

Emotional Dynamics in Toxic Creative Workplaces in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to explore the emotional dynamics of employees working in toxic work environments in the creative industries, and to understand how these conditions affect their identity, well-being, and creative processes.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a narrative inquiry approach to capture the lived experiences of participants. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 creative professionals from the advertising, digital media, and film production sectors. Thematic narrative analysis was used to identify key patterns in their experiences.

Finding/Results – The research revealed four main themes: (1) emotional dissonance and identity stress, where employees suppress authentic feelings to conform to organizational expectations; (2) burnout and emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic workloads that diminish creativity; (3) silencing and erosion of trust that undermine psychological safety and collaboration; and (4) narrative coping and resilience strategies, where employees use stories, coworker solidarity, and reframing to maintain meaning and identity.

Originality/Value – This research contributes to organizational studies by situating the issues of emotional labor, burnout, and psychological safety within the context of the creative industries, where the interconnectedness of professional identity and creative output increases vulnerability to toxic environments. Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry in uncovering the complexities of work emotions and hidden resilience strategies. Practically, these findings emphasize the importance of systemic interventions and leadership practices that build trust, recognition, and psychological safety to maintain employee well-being and sustain creativity and innovation.

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1. Introduction

The creative industry has witnessed significant growth over the past decade, particularly in Southeast Asia, which has become a hub for idea-driven and innovation-based economies (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Amoozegar et al., 2025). Behind the glamorous image and abundant opportunities, however, work dynamics in this sector are often marked by intense pressure, high productivity demands, and complex interpersonal relationships. When poorly managed, such conditions can foster what scholars describe as a toxic workplace an organizational environment characterized by unhealthy communication patterns, excessive power dominance, and a lack of adequate social support (Batool, Izwar Ibrahim, Adeel, Jiang, & Samad, 2024; Chen, Ye, Shafait, & Zhu, 2022; Zia & Ahmed, 2024).

Employees in the creative industry experience unique emotional burdens (Odden & Russ, 2018; Sjoberg, 2019). Concept of emotional labor illustrates how workers are frequently compelled to display emotions aligned with organizational expectations, even when these conflict with their genuine feelings. When such demands intersect with highly competitive work cultures, psychological strain intensifies, often undermining emotional well-being (Ardıç & Erişen, 2025; Mol, Nijkamp, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Kompanje, 2017; Partina, Suparmono, & Sudarusman, 2024). Within the creative sector, where innovation relies heavily on emotional engagement, these pressures are particularly acute (Klein & Spsychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020; Rahman, Budiyanto, & Suwitho, 2021).

Empirical studies consistently reveal that toxic workplace environments are strongly correlated with heightened stress, burnout, and diminished job satisfaction. (Palmer, Walls, Burgess, & Stough, 2001; Roy & Nandi, 2025) argue that burnout results from chronic mismatches between individuals and their work environments, spanning dimensions such as workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values. Similarly, (Chu, 2013; Huang & Zhou, 2023) emphasize that organizational injustice provokes latent aggression and counterproductive behaviors, further exacerbating the toxic climate.

In the creative industry, these dynamics are even more complex, as professional identity is often intertwined with the work employees produce. (Dailey, Browning, & Sørnes, 2024; Rakhmaniar, 2024) underline that creativity does not emerge in isolation but is deeply embedded in emotionally charged social interactions. In toxic organizational climates, therefore, a paradox emerges: workers are expected to produce innovative outcomes while simultaneously navigating environments that destabilize their emotional resilience.

This issue extends beyond the individual level, affecting organizational sustainability as well. Research by (Bou Reslan, Hassanie, Uludag, BouKarroum, & Jabbour Al Maalouf, 2025), shows that the emotional climate within teams has a domino effect on cohesion, collaboration, and overall productivity. Toxic workplaces erode social capital among employees, weaken trust, and impair collective creativity, even though trust has been identified as a key factor in team innovation and psychological safety (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

To date, few studies have examined emotional dynamics specifically within toxic creative workplaces using narrative approaches. Existing research often relies on quantitative surveys or generalized organizational settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how creative professionals personally interpret, negotiate, and emotionally navigate toxic environments. Addressing this gap is essential because emotional meaning-making plays a central role in creative identity and output.

Narrative inquiry is not only suitable but methodologically necessary for this exploration. Toxic workplace experiences involve complex emotional layers, identity struggles, and

evolving interpersonal tensions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures. Narrative methods enable researchers to access temporally unfolding stories, interpretive processes, and subjective meaning-making that shape how employees construct, internalize, and respond to toxicity. As (Braun & Clarke, 2020), emphasizes, narrative inquiry reveals dimensions of emotional experience that remain invisible when researchers rely solely on standardized instruments, making it indispensable for understanding the lived realities of creative professionals.

Consequently, the emotional dynamics of employees in toxic workplaces must be understood not merely as a psychological challenge but as a multidimensional phenomenon with implications for the competitiveness of the creative industry as a whole. Narrative perspectives provide a critical lens to uncover the depth, nuance, and emotional complexity of these experiences, revealing how individuals make sense of and endure toxic organizational settings.

Despite the growing body of research on toxic workplaces, emotional labor, and burnout, existing studies remain limited in three important ways. First, much of the literature relies heavily on quantitative survey methods, which capture outcomes such as stress or job dissatisfaction but offer limited insight into how employees subjectively interpret and emotionally experience toxicity over time. Second, research on toxic workplaces has largely focused on generalized organizational settings, leaving the creative industry where emotional authenticity, identity, and creative output are deeply intertwined underexplored. Third, little attention has been given to the narrative and identity-based processes through which creative professionals make sense of, cope with, and endure toxic work environments (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019).

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to examine the emotional dynamics of employees working in toxic creative workplaces in Southeast Asia. By foregrounding employees' lived stories, this study contributes theoretically by integrating emotional labor, burnout, psychological safety, and identity strain within a narrative framework tailored to the creative industry context. Methodologically, it extends organizational research by demonstrating the value of narrative inquiry for uncovering emotional meaning-making processes that are often obscured in survey-based studies. Practically, the study offers insights into how toxic organizational climates undermine not only employee well-being but also the emotional and identity resources essential for sustained creativity and innovation.

2. Literature Review & Hypothesis Development

2.1. Creative Industries and Job Characteristics

The creative industries are sectors that rely on individual creativity, skills, and talent as their primary source of economic value. According to UNESCO, this sector encompasses fields such as advertising, digital media, film, design, and the performing arts. Key characteristics of this industry include work flexibility, high demands for innovation, and a strong emotional connection between workers and their work (UNESCO, 2013).

However, this flexibility is often accompanied by job insecurity, long working hours, and high performance pressure. In the Southeast Asian context, the rapid growth of the creative industries has not always been matched by adequate labor regulations, increasing vulnerability to unhealthy working conditions (Flew, 2012).

2.2. Toxic Workplace

A toxic work environment refers to an organizational condition characterized by dysfunctional behaviors such as intimidation, manipulation, lack of support, and unhealthy communication (Frost, 2003). These conditions significantly impact employee well-being, including increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and high turnover rates (Einarsen et al., 2011).

In the creative industries, toxicity is often disguised in narratives of “passion” and “dedication,” so exploitative practices are considered a normal part of the creative process (Gill, 2002).

2.3. Emotional Labor and Emotional Dynamics

The concept of emotional labor, introduced by Arlie Russell Hochschild, explains how individuals manage their emotions to meet organizational demands (Hochschild, 1983). In the creative industries, these demands are further complicated because personal identity is often tied to work output.

Emotional dynamics in a toxic work environment include emotional dissonance, a mismatch between the emotions felt and those expected to be displayed. This condition can lead to psychological stress and emotional exhaustion (Grandey, 2000).

2.4. Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

Burnout is a state of chronic exhaustion involving emotional, mental, and physical dimensions. This concept was developed by Christina Maslach, who identified three main dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased sense of accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

In the creative industry, burnout is often caused by deadline pressure, high workloads, and constant expectations of creativity. Creative workers tend to be more vulnerable due to their strong emotional attachment to their work (McRobbie, 2016).

2.5. Psychological Safety and Organizational Trust

The concept of psychological safety, developed by Amy Edmondson, refers to a condition in which individuals feel safe to express ideas and take risks without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999).

In a toxic work environment, low psychological safety leads to the silencing of employee voices, decreased trust, and hampered innovation. This contradicts the needs of creative industries, which rely heavily on collaboration and the exchange of ideas (Kahn, 1990).

2.6. Coping Strategies and Resilience

To deal with emotional stress, employees develop various coping strategies, including emotion regulation, social support, and reframing work experiences (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Resilience refers to an individual's ability to survive and adapt under difficult circumstances. In a narrative context, storytelling becomes an important way for workers to construct meaning and maintain their professional identity (Riessman, 2008).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore the emotional dynamics of employees working within toxic environments in the creative industry. Narrative inquiry is a well-established qualitative tradition grounded in interpretive and constructivist paradigms, emphasizing how individuals construct meaning through lived experience and

storytelling (Victor, 2016). This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study for three key reasons. First, emotional experiences in toxic workplaces are temporally unfolding, subjective, and identity-laden, making them difficult to capture through cross-sectional or variable-centered quantitative methods. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to examine not only *what* employees experience but *how* they interpret, organize, and emotionally negotiate those experiences over time.

Second, within the creative industry, emotional expression and professional identity are deeply intertwined with creative output. Narrative inquiry is uniquely suited to capturing identity work, emotional meaning-making, and the tensions between the “performed self” and the “experienced self” that emerge under toxic organizational conditions.

Third, narrative methods enable the examination of power, silence, and voice central dynamics in toxic workplaces by foregrounding participants’ stories rather than imposing predefined analytical categories. As (Victor, 2016), narratives reveal dimensions of emotional experience and identity negotiation that often remain invisible when researchers rely solely on standardized instruments.

Accordingly, narrative inquiry was selected not merely as a methodological preference but as an epistemological necessity for addressing the study’s research aim: to understand how creative professionals narratively experience, interpret, and cope with emotional dynamics in toxic work environments.

3.2. Participants

Participants consisted of employees working across multiple segments of the creative industry, including advertising, film production, design, and digital media, who reported experiences of toxic workplace conditions. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure diversity in job roles, gender, and organizational contexts, enabling the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research aim (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019).

A total of 18 participants were recruited for the study, comprising designers (n = 6), animators (n = 4), directors (n = 5), and strategists (n = 3). Approximately 65% of participants were women, reflecting gender diversity within the sample. Participants were employed in creative organizations operating primarily within Indonesia and the broader Southeast Asian context. The sample size was deemed sufficient based on qualitative saturation principles. (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020) suggest that thematic saturation in qualitative research is typically achieved within 12-20 interviews, depending on the heterogeneity of participants and the scope of the study. During data analysis, no substantively new themes emerged after the later interviews, indicating that saturation had been reached.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured narrative interviews designed to elicit participants’ personal stories and emotional experiences within toxic workplace environments. This interview format allowed participants to construct narratives in their own words while enabling the researchers to probe for clarification, emotional depth, and temporal sequencing of experiences (Victor, 2016).

Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure online platforms, depending on participants’ availability and location. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to interviews, participants were invited to contribute optional reflective journals over a two-week period following the interview. These reflective narratives allowed

participants to document ongoing emotional experiences, workplace interactions, and retrospective reflections that might not have emerged during the interview setting. Reflective journals served as a complementary narrative source, enabling the capture of emotional processes as they unfolded in real time rather than solely through retrospective accounts.

The integration of interview narratives and reflective journals enhanced data richness and triangulation by providing multiple narrative entry points into participants' emotional worlds (Clandinin, 2013). Rather than functioning as a separate dataset, reflective journals were analytically integrated with interview transcripts to deepen interpretation of emotional dynamics, identity tensions, and coping strategies.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the data collection process. Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Given the emotionally sensitive nature of discussing toxic workplace experiences, care was taken to conduct interviews in a supportive and non-judgmental manner, consistent with ethical guidelines for qualitative research involving psychological risk (Shen et al., 2016).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, focusing on both the content of participants' stories and the meaning-making processes embedded within their narratives. This approach emphasizes how individuals organize experiences temporally, interpret emotional events, and negotiate identity through storytelling (Victor, 2016).

The analysis followed six iterative phases guided by (Braun & Clarke, 2020), reflexive thematic framework. First, the researchers engaged in repeated readings of interview transcripts and reflective journals to achieve deep familiarization with the data. During this phase, attention was given not only to recurring topics but also to emotional tone, metaphors, silences, and narrative turning points.

Second, initial codes were generated inductively across the dataset. Coding focused on emotionally salient narrative segments, such as expressions of emotional suppression, identity conflict, exhaustion, silence, resistance, and coping practices. For instance, narrative excerpts describing "pretending enthusiasm," "withholding ideas," or "emotionally detaching from work" were coded as emotional dissonance, organizational silence, and emotional distancing, respectively (Clandinin, 2013).

Third, related codes were clustered into preliminary themes that captured broader narrative processes rather than isolated incidents. These themes were continuously reviewed against the dataset to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes. Fourth, themes were refined and defined through iterative comparison across participants' narratives, resulting in four overarching themes that represented shared emotional dynamics across different creative roles and organizational contexts.

NVivo software was used to support systematic data management, coding consistency, and transparency of analytic decisions (Greener & Martelli, 2020). The software facilitated comparison across narrative sources and supported the development of an audit trail linking raw data to final themes.

3.5. Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, established qualitative rigor criteria credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied.

Credibility was strengthened through a two-stage member-checking process. First, all participants were invited to review their interview transcripts; fifteen participants confirmed

accuracy, while three requested minor clarifications, which were incorporated into the final dataset. Second, a summary of preliminary themes was shared with eight volunteer participants, who confirmed that the themes resonated with their lived experiences and suggested further elaboration on emotional distancing and peer solidarity, which were subsequently integrated into the findings.

Transferability was addressed by providing rich and contextualized descriptions of participants, creative industry settings, and narrative excerpts, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar organizational contexts.

Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of the analytic process, including coding procedures, theme development, and iterative refinements. Regular peer debriefing sessions among the research team were conducted to critically examine analytic decisions and challenge emerging interpretations (Victor, 2016).

Confirmability was supported through reflexive memo-writing and the maintenance of an audit trail linking interpretations to participants' narratives, thereby minimizing researcher bias and enhancing analytic transparency.

4. Result and Discussion

Based on thematic narrative analysis of in-depth interviews with 18 creative professionals working in advertising, digital media, and film production across Southeast Asia, this study identified four dominant themes that reflect the emotional dynamics of toxic workplace experiences. These themes capture recurring patterns in how participants experienced emotional pressure, interpreted organizational toxicity, and developed coping responses within creative work settings. The findings are also consistent with the study's qualitative narrative inquiry design, which seeks to uncover emotional meaning-making, identity negotiation, and lived experience in context.

4.1. Emotional Dissonance and Identity Strain

Participants consistently described emotional dissonance as a routine part of their work lives. They reported having to suppress authentic emotions and display enthusiasm, calmness, or commitment in accordance with organizational expectations, even when they felt exhausted, disappointed, or psychologically distressed. In many cases, participants perceived that emotional masking was necessary to remain professionally accepted in team meetings, project discussions, and client-facing interactions. This finding suggests that toxic creative workplaces do not merely produce emotional discomfort, but require workers to repeatedly perform emotions that are disconnected from their actual inner state.

This emotional dissonance was particularly intense because creative work is closely tied to identity. Several narratives indicated that criticism of ideas, design outputs, or creative decisions was often internalized as criticism of the self. As a result, participants did not experience emotional pressure only as work-related stress, but as an identity-level strain that affected self-worth, confidence, and sense of professional belonging. The findings therefore indicate that emotional dissonance in creative workplaces is not simply about emotional regulation, but about the destabilization of the creative self.

The persistence of this condition also reduced emotional engagement with work. Participants described becoming less attached to their projects, less proud of their output, and more detached from the meaning they once found in creative labor. These experiences suggest that emotional dissonance gradually weakens the psychological resources required for sustained

creativity, especially when emotional expression is controlled by hierarchical expectations and toxic work norms.

4.2. Burnout and the Erosion of Creative Capacity

The second major theme was burnout, which participants described as chronic emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive workloads, tight deadlines, and constant expectations of originality. Participants frequently referred to long working hours, limited recovery time, and pressure to remain creative under emotionally draining conditions. These experiences indicate that burnout in toxic creative workplaces is not episodic, but cumulative and structurally embedded in the organization of work.

Importantly, participants did not describe burnout merely as tiredness. They associated it with declining imaginative energy, reduced motivation, and a growing inability to engage deeply with creative tasks. Some participants suggested that the most painful aspect of burnout was not only exhaustion itself, but the feeling that their creative ability was slowly diminishing. In this context, burnout functioned as an erosion of creative capacity rather than simply an indicator of overwork.

Participants also described a loss of meaning in work that had once been a source of pride and identity. This loss of meaning reflects how burnout in the creative sector affects more than well-being; it undermines the emotional vitality, cognitive openness, and intrinsic motivation that creativity depends on. Thus, burnout emerged in the narratives as both a psychological outcome and a professional threat, weakening the very resources that sustain long-term creative contribution.

4.3. Silenced Voices and Erosion of Trust

A third recurring theme was the silencing of employee voices and the gradual erosion of trust within teams. Many participants reported withholding ideas, concerns, or criticism because they feared negative responses from supervisors or coworkers. Narratives described ridicule, dismissal, public correction, and subtle exclusion as common organizational reactions to speaking up. Over time, these experiences led participants to adopt silence as a protective strategy.

This silence had important relational consequences. Participants described declining trust in both supervisors and peers, particularly when they saw colleagues being humiliated or ignored after sharing opinions. In such contexts, psychological safety was significantly weakened, and collaborative exchange became increasingly superficial. Rather than contributing ideas openly, participants often prioritized emotional self-protection and conflict avoidance.

For creative professionals, this pattern was especially damaging because idea sharing is central to both creative identity and team innovation. When organizational toxicity made expression risky, participants withdrew not only behaviorally but also emotionally. The findings therefore suggest that silence in toxic creative workplaces is not merely a communication problem; it reflects the collapse of the trust and psychological safety necessary for collaborative creativity.

4.4. Coping Strategies and Narrative Resilience

Despite prolonged emotional strain, participants described several coping strategies that helped them endure toxic workplace environments. Common responses included cognitive reframing, emotional distancing, humor, and peer support. Through these strategies, participants attempted to preserve a sense of self and maintain daily functioning, even when

organizational conditions remained harmful. These accounts suggest that coping in toxic workplaces often takes the form of survival-oriented adaptation rather than real resolution. Narrative meaning-making was particularly important in this process. Participants used stories to interpret their experiences, justify endurance, and reconstruct professional identity in the face of emotional invalidation. Some framed their current work situation as temporary, while others relied on shared storytelling with trusted colleagues to reduce isolation and preserve emotional stability. In this sense, resilience was not only individual, but relational and narrative in nature.

At the same time, participants recognized the limits of these coping strategies. Emotional distancing could protect the self but also reduce engagement, while peer solidarity could provide emotional relief without changing the underlying organizational culture. Thus, the findings indicate that coping and resilience help workers survive toxic workplaces in the short term, but they do not eliminate systemic toxicity. This reveals an important paradox: resilience may sustain individuals, yet it may also coexist with unresolved structural harm.

4.5 Discussion

The findings illuminate a central paradox within the creative industry: employees are expected to contribute authenticity, passion, and imagination to their work, yet the organizational conditions in which they operate often suppress, distort, or punish these very emotional investments. By using a narrative inquiry approach, this study deepens understanding of toxic workplaces by showing how emotional strain unfolds through lived experience, identity negotiation, and meaning-making among creative professionals. This focus is consistent with the study's narrative methodology, which was explicitly chosen to capture temporality, voice, emotional nuance, and identity-laden experiences that are difficult to reveal through standardized instruments.

4.5.1. Emotional Dissonance and Identity Strain in Creative Work

The first theme extends research on emotional labor by showing that sustained emotional regulation in toxic workplaces does not merely generate fatigue but can destabilize professional identity itself. Emotional labor theory emphasizes that workers are often required to manage feelings in order to display emotions consistent with organizational expectations, even when such displays conflict with their genuine emotional state (Hochschild, 2012; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). In the present study, this process appeared especially intense because participants' creative identity was strongly connected to their work output, making emotional suppression feel like a distortion of self rather than only a job demand.

These findings also support the argument that the creative industries are uniquely vulnerable to emotional strain because creativity depends on personal investment, affective engagement, and expressive authenticity (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Klein & Sychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020). In toxic settings, however, these same qualities become sources of vulnerability. Emotional dissonance therefore emerged not only as a workplace condition, but as a challenge to identity coherence and creative self-recognition.

4.5.2. Burnout as the Erosion of Creative Capacity

The second theme highlights burnout as more than a state of exhaustion; it represents a gradual erosion of creative capacity. Burnout literature has long explained how chronic mismatch between the person and the work environment can produce emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and diminished accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The narratives in this study confirm those effects, but also show a more specific consequence in creative professions:

burnout weakens imaginative energy, intrinsic motivation, and attachment to creative work itself.

This insight is important because creativity is sustained by emotional vitality and cognitive openness. When toxic environments normalize overwork, high pressure, and relentless performance expectations, they undermine the very psychological resources necessary for creative contribution. In this sense, burnout becomes both an individual well-being issue and an organizational threat to innovation. The finding is also consistent with studies linking toxic environments and work stress to reduced engagement and emotional depletion (Mol et al., 2017; Partina et al., 2024).

4.5.3 Silence, Trust, and the Collapse of Psychological Safety

The third theme underscores the importance of psychological safety in creative work. Psychological safety refers to the sense that one can speak up, express ideas, and take interpersonal risks without fear of humiliation or punishment (Edmondson & Bransby, 2022). In the present study, participants' reluctance to voice ideas reflected a workplace climate in which silence became a rational form of self-protection.

This finding aligns with prior work showing that toxic supervision and abusive organizational climates discourage voice, increase silence, and suppress employee creativity (Chen et al., 2022; Zia & Ahmed, 2024). However, the current study extends this literature by showing that in creative work, silence has identity consequences as well. Sharing ideas is not merely a task behavior, but a form of professional expression. When that expression is repeatedly invalidated, employees withdraw emotionally and cognitively, weakening collaboration and reducing collective creativity. Toxic workplaces thus damage not only trust, but the social-emotional infrastructure on which innovation depends.

4.5.4 Coping Strategies and Narrative Resilience: Survival Without Resolution

The final theme reveals how participants relied on coping strategies such as reframing, emotional distancing, peer solidarity, and storytelling to preserve emotional balance in harmful work environments. Coping theory has long emphasized that individuals use appraisal, regulation, and social support to manage stressful conditions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The present study supports that perspective but adds a narrative dimension: coping was often enacted through stories that helped participants interpret suffering, preserve dignity, and maintain a coherent sense of self.

This resonates with narrative inquiry scholarship emphasizing that stories are not simply accounts of events, but mechanisms for meaning-making, identity maintenance, and emotional survival (Clandinin, 2013; Victor, 2016). Yet the findings also reveal the limitations of resilience. Emotional distancing may shield the self but reduce engagement, while peer solidarity may make toxicity bearable without altering the organizational structures that produce it. Resilience therefore functioned as a means of endurance rather than transformation.

4.5.5 Theoretical, Methodological, and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study integrates emotional labor, burnout, psychological safety, and identity strain within a narrative framework tailored to toxic creative workplaces. By foregrounding lived experience and meaning-making, it shifts attention from outcome-based explanations toward a richer understanding of how toxicity is emotionally interpreted and identity-wise negotiated over time. This extends organizational research on toxic workplaces by showing that in creative settings, the damage is not limited to stress or satisfaction, but reaches into creativity, identity, and belonging (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Dailey et al., 2024).

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry for examining emotionally complex organizational realities. The use of participants' narratives makes visible the temporality, ambiguity, and identity-based dimensions of toxic workplace experiences that are often flattened in variable-centered survey research. This confirms the methodological importance of narrative approaches for studies of emotion, power, and work experience in the creative industries (Clandinin, 2013; Victor, 2016).

Practically, the findings suggest that toxic creative workplaces cannot be addressed solely through individual resilience or informal peer support. Organizations need systemic interventions that strengthen psychological safety, reduce abusive supervision, recognize emotional labor, and create sustainable workload practices. Leadership that supports trust, respectful communication, and emotional recognition is essential not only for employee well-being, but also for protecting the long-term creative capacity on which the industry depends (Batool et al., 2024; Bou Reslan et al., 2025; Rasool et al., 2021).

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

This study reveals that the emotional dynamics within toxic creative workplaces in Southeast Asia are a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The results indicate that creative workers experience emotional dissonance due to demands to display specific emotions that do not always align with their internal state. This is exacerbated by the strong attachment between personal identity and creative work output.

Furthermore, burnout emerges as a consequence of chronic work pressure, a culture of overwork, and expectations of continuous creativity. Low psychological safety exacerbates this situation by silencing voices, reducing trust, and hindering collaboration and innovation. Nevertheless, workers demonstrate adaptive capabilities through various coping strategies and resilience, both individually and collectively. However, these findings confirm that individual resilience is not enough to address structural issues within organizations.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of a holistic approach that integrates emotional, organizational, and cultural aspects in understanding the work experience in the creative industries. Practical implications include the need for systemic interventions, particularly through leadership practices that support psychological safety, recognition, and work-life balance, to maintain sustainable employee creativity and well-being.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered. First, the relatively limited number of participants (18) and the use of qualitative methods mean that these findings cannot be broadly generalized to the entire creative industry in Southeast Asia. Second, the data obtained relies on subjective narratives from participants, potentially subject to perception and interpretation bias. Third, this study focuses on several subsectors of the creative industry (advertising, digital media, and film production), thus not covering the entire spectrum of the broader creative industry. Fourth, differences in country contexts within Southeast Asia were not analyzed in depth, thus variations in culture, regulations, and working conditions across countries were not fully accommodated. Fifth, the cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for longitudinal analysis of emotional dynamics, so changes in emotional experiences over time cannot be captured.

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