by the revitalization of creative centers. A limitation of this study is its constrained geographical focus and sample size; future research should longitudinally assess the economic and tourism impacts of these implemented policies across a broader demographic.

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Declarations

- Author contribution** : Study conceptualization and design: Z., A.I.; Methodology and data analysis: A.A., L.R.; Field investigation and data collection: Z., A.I., L.R.; Writing, initial draft: Z., B.K., L.R.; Writing—review, editing, and critical evaluation of the manuscript.
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- Conflict of interest** : The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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