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Creativity as a socially negotiated practice: A systematic review of ethnographic evidence

La creatividad como práctica negociada socialmente: una revisión sistemática de la evidencia etnográfica

A criatividade como prática socialmente negociada: uma revisão sistemática de evidências etnográficas

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is often viewed as a positive and individual phenomenon, obscuring its role in maintaining social hierarchies. This article investigates how the discourse of creativity can be a site of ideological dispute, analyzing how social groups mobilize it as a symbolic, political, or economic resource. We conducted a systematic literature review following the PRISMA protocol, resulting in a qualitative metasynthesis of 13 ethnographic studies published between January 2014 and May 2025. Findings reveal three central dynamics: the reinforcement of the creative status quo by dominant groups; the construction of alternative validation systems by subalternized groups or their attempt to integrate into the hegemonic discourse of creativity; and the cooperation among different groups, transcending hierarchical boundaries. It is concluded that, based on the analyzed studies, creativity is not a universal and apolitical attribute, but a negotiated order, whose value and meaning are in permanent negotiation.

Keywords: creativity, ethnography, sociocultural studies, ideology, systematic review.

RESUMEN

La creatividad es a menudo vista como un fenómeno positivo e individual, lo que oculta su papel en el mantenimiento de las jerarquías sociales. Este artículo investiga cómo el discurso de la creatividad puede ser un lugar de disputa ideológica, analizando cómo los grupos sociales lo movilizan como un recurso simbólico, político o económico. Llevamos a cabo una revisión sistemática de la literatura siguiendo el protocolo PRISMA, lo que resultó en una metasíntesis cualitativa de 13 estudios etnográficos publicados entre enero de 2014 y mayo de 2025. Los hallazgos revelan tres dinámicas centrales: el refuerzo del statu quo creativo por parte de los grupos dominantes; la construcción de sistemas de validación alternativos por parte de grupos subalternizados o su intento de integrarse en el discurso hegemónico de la creatividad; y la cooperación entre diferentes grupos, trascendiendo las fronteras jerárquicas. Se concluye que, basándose en los estudios analizados, la creatividad no es un atributo universal y apolítico, sino un orden negociado, cuyo valor y significado están en permanente negociación.

Palabras clave: creatividad, etnografía, estudios socioculturales, ideología, revisión sistemática.

RESUMO

A criatividade é frequentemente vista como um fenômeno positivo e individual, obscurecendo seu papel na manutenção de hierarquias sociais. Este artigo investiga como o discurso da criatividade pode ser um campo de disputa ideológica, analisando como grupos sociais a mobilizam como um recurso simbólico, político ou econômico. Foi conduzida uma revisão sistemática de literatura seguindo o protocolo PRISMA, resultando em uma metassíntese qualitativa de 13 estudos etnográficos publicados entre janeiro de 2014 e maio de 2025. Os resultados revelam três dinâmicas centrais: o reforço do status quo criativo por grupos dominantes; a construção de sistemas de validação alternativos por grupos subalternizados ou suas tentativas em integrar-se ao discurso hegemônico de criatividade; e a cooperação entre diferentes grupos, transcendendo fronteiras hierárquicas. Conclui-se, com base nos estudos analisados, que a criatividade não é um atributo universal e apolítico, mas uma ordem negociada, cujo valor e significado estão em permanente negociação.

Palavras-chave: criatividade, etnografia, estudos socioculturais, ideologia, revisão sistemática.

1 Introduction

Creativity stands as a central theme in research on human development. Seminal studies have long addressed it as a fundamental psychological element for cognitive development, self-preservation, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1959; Winnicott, 1990). A significant part of the scientific literature highlights two primary understandings of the concept:

(a) A broad sense, viewing creativity as inherent to human nature and present whenever an individual imagines, generates ideas, or solves problems (e.g., new concept of creativity, cf. Elliott, 1971; personal creativity, cf. Runco, 1996; psychological creativity, cf. Boden, 2004; everyday creativity, cf. Richards, 2007); and

(b) A strict sense, which links it to individual talent, valuing original and innovative ideas within a specific society and culture (Amabile, 2013; traditional concept of creativity, cf. Elliott, 1971; Big-C creativity, cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; historical creativity, cf. Boden, 2004).

However, while these definitions address individual potential and cognition, academic inquiry has increasingly expanded to examine the systemic forces that frame these processes. Since the second half of the 20th century, the humanities have consolidated the approach to creativity as a socially situated phenomenon, a continuous, collective process of transforming cultural practices (Becker, 1982; Sawyer, 2012). This procedural and relational perspective permeates several seminal texts that investigate the conditions and possibilities of creativity, even where not addressing it as their central theme. While analyses of the struggles within the social field (Bourdieu, 1979, 1982), the material conditions of production (Williams, 1977), and systems of artistic validation (Wolff, 1981) delineated its structural foundations, studies on the suspension of social structure (Turner *et al.*, 1969), interdependence in cultural production (Becker, 1982), and processes of engagement with the world (Ingold, 2013) highlighted its interactional and material dynamics.

In the pursuit of a sociology of creativity, literature reviews have predominantly focused on the conceptual aspects of the phenomenon (Burns *et al.*, 2015; Godart *et al.*, 2020). This emphasis on theoretical construction, however, has not been matched by an equivalent effort to organize empirical knowledge. Searches in high-impact international databases, such as Scopus

and Web of Science, reveal a scarcity of systematic reviews on creativity based on studies with ethnographic approaches and a sociocultural focus. This gap becomes more evident when compared to the abundance of reviews that have analyzed this phenomenon from predominantly functional or cognitive perspectives, found mainly in the fields of education, the arts, psychology, economics, and management. This significant gap in the literature highlights the lack of work that articulates creative expression as a practice situated in local communities. It is precisely in these contexts that creativity manifests as a distributed, relational, and deeply contextual phenomenon (Glăveanu, 2013; Sawyer & Henriksen, 2024). As Glăveanu (2013) suggests with the "5 A's" framework (Actors, Audiences, Artifacts, Affordances, and Actions), creative expression cannot be understood separately from the material and social environments that afford or constrain it. The sociocultural interpretation of these realities thus allows us to understand how this phenomenon can be mobilized to construct identities and meanings in collective life.

However, the importance of such a synthesis transcends the mere organization of knowledge. The hegemonic narrative on creativity tends to obscure its role in the production and maintenance of social hierarchies. Frequently, creativity is framed as an inherently positive force, disconnected from the power relations and sociocultural structures that influence it. This view obscures how defining what is "creative" and who is "creative" constitutes a powerful mechanism of social distinction and legitimation. Through this systematic review, we propose to highlight recent studies with ethnographic approaches on these aspects, starting from the premise that the discourse of creativity is permeated by a constant ideological negotiation between individuals and/or groups. In this process, the construction of the creative subject transcends the psychological sphere to produce and legitimize worldviews and systems of values and beliefs associated with the socioeconomic contexts in which this subject is integrated. The study of this phenomenon therefore implies the intersection of multiple discourses that define what it means to be, think, and act creatively. Instead of asking "how much" creativity individuals possess, we ask: How is creativity socially constructed, validated, and negotiated in specific cultural contexts? We place multidisciplinary investigations in dialogue to discern the transversal patterns and contrasts emerging from empirical data.

2 Methods

This study adopts a Qualitative Metasynthesis (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007) design conducted within a Systematic Review framework, following the guidelines outlined in the PRISMA 2020 statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). We searched for articles published between January 2014 and May 2025 in the Scopus and Web of Science databases, as they are widely recognized bibliographic databases in scientific literature with a multidisciplinary scope and rigorous indexing criteria. Both platforms offer extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals from various publishers, making them appropriate to ensure the breadth and methodological quality required in systematic reviews. The time frame of the research was defined to analyze the most contemporary scientific production on the topic. Literature reviews, book reviews, purely theoretical essays, conference abstracts, books, and book chapters were excluded (see Records removed for other reasons: n= 131, Figure 1). This decision is based on the eligibility and exclusion criteria specified in the SPICE strategy described in Table 1 and the guidelines of the PRISMA-P protocol, which prioritizes transparency and the study's replicability. This approach prevented the inclusion of scattered, non-indexed texts, ensuring the review's systematic rigor. Although significant to the study of creativity, we did not include purely quantitative, experimental, or laboratory-based research. Our aim was to capture the ecological validity of creative practices, examining how participants qualitatively experience and interpret them within their local contexts. Considering that research on creativity frequently uses related concepts, the search strategy was designed to capture both the explicit and implicit terminology of the phenomenon. To this end, we structured two conceptual blocks of keywords:

Conceptual Block 1 (Phenomenon): Terms related to the processes and manifestations of creativity. Keywords: creativity, inventiveness, improvisation, poiesis, cultural production.

Conceptual Block 2 (Methodology): Terms related to the ethnographic approach. Keywords: ethnography, fieldwork, participant observation, case study, grounded theory, action research, autoethnography, visual ethnography, digital ethnography, netnography, sensory ethnography.

The final search string was constructed by combining the terms from each block with the Boolean operator OR, and then connecting the two blocks with the AND operator. Truncation techniques (*) and quotation marks (“ ”) were used to optimize search sensitivity and precision. In line with best practices for systematic reviews, a complementary search was conducted in Google Scholar. The objective of this step was not to be exhaustive (an unfeasible task on that platform), but to serve as a methodological safeguard. This strategy aimed to mitigate the risk of omitting relevant studies not indexed in the primary databases. The search was limited to the first 150 results because (1) Google Scholar’s relevance algorithm concentrates the most cited and relevant articles on the first pages, and (2) a clear saturation point was reached within this sample. This was evidenced by the repetition of articles already found in the main search and a sharp decline in the relevance of subsequent results, confirming the comprehensiveness of our primary search. To ensure transparency and reproducibility, the complete search strings, adapted for the syntax of each database, are detailed in the Appendix. The initial search yielded 2,611 records, which were imported into Zotero for management and deduplication (n=71). The screening of titles and abstracts (n=2,409) was performed by three independent reviewers under the supervision of a lead reviewer. To ensure consistent and reliable application of the eligibility criteria, a rigorous consensus process was implemented, consisting of three main stages:

(a) Calibration sessions, where reviewers aligned their interpretation of the criteria and resolved ambiguities;

(b) Consensus meetings, where all disagreements were systematically recorded and discussed with justifications provided by each reviewer; and

(c) Final arbitration by the lead reviewer in the rare cases where consensus could not be reached, with the justification being formally documented.

A verification protocol with specific indicators was developed to ensure the consistency and rigor of the screening process. This approach transformed the general inclusion criteria (items A1, A2, A3, and A5 in Table 1) into a set of observable requirements, cumulatively meeting the following requirements:

(a) Explicit Contextual Analysis: The study should not merely describe a creative product or practice, but explicitly analyze how these were constructed, perceived, and valued within a specific sociocultural context;

(b) Connection to Sociocultural Context: The studies were required to demonstrate the interplay between the creative actor and their social environment. This involves analyzing how creativity is embedded in cultural practices, mobilizes group identities, navigates social hierarchies, or reshapes local belief systems;

(c) Empirical Grounding: The sociocultural insights needed to be substantiated by concrete field evidence, including participant narratives and observed interactions, to avoid reliance on unsupported theoretical assumptions.

Table 1. SPICE strategy applied in this study

	Inclusion Criteria	**Exclusion Criteria**
SPICE Element	**Application in the context of the screenings**	
Setting	(A1) Studies conducted in naturalistic settings where data were collected through field observations and interactions.	(B1) Studies conducted in controlled environments (e.g., laboratories, simulations).
Perspective	(A2) Studies involving participants aged 18 years or older.	(B2) Studies involving participants aged 17 years or younger.
Intervention	(A3) Studies that focus on the impact of sociocultural values and beliefs on creative behavior.	(B3) Studies with an exclusively psychological focus, that lack a sociocultural context, or whose approach to creativity does not align with the central objective of this review.
Comparison	(A4) Studies that conduct comparisons between different groups, contexts, or perspectives. (Note: This is a feature to be noted, not a mandatory inclusion criterion).	(B4) The absence of comparison is not a reason for exclusion.
Evaluation	(A5) Studies that report relevant qualitative outcomes, such as perceptions, meanings attributed to creativity, lived experiences, or narratives emerging from the observed cultural practices.	(B5) Studies reporting purely quantitative results (e.g., scores, statistics, scale-based questionnaires, etc.).

Source: Developed by the authors.

Acknowledging that criterion A3 (the explicit connection between creativity and sociocultural values/beliefs) contained an interpretive element, we adopted a narrative and systematic process to manage this subjectivity and ensure a transparent and replicable act of judgment. This process was operationalized through a detailed scoring rubric, a 'codebook' with anchor studies that served as concrete examples of inclusion and exclusion, and continuous calibration sessions to ensure inter-reviewer consistency. Disagreements were not only resolved by consensus but also documented to create an internal precedent that guided subsequent decisions. Therefore, the number of exclusions (n=46) was designed to isolate a highly specific body of evidence aligned with the research objectives.

In this same screening stage, texts that met one or more of the exclusion criteria (items B1, B2, B3, or B5 in Table 1) were discarded. In accordance with criteria B1 and B3, and given the abundance of existing literature focusing on performance metrics within strictly educational or corporate environments, we narrowed our scope to prioritize underrepresented contexts. Therefore, strictly functional studies focused on outcome measurement (e.g., test scores, economic ROI) were excluded to allow for a deeper analysis of sociocultural dynamics and lived experience. The focus on the adult population (A2) allowed for an in-depth analysis of how individuals navigate, negotiate, and contest these structures in domains where they are well-established, such as the world of work and formal community practices. In this screening, 2,271 abstracts were excluded.

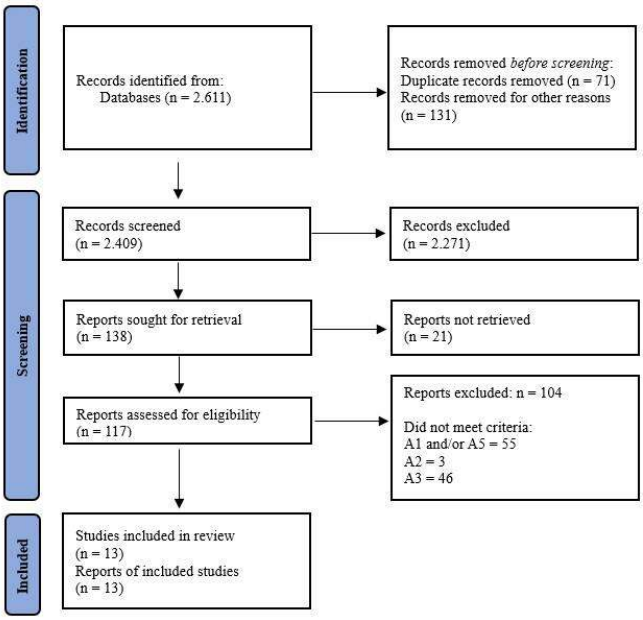
The 138 studies that advanced to the next screening stage were retrieved for full-text reading. Efforts were made to locate unavailable texts, including searching repositories and contacting authors directly (n=21). During this screening, we excluded 104 articles that, upon in-depth analysis, did not meet the inclusion criteria [A1, A2, A3, and A5]. These were inadequacies that could not be identified from reading the abstract alone. For the studies that successfully completed both screening phases, the process moved to the data extraction stage. The extraction form, based on the review protocol, was validated through a pilot test in which a subset of five articles was analyzed independently by the reviewers to refine the instrument and ensure collection consistency.

All studies were subjected to the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Qualitative Research (2017), which assessed their methodological quality

and the extent to which bias was addressed in their design, conduct, and analysis. Two independent reviewers individually applied the ten criteria of the checklist, and then the team met to discuss their evaluations, resolve disagreements, and reach a consensus. The purpose of this assessment was not to exclude studies but to conduct a descriptive analysis of the quality of the body of evidence. All selected studies met the pre-established quality threshold of 50% of the criteria, indicating a high methodological standard in the sample.

In total, 13 studies were included in this review. The study selection process is summarized in the flow diagram in Figure 1:

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram illustrating the systematic review selection process



Source: Developed by the authors.

The rigorous selection strategy resulted in a focused corpus of high-quality ethnographic studies. This sample size is consistent with the requirements of qualitative metasynthesis, which prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical breadth (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The specific intersection of criteria highlights a nascent but critical turn in the field towards ecological validity.

3 Findings

The disciplinary diversity of the analyzed studies, which range from fields of knowledge such as anthropology and cultural studies to areas like design and the sociology of art, mirrors the multifaceted nature of the discourse on creativity. However, beyond this breadth, the synthesis of these works reveals a cross-cutting pattern: social practices construct and mobilize creativity as an ideological resource, whose value and meaning are constantly negotiated and disputed among individuals, groups, and communities. Table 2 presents a summary of the 13 studies included in this review, detailing their authors, focuses, geographical/cultural context, and analytical approaches:

Table 2. Summary of Studies with an Ethnographic Approach Included in the Review

Authors	**Study Focus**	**Geographical and/ or cultural context**	**Analytical approaches**
Aruna L (2022)	The research investigates the historical origins, cultural significance, and relationship between the Kolam dance and the caste hierarchy in Sri Lankan society.	Ambalangoda region, located on the southwest coast of Sri Lanka.	Interpretive philosophy and historical-ethnographic methods.
Chen H. (2021)	Paiwanese aesthetic expression and its social values. Analysis of rituals and garments in aristocratic wedding ceremonies.	Sandimen village, Taiwan; Paiwanese indigenous people (Ravar subgroup). Stratified Paiwanese society, divided into aristocrats (known as *mamazangilan*) and commoners (called *taqaljaljan*).	Theoretical analysis centered on the Anthropology of Art, with an emphasis on functionalist and symbolic perspectives.
DeNicola AO (2016)	Analysis of how Geographical Indication (GI) affected the relationship between manual block-printing artisans and urban designers.	City of Bagru, a center for textile printing in northern India.	Semiotic analysis.

...Continuation | Table 2. Summary of Studies with an Ethnographic Approach Included in the Review

Isiani MC *et al.* (2023)	The study analyzes how the creativity of sacred Igbo sculptures (Ikenga and Ofo) is threatened with extinction by discourses that label them as "primitive" and "fetishistic."	Communities in the Nsukka area (Nigeria). Study of artifacts produced by the Igbo society.	Analysis guided by Social Representation Theory.
Jaramillo-Vazquez A (2019)	Examination of how creativity is collectively produced in a community arts organization.	Mexico City, Mexico; Community arts organization in a disadvantaged area.	Montage theory.
Malm T (2020)	To understand how learning occurs within a rock band and how this process contributes to its organizational development.	Sweden; the rock band studied, "Popbandet," achieved a certain level of local success, playing on Swedish National Radio channels.	Communities of practice (CoP) theory; social constructivism and organization theory; activity theory.
Ness IJ and Riese H (2015)	To investigate how knowledge is constructed in the interaction between different disciplines in multidisciplinary groups, and to identify the relational conditions that allow this process to occur.	Bergen, Norway; organizational and professional culture of highly specialized sectors in Norway, specifically in the areas of research and the oil and gas industry.	Historical-Cultural Perspective; Relational Expertise; Common Knowledge.
Rosihan M and Aris A (2022)	To analyze the influence of cultural values on the creativity of fashion designers and the elements that contribute to the enhancement of this creativity.	Klang Valley, Malaysia.	Sociocultural Perspective; Flow Theory; Self-Concept and Identity.

...Continuation | Table 2. Summary of Studies with an Ethnographic Approach Included in the Review

van Dijk Y (2014)	Focus on the function of an online digital community of amateur authors of interactive fiction (IF), analyzing it as a network.	Global; online community of amateur authors of interactive fiction (IF); The study is situated within a Western academic context.	Actor-network theory; Sociology of art.
Wikhamn BR and Knights D (2013)	To illustrate how open innovation is implemented in a large multinational corporation and to discuss how the discourses of rational control and competition are reinforced during this process.	Sweden; the company AB Volvo, which has production facilities in 20 countries and sales in more than 190 markets, placing it in a global context.	Gender theory; Post-structuralist Discourse Approach.
Zhang D and Shangguan W (2023)	To investigate the everyday creativity of village inhabitants, termed "everyday creativity."	China, Hunan province, in Longhui county, in the Huxing Mountain Yao township region.	Anthropology of design.
Creely E and Southcott J (2025)	To explore how a group of older adults experiences and articulates the transformation of their creative expression through poetry writing in a structured group context.	Melbourne, Australia; University of the Third Age (U3A) poetry group.	Flow Theory; Strengths-Based Approach; Systems Model of Creativity.
Threadgold (2018)	Analysis of how young Australians involved in the underground music scene cope with economic pressures and job precarity while seeking to maintain their creative and artistic passions.	Newcastle, Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane, Australia.	Illusio, Struggle, and Strategy; Risk Society and DIY Biography; Precariat; Cruel Optimism; Arts of Resistance vs. Arts of Existence.

Source: Developed by the authors.

To organize the analysis, the studies were grouped into two central axes. It is important to note that these axes do not represent rigid categories, but rather distinct analytical emphases. While the first axis focuses on how dominant power structures construct the creative field, the second deepens the analysis of the responses and agencies that emerge within these same structures. The overlap between them is, therefore, inherent to the phenomenon being studied.

3.1 Axis 1: Creativity as a field of symbolic, political, and economic dispute

The analyzed studies demonstrate that creativity, far from being a neutral attribute, is actively constructed and mobilized to reinforce hierarchies, contest hegemonic narratives, and define values within specific social systems. Hueiyun Chen (2021) demonstrates how creativity in aristocratic wedding ceremonies serves to reinforce a stratified social system, legitimizing the status of the Paiwanese elite (the *mamazangilan*) through their ancestral past. The author shows that the basis of social stratification lies in an origin myth, in which the first ancestor of the *mamazangilan* elite is born from the sacred union of the sun and a pot. This myth establishes the divine lineage of the elite and their association with intellectual work, in opposition to the commoners (*taqaljaljan*), who are designated as manual laborers. This cosmological division is concretely manifested in wedding ceremonies. Artistic creation, such as garments and artifacts, is governed by symbolic patterns that are considered the property of the elite. The *taqaljaljan* are prohibited from using certain sacred motifs, and their attire must be simpler so as not to usurp the privileges of the aristocracy. Furthermore, their traditional role of providing food and services during the rituals reinforces their subordinate social and symbolic position.

Similarly, DeNicola's (2016) study on manual printing in India exposes the dispute over the authorship of "creativity" between traditional artisans and urban designers. For over 300 years, artisans formed a community of independent businesses. However, when the local market for their cotton fabrics disappeared in favor of screen-printed synthetics, which were easier to wash and more durable, artisan communities became dependent on urban

designers as mediators to reach global consumers. This mediation, however, generated a new symbolic hierarchy: the designer, by appropriating the discourse of "innovation," relegated the artisan to "technique," transforming their ancestral knowledge into a mere "basic technology." In this context, the Geographical Indication (GI)—an intellectual property seal that protects products based on their origin—emerges as a tool to return the recognition of creativity to the artisans. Nevertheless, the author points to a paradox with unintentional economic consequences. By reaffirming the artisan as the true "creator," the GI risks demotivating the designers, who are the crucial link to global markets, potentially isolating the artisan community economically.

In a post-colonial scenario, Isiani *et al.* (2023) showed how the Ikenga and Ofọ sculptures of the Igbo people in Nigeria have become the center of a dispute over symbolic value. While colonial discourses, Western education, modernization, and Christianity label the sculptures as "primitive" and "fetish", the Igbo community reaffirms them as symbols of creativity and spirituality. The article warns that cultural heritage resources are currently and gradually heading towards extinction, with predictions that Igbo values may disappear by the end of the 21st century. The situation is aggravated because the knowledgeable elders, who are the guardians of the material symbols and traditions of the Igbo people, are gradually disappearing, interrupting the transfer of cultural knowledge to future generations.

In contemporary capitalism, the dispute over the value of creativity manifests prominently in the economic and professional spheres. In their study of Volvo's corporate environment, Wikhamn and Knights (2013) argued that the dominant management context defined creativity in a narrow and instrumental way. Such an environment recognized only what was controllable and measurable, while actively silencing and co-opting the more open and collaborative approaches that could enrich the open innovation paradigm. The rhetoric of conflict was predominant, and managers spoke of "choosing battles" and using hierarchical power as a "weapon" to win. Even events created to generate new ideas, such as the Innovation Jam, were subjected to managerial control through evaluation committees that decided which projects would be funded. The culture of pressure for billable hours and the dependence on hierarchical approval, in turn, discouraged any idea that arose spontaneously.

3.2 Axis 2: Tensions, limits, and possibilities for creative action

If the works analyzed so far have revealed the power structures that instrumentalize, co-opt, and restrict creativity, the following analyses highlight the other side of this dynamic: the resilience of subalternized or distinct creative agents. Creative expression is not an isolated act, but a process of continuous negotiation between groups and communities. Despite also pointing to a field of tensions, the subsequent cases focus on how, even in the face of hegemonic narratives, new spaces were constructed that enabled the reaffirmation of autonomy and collective identity.

Jaramillo-Vazquez (2019) examined how creativity could be constructed and experienced in a community arts organization located in a disadvantaged area of Mexico City. The article argues that public cultural policies, both in Mexico and elsewhere, tend to view creativity as a tool to achieve specific ends, such as economic growth, reduction of antisocial behavior, and urban regeneration. This approach is described as "instrumental" because it focuses on predefined outcomes, ignoring the social processes and relationships that foster genuine creativity. In contrast to the policy view, the research indicates that creativity in the studied arts organization emerges not as an individual act, but as a collaborative, dynamic, and continuous process, constituted by networks of solidarity and the sharing of experiences. Similarly, Creely and Southcott (2025) challenged the stereotypes that associate aging with a decline in creative capacity. The research investigated the creative poetry writing practices of a group of older adults at the University of the Third Age (U3A) in Melbourne, Australia. The work counters the view of aging as a deficit model, common in Western societies, in which the elderly person is evaluated in terms of loss and lack of cognitive and, consequently, creative capacity. For the authors, this view of decline is often based on a traditional model of creativity focused on quantifiable criteria of originality (novelty) and effectiveness (utility). In contrast, the study reveals that a qualitative transformation occurs in creative expression, such that it is enriched by accumulated life experiences, emotional depth, and an understanding of life's complexities. In this context, the collaborative work and community environment were perceived as a vital factor for creativity. Through collaboration, the group built a support network and an environment of trust, safety, and validation of their actions.

The role of the collaborative environment as a catalyst for creative agency is clearly illustrated by Threadgold (2018) in his study of the Australian DIY music scene. In this context, the environment functioned as a crucial instrument that allowed participants to redefine success in non-material terms and outside of market logics. For these musicians, the goal is not profit, but rather the ability to continue investing in their artistic interests authentically, even if it means living in relative poverty. Creativity is therefore seen as synonymous with integrity and resistance to commodification, where genuine recognition comes from the community of peers who share the same values of independence. This ethic contrasts directly with the logic of the creative industries, which, according to the author's analysis, frame creativity as a means to an economic end, validated by external institutions and subject to the pressures of productivity and labor market competition. In the same vein, van Dijk's (2014) research analyzes a digital network that, when confronted with the lack of a market or traditional institutions (like publishing houses and professional critics), builds its own possibilities for creative action. This network produces not only literary works but also the entire ecosystem necessary for its existence: sociability, criticism, a canon with annual awards, and a vast archive of technical and poetic knowledge. Thus, the community becomes its own institution, assuming the functions of evaluation, distribution, and legitimization that the art world traditionally performs. Instead of fighting for a place in the field of "high culture," it chooses to bypass it, creating an autonomous space. The success of its creations is measured in terms of pleasure and creativity instead of economics.

Malm's (2020) study on the internal dynamics of a Swedish rock band can be understood as a microcosm that explores the same central conflict identified in the Australian DIY music scene. Both texts address the fundamental tension between an ethic of authentic creativity on one hand, and the commercial pressures of entrepreneurship on the other. The main difference lies in how the groups deal with this dilemma. While the DIY scene studied by Threadgold (2018) externalizes the art-market conflict through a collective rejection of commercial logic, Malm (2020) analyzes a band that internalizes it, seeking a fragile balance between creative integrity and organizational survival. This constant tension modulates the group's life cycle, which transitions between a "production mode," where these logics integrate into a micro-organization, and a "hibernation mode,"

in which the dilemma turns into a crisis that threatens internal cohesion. This case is particularly illustrative of the overlapping dynamics. The band internalizes the hegemonic discourse that equates creative success with commercial viability, the same logic of control and instrumentalization analyzed in the power structures of Axis 1. This reveals how the struggle for creative autonomy often occurs within the very dominant logics one seeks to negotiate. This same tension between authentic cultural expression and market demands also occurs in the practice of fashion designers in Malaysia, as analyzed by Rosihan and Aris (2022). The study focuses on how designers, who act as entrepreneurs competing with large international brands, try to boost their creative agencies by searching for sources of inspiration that go beyond commercial trends, drawing on personal experiences, cultural values, art, and history. According to the authors, although the entrepreneurs succeed in maintaining their passions, they face serious problems with market consolidation precisely because they fail to translate this cultural authenticity into a strong and commercially viable brand identity capable of competing with major international labels. The designers confront the same logic that, in Axis 1, operates to devalue knowledge and practices not aligned with the interests of power, showing the permeability between individual resistance and systemic oppression.

The case study by Zhang and Shangguan (2023) identifies a fundamental tension between external experts (designers and architects) and local communities in construction projects carried out by Hunan University since 2014 in the mountainous Yao region of Huaxing. On one side, there is the coded and formal knowledge of professionals, expressed in drawings and theoretical models; on the other, the everyday creativity of the residents, which is a tacit, embodied, and improvised skill, emerging from direct interaction with the environment and materials. The authors argue that creativity is not just an exclusive skill of professional elites who possess formal technical knowledge. It is also a phenomenon that emerges from people's daily interaction with their environment, as seen in the various forms of traditional architecture that residents developed to adapt to the terrain. The text points to a tendency for designers to present a discourse of superiority, using terms like "intervene" or "remodel" the village, which carried an implicit logic that the countryside has no art or agency of its own. Such discourse ignored the practical and contextual knowledge of

the villagers who, historically, used their own bodies as a measurement reference to build their houses. In this context, the limits of creative action became clear. The professional designer, despite their technique, could not fully capture the deep and contextualized knowledge of local life, such as seasonal weather conditions. In turn, the villagers' creativity, being informal and unsystematized, was often rendered invisible or ignored in formal planning processes. To overcome the barrier between the technical knowledge of designers and the practical knowledge of residents, the two groups established a dialogue through a common visual language: three-dimensional models. The solution did not come from a single direction; it emerged from interaction. While the design team brought digital models to the construction site, facilitating the visualization of proposals, the residents and artisans responded actively with their embodied knowledge, validating or correcting the ideas based on their life experiences. This exchange became even more reciprocal when one of the residents took the initiative to build his own physical wooden model to teach the designers traditional construction techniques. It was this mutual sharing of knowledge that allowed both groups to co-create and complete the new residences collaboratively.

Similarly, the study conducted by Ness and Riese (2015) with multidisciplinary teams in Norway identified a communication barrier as the main obstacle to knowledge construction, as its members, coming from different fields, "did not speak the same language." This difficulty manifested in different interpretations of the same terms, making the collaboration process more arduous the greater the difference between the participants' knowledge bases. To overcome this challenge, the groups needed to build a "common knowledge platform." Even in the phases of greatest tension and debate, such as in the "polyphony phase," discussions were kept constructive. The article points out that the key to this understanding was the application of "relational skills," specifically openness, curiosity, and respect for each other's views. These conditions allowed the members to navigate disagreements, maintain a positive climate, and advance in the development of their ideas.

This same dynamic of integrating different kinds of knowledge, seen in contemporary projects, can also be observed in secular cultural traditions. The study by Aruna (2022) on the traditional Kolam theater of Ambalangoda, in Sri Lanka, demonstrates that this art form was born from a symbiosis between

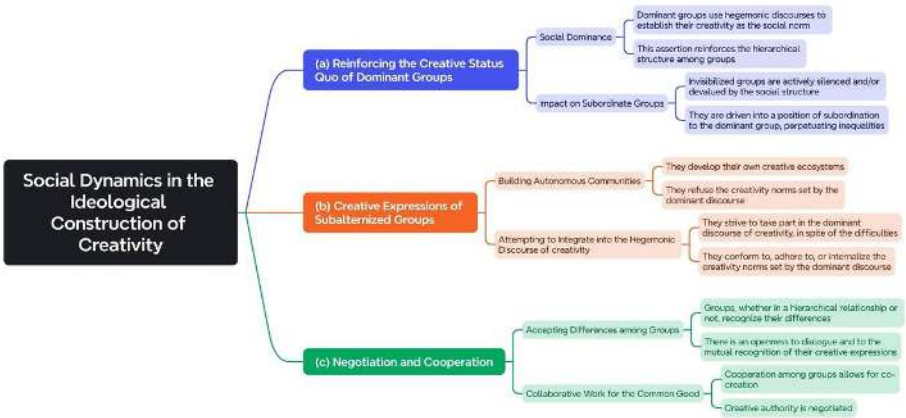
two castes with complementary knowledge: the Karawa caste, composed of carpenters and fishermen with great manual skill and influences from Southern India, and the Oli (or Nakathi) caste, which held the theoretical and aesthetic knowledge of the Bali rituals. The Karawa carpenters adapted the poetic guidelines and three-dimensional style used by the Oli specialists for molding ritual statues, applying this knowledge to carve wooden masks. However, the study also shows that the caste hierarchy was not broken or abolished but became fluid and permeable in daily practice, especially in the context of the southern lowlands of Sri Lanka.

4 Discussion

The in-depth analysis of the 13 ethnographic studies suggests the existence of consistent patterns in the way creativity is socially constructed and contested. It should be noted, however, that the contribution of this work does not lie in generalizing these findings, but in proposing an analytical model (Figure 2) built from a body of empirical evidence. To deepen the analysis, the social dynamics observed here were placed in dialogue with broader theoretical frameworks:

Figure 2. Social dynamics in the ideological construction of creativity

A conceptual map showing three central social dynamics: (a) Reinforcing the Creative Status Quo, (b) Creative Expressions of Subalternized Groups, and (c) Negotiation and Cooperation



Source: Developed by the authors.

The consolidation of the creative status quo by dominant groups (item a), as observed in the analyzed studies, appears to operate through a dual movement of social domination and subordination. Hegemonic discourses are mobilized to establish a specific form of creativity as a social norm, thereby reinforcing the existing hierarchical structure (Chen, 2021; DeNicola, 2016; Isiani *et al.*, 2023; Wikhamn & Knights, 2013). The dynamic of social domination, which consistently emerged from the empirical analysis, finds a theoretical echo in the concept of hegemony, as discussed by Williams (1977) based on Gramsci. Hegemony is, in the strongest sense, a "culture," but a culture that must be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of certain classes (Williams, 1977). This pattern observed in our data finds parallels with broader analyses of the creative industries, where concepts of merit and value act to validate productions aligned with market standards, generally associated with privileged cultural and social groups (Banks, 2017; Moeran, 2014). Consequently, the impact on subordinated groups is their silencing. This pattern of systemic devaluation directly dialogues with broader discussions on the colonial matrix of power. Authors like Mignolo (2011) and Smith (1999) argue that colonialism imposes not only economic control but also a standard of aesthetics and reason. The case of the Igbo sculptures (Isiani *et al.*, 2023), for example, can be seen as a micro-illustration of this theoretical macrostructure, where local creativity is suppressed by a 'universalist' discourse. This act of appropriation and reinterpretation denies subordinated groups the authority to define and represent their own creativity, resulting in their invisibilization and the suppression of their voices and histories. In this way, the dynamic is completed: the dominant discourse not only self-validates but actively constructs the subordination of other forms of expression. By being relegated to a marginal position, the invisibilized groups are prevented from competing in a field whose rules have already been defined to perpetuate inequalities.

The creative expressions of subalternized groups (item b) manifest through a field of tension that oscillates between the construction of autonomy and the attempt to integrate into the hegemonic discourse. On one hand, these groups demonstrate their agency by building autonomous communities that develop their own creative ecosystems, with independent systems of validation and legitimization (Jaramillo-Vazquez, 2019; Creely & Southcott, 2025; Threadgold, 2018; Van Dijk, 2014). In this process,

strategies of resistance are forged, which involve the refusal of dominant norms, the pursuit of self-expression, authenticity, and the creation of their own styles and symbols (Scott, 1990; Hebdige, 1979). On the other hand, an effort to integrate into this same dominant discourse is observed, a trajectory marked by the struggle for recognition within structures that often render these creative agents precarious (Malm, 2020; Rosihan & Aris, 2022; McRobbie, 2016). The dominant discourse of creativity, in turn, appropriates, incorporates, and reinterprets artistic critiques to construct narratives that reinforce its own legitimacy (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fennessey, 2021).

The dynamic of negotiation and cooperation, in turn, can be interpreted as an alternative path to domination and resistance (item c), allowing for co-creation based on mutual recognition between different groups. This process begins with the acceptance of differences, where agents with distinct knowledge, status, and worldviews establish a dialogue that acknowledges the validity of multiple creative expressions, overcoming hierarchical barriers (Zhang & Shangguan, 2023; Ness & Riese, 2015; Aruna, 2022). Based on this recognition, collaborative work for a common good becomes possible, in which creative authority is dynamically negotiated (Berkes, 2018; Sanders & Stappers, 2008).

Ultimately, these social dynamics shape the observable creative behavior. The decision to engage in risk-taking, to collaborate across hierarchies, or to withdraw into autonomous communities is not merely an individual personality trait; it is a behavioral response to the ideological pressures of the environment. These dynamics can manifest in interconnected ways, operating simultaneously at micro levels (involving people or groups) and macro levels (cultural policies and the market, for example). The coexistence and overlapping of these processes indicate that a reductionist analysis, which sees only domination or only resistance, is insufficient. An expression of resistance (item b), for example, can be co-opted and commodified by the dominant discourse (item a), emptying it of its original counter-hegemonic potential. Similarly, a cooperation initiative (item c) can, in practice, mask unequal power relations, subtly reproducing hegemony. The analysis of the creative field should not seek pure categories, but rather map the tensions, contradictions, and alliances that shape the struggle for legitimacy. It is in this fluid space that creativity is continually challenged, reinforced, and reinvented.

5 Final Considerations

The findings suggest that the ideological construction of creativity can manifest from what we propose as three central social dynamics. In the proposed model, the first dynamic is characterized by hegemonic discourses mobilized by dominant groups that reinforce power structures and social hierarchies, legitimizing their own creative expressions as the norm while devaluing or silencing other forms of knowing and doing. The second dynamic reveals the agency of subalternized groups, which manifests in a field of tension with two main responses: on one hand, the construction of autonomous creative ecosystems, in which they establish their own validation systems to resist dominant logics and strengthen collective identity; on the other hand, the attempt to integrate into this same hegemonic discourse, a struggle for recognition that often implies conforming to or internalizing the norms of creativity imposed by existing power structures. Finally, a third path identified is that of negotiation and cooperation, in which different groups overcome hierarchical and/or knowledge barriers to co-create based on mutual appreciation.

It is important to reiterate that this three-dynamics model is not intended to be an exhaustive or universal representation. Rather, it emerges as a theoretical contribution from the systematic analysis of a specific body of evidence, offering an analytical lens and a starting point for future investigations to continue exploring the complex relationship between creativity, power, and ideology from other contexts. By highlighting creativity as an ideological practice, this work offers a counterpoint to approaches that treat it exclusively in an apolitical and universal manner, thereby obscuring its role in maintaining social hierarchies. Envisioning who defines what it means to 'be creative' is fundamental to understanding the power mechanisms that traverse collective life. Expanding this analysis in all its social complexity is, therefore, a decisive step toward recognizing and valuing the multiplicity of creative expressions that make up the cultural fabric, an essential movement for the legitimization of cultural diversity.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties that could be perceived as influencing the content of this article.

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Appendix

Scopus

The search was performed in the Title, Abstract, and Keywords fields (TITLE-ABS-KEY) to maximize the relevance of the results.

((creativ* OR inventiveness OR poiesis OR improvis* OR "cultural production") AND (ethnogr* OR fieldwork OR "participant observation" OR "case study" OR "grounded theory" OR "action research" OR autoethnogr* OR "visual ethnography" OR "digital ethnography" OR netnography OR "sensory ethnography"))

Year published: 2014-2025

Main subject areas: Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Psychology

Document Type: Research Article

Web of Science

The search was conducted in the Topic (TS) field, which includes titles, abstracts, author keywords, and index keywords (Keywords Plus).

((creativ* OR inventiveness OR poiesis OR improvis* OR “cultural production”) AND (ethnogr* OR fieldwork OR ”participant observation” OR ”case study” OR ”grounded theory” OR ”action research” OR autoethnogr* OR ”visual ethnography” OR ”digital ethnography” OR netnography OR ”sensory ethnography”))

Year published: 2014-2025

Main subject areas: Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, and Psychology

Document Type: Research Article

Google Scholar

The Google Scholar search was performed using validated combinations of terms. The results were then filtered by the platform to the 2014-2025 period. Since Google Scholar does not permit filtering by ‘Research Article,’ the first 150 results from each search were reviewed manually to identify relevant articles, while excluding books, theses, citations, and patents.

(“creativity” AND “ethnography”) OR (“creativity” AND “participant observation”) OR (“creativity” AND “fieldwork”)

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