

## Branding Kretek

### *Influence and Creativity in the Gig Economy*

On a rainy Friday evening, we arrived at a campground and adventure climbing park near Surabaya that Sampoerna had converted into “Averland: The land of discovery and inspiration,” where participants would, over the next two days and nights, “experience a journey of a lifetime,” courtesy of Sampoerna’s A-Mild brand.<sup>1</sup> Fatma and Shahnaz, who were assisting me with my research, had wrangled lanyards and tags that identified us as belonging to the dubious and vague category of “VIPs.” We felt like undesirable interlopers. Sampoerna had selected most of the event’s participants through a competitive process that it ran in seven Javanese college towns. Indonesia’s New Order government used competitions (*lomba*) to impose social order, while companies like Sampoerna mobilize them to engage youth and extract brand value and personal data.<sup>2</sup> Competition entrants had to form a group, which was to include at least one smoker, and submit creative ideas for promoting their city, an established corporate strategy for forging connections with particular locales (Banks 2022, 96, 138–39). Sampoerna supposedly selected the best ideas, although company goals like attracting youth and achieving some gender balance as well as representation across predetermined themes likely factored into their choices. Win or lose, each competition entry supplied Sampoerna with information on potential consumers, including email addresses and mobile phone numbers for SMS promotions and updates, and thereby extended its targeted or “below the line” marketing database for A-Mild kretek. Such marketing directly engages customers in activities and events, in contrast to “above the line” marketing strategies such as billboard or magazine ads that project brands in a more indiscriminate and less active fashion. Tobacco advertising restrictions that limit the latter approach have led cigarette companies to increase their investment and labor in the former.

We wandered Averland in search of food, taking in the free welcome haircut and reflexology booths, the graffiti wall where artists were busily spray-painting, and the music lounge that seemed to play the Red Hot Chili Peppers in an endless loop. After we occupied a table in front of a pop-up Sampoerna Retail Community shop, some event organizers and Sampoerna marketing agents from Malang pulled up chairs and joined us. As Pak Edy, a marketing manager with a bouncer's build, rocked up, he loudly joked that it stank like we had been eating durian (the pungent fruit was for sale nearby at the shop), and he wrestled Fatma into a headlock with his meaty arms. I asked an event organizer sporting a pack of A-Motion cigarettes in his shirt pocket what he thought of Sampoerna's latest "brand extension" (a new cigarette named A-Motion that drew on A-Mild's strong reputation).<sup>3</sup> "Wow!" he enthused brightly in English, while pointing his finger under the table at the Sampoerna staff to indicate that he was not at liberty to respond candidly.

Eventually, MCs called everyone over to a stage, where giant screens projected A-Mild ads, audio booming from enormous speakers. Pak Tony, a Sampoerna manager, enthusiastically welcomed participants and praised them for being among the elect. From thousands of hopefuls, Sampoerna awarded coveted spots in Averland to but 350. Squeezing three brand slogans into a single sentence, he said that Sampoerna was looking for "go ahead people" who want to "change the ordinary" and "don't think twice." He called out the university towns represented—"Bandung, Jogjakarta, Malang, Purwokerto, Semarang, Solo, Surabayaaaa!"—provoking only a desultory response. Undeterred, he announced, "You'll compete further to creatively represent your cities, and"—he paused dramatically—"just maybe, the winners will get a chance to make their own advertisement for Sampoerna!" This made the crowd stand and cheer wildly. In fact, Averland participants were already involved in promoting A-Mild; most were just not getting paid for their labor.

In this chapter, I examine how Sampoerna recruits, directs, incentivizes, and monitors an assortment of actors—including sales promotion girls, artists, musicians, DIY entrepreneurs, hobby groups, event organizers, and students—to service, promote, and extend the A-Mild brand. I call them brand producers to emphasize how they actively make, rather than simply represent, the A-Mild brand (Foster 2008). In a broader industry context of tightening restrictions over its use of online and social media and traditional marketing channels, Sampoerna relies on brand producers to help consolidate, grow, and defend A-Mild's position as the top-selling cigarette brand in Indonesia. Posting tobacco product imagery on Instagram violates Indonesia's tobacco regulations (PP 109/2012 article 39), but sanction mechanisms are lacking. Sampoerna circumvents the rules by requiring contractors and ambassadors—and strongly encouraging event participants—to post on social media rather than doing so through its own offices and employees (Astuti, Assunta, and Freeman 2018, 47). Sampoerna markets A-Mild as a

“premium” (as opposed to “budget”) “low-tar, low-nicotine” (LTLN) machine-rolled kretek and constructs its brand identity around youth, community, and creativity, centering values and aesthetics that are often coded as countercultural, transgressive, activist, and anti-capitalist (Frank 1997).

Creativity is an increasingly dominant theme in A-Mild marketing, which invites Indonesian youth not simply to consume but also to produce, create, and make. Claiming thirty-two thousand registrations, the brand’s Go Ahead People website encouraged visitors “to learn, meet, show, share and sell their own creative works” and hosted a virtual display of twenty-two thousand artworks created by users (Astuti, Assunta, and Freeman 2018, 42; on a similar Djarum program, see Priyatna 2017, 135). Sampoerna’s ostensible rationale for Averland was both to celebrate and recognize (*apresiasi*) and to challenge and upgrade participants’ creative capacities and their ability to market their creative output, a mission that aligns the project with Indonesia’s vibrant youth do-it-yourself or DIY scene. Luvaas (2012) relates the rise of Indonesian DIY to the Asian financial crisis, which placed expensive consumer goods and brands out of reach. Dominated by impassioned male amateurs, Indonesian DIY challenges conventions of single authorship and fidelity to imported styles, celebrating instead fashion remixing, low-budget techniques, and limited-edition lines. These aesthetic strategies were often on full display at A-Mild events.

Sampoerna sought to reach this audience of young, community-oriented creatives by heavily promoting A-Mild in cities that featured a sizable young, middle-class, college-town demographic. Of the dozens of Sampoerna brand promotion events I attended in Malang, most were tied to A-Mild, although a couple promoted A-Motion. These events often featured professional or amateur live music, attractions like food photography or bodypainting, and small stands selling offbeat, small-batch, vintage, and homemade commodities.

A-Mild events were also sites for the distribution of branded swag, which participants acquired by winning prizes or taking advantage of special offers from sales promotion girls, such as a free T-shirt with the purchase of two packs of cigarettes. I justified my own acquisitive compulsion to collect an exemplar of each new item I came across on the grounds that all swag was research data, but I was also attracted to this brand kitsch. Before packing my bags to return to the United States, I laid out all the cigarette packs, T-shirts, jackets, mugs, lighters, selfie sticks, tote bags, waist packs, rain ponchos, and bracelets I had amassed and reluctantly weeded out precious packs and lighters to leave behind lest their total quantity land me in trouble with customs. Some of the swag that Sampoerna distributes is more personalized, such as individual and group studio photos taken against brand-themed backgrounds that served as event mementos or tote bags with a simple A that event participants—or one of Sampoerna’s sponsored artists—could hand-decorate with indelible ink markers. This swag encouraged youth to wear and declare their attachment to A-Mild, forged links between the brand and

quotidian practices such as drinking a beverage or taking a selfie, and embedded brand reminders into the broader environment—for example, in glimpses of branded backpacks worn by students on college campuses or on motorbikes.

Sampoerna exploits the context of precarity and un- or underemployment experienced by young Indonesians to align A-Mild with purportedly positive features of the gig economy, such as creativity, self-expression, and independence. A focus on creativity and community helps Sampoerna recruit cheap, flexible, and often unpaid labor to produce content and promote and populate brand events. Sampoerna flatters youth, nourishes and inflates their sense of agency, potential, and importance, and urges them to pursue their passions and improbable dreams. Sampoerna's strategy of courting creative youth as brand producers enables the company to extract valuable paid and unpaid labor from a wide swath of Indonesians, many of whom do not necessarily see themselves as performing labor for the tobacco industry. Thus, it not only enables Sampoerna to circumvent regulations on social media promotion of cigarettes but is also part of kretek capitalism's larger strategy of adopting global capitalist techniques to enroll and control a wide variety of labor. PMI, British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco International, and Imperial Brands have all been accused of using deceptive social media marketing practices by recruiting influencers and issuing specific instructions to promote their products. One study found that 123 hashtags associated with cigarette manufacturers' brands attracted 25 billion global views, with 8.8 billion in the United States alone (Kaplan 2018). Support for the creative arts is also a staple global tobacco public relations strategy rather than a unique feature of kretek capitalism. Arts philanthropy serves to buy political support and silence from communities that might otherwise be critical, and it associates cigarette companies with appealing aesthetic and political projects. In New York alone, the Museum of Modern Art, American Folk Art Museum, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Guggenheim Museum, American Ballet Theatre, American Museum of Natural History, Dance Theater of Harlem, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater have all benefited from tobacco industry patronage, and the US tobacco industry has been especially active in sponsoring music, arts, and festivals associated with the Black and Latinx ethnoracial markets it targets (Martin 2007; Proctor 2011, 120–21; Wailoo 2021). With the Met and MoMA availing themselves of tobacco industry largesse, it is unsurprising that small groups and individuals in underfunded art scenes have done the same.

After exploring A-Mild's advertising history and brand persona, I structure the rest of the chapter around abbreviated portraits of brand producers. Analyzing how these figures speak to processes larger than themselves including commodification, class formation, and globalization, I suggest that brand producers evidence how Sampoerna has harnessed global marketing tools associated with the influencer economy and content creation to enroll young people as both workers for and consumers of the A-Mild brand (Barker, Harms, and Lindquist 2014). The

chapter complements scholarship on the rich and complex subjective experiences of youth by illuminating the symbiotic relationship between youth, commodities, and corporations, in which the latter provisions and parasitically appropriates the material and semiotic resources on which youth culture is based (Lee 2016; Luvaas 2012; Nakassis 2016). At the same time, it complements scholarship on marketing and branding by examining diffuse processes of labor elicitation and extraction. I first introduce sales promotion girls (SPGs) because their roles and the incentives and constraints under which they labor offer useful points of comparison with other brand producers. Although SPGs' bodies, dress, and social interactions are subject to rigid controls and their occupational category is socially stigmatized due to its resemblance to sex work, I propose that the overt and bounded nature of their work renders it less insidious than that of influencers and unpaid brand promoters. The chapter then proceeds down a hierarchy of brand producers—from influencers of national stature to regional influencers, event organizers, and unrewarded participants—before concluding with undesirable event participants, including myself, who threaten to undermine rather than generate brand value.

My short and fragmentary presentations of brand producers embrace “thin description” and reflect the shallow encounters and relations produced in the party atmosphere that pervades brand promotion fieldwork settings, where music was often so loud that one had to shout to be heard (Jackson 2013; Ferguson 1999, 18–19). Besides this uncondusive auditory environment, Shahnaz, Fatma, and I often felt inhibited around participants in these settings, which were by design suffused in social anxiety and where we were often regarded with suspicion (a point I will return to later). Shahnaz's efforts to connect with brand producers outside of promotional events yielded only a limited number of meetings, often under less than ideal conditions. We gathered in cafés and food courts where loud music played, and we found that some interlocutors were preoccupied with texting and were less than enthusiastic in conversing with us. These shallow encounters reflect the reality of the kind of labor that brand producers perform.

#### MEET A-MILD

Advertising and marketing experts often refer to brands as persons who possess unique traits and DNA, the ability to grow and change over time, and the capacity to anchor social relations and attachments with consumers (Manning 2010, 36).<sup>4</sup> Over a chocolate martini at a swanky Jakarta bar, Heru, a senior Sampoerna marketing manager, explained to me, in English sprinkled with Indonesian, how A-Mild relates to Marlboro in Indonesia. “Marlboro is *sombong* [arrogant], a *bule* [white guy], a leader. He gets the *cewek cantik* [pretty girls]. He can't wear a sarong and drink tea with you. That's OK. A-Mild is looking over at Marlboro, thinking ‘Saya masih kumpul sama teman!’ [I'm still hanging out with my (male) buddies.]” Although Philip Morris has retired its Marlboro Man, Heru suggested

the durability of some of the iconic advertising campaign's themes when he personified Marlboro as mature, deep-voiced, attractive, authentic, and confident, in contrast to the quick speech and anxious adolescent masculinity of A-Mild.

Advertising agencies have played a key role over the decades in sculpting the themes, imagery, and language associated with A-Mild's "prosthetic personality" (Malefyt 2009; Malefyt and Moeran 2003; Manning 2010, 35; Mazzarella 2003; Schudson 1984).<sup>5</sup> The book that Putera Sampoerna commissioned marketing consultants to write frames the A-Mild brand as Putera's brainchild and the first mass-produced, machine-rolled, LTLN clove cigarette brand in Indonesia when it was released in 1989 (Kartajaya 2005; Djarum developed an LTLN kretek in 1986 for the US market; see Hanusz 2000, 143). Sampoerna invested considerable resources into the new product and buried another brand, Sampoerna Exclusive, to convert its rolling machines to A-Mild production.

In a lavish 1990 ad that Sampoerna showcases in its museum and, for many years, ran around Independence Day, the company's 234-member marching band played their instruments while traversing the precipitous path toward Mount Bromo's volcanic crater, a Sampoerna helicopter circling overhead to enhance the drama. Sampoerna recruited marching band members from its hand-rolling cigarette factories, implying that these workers had participated in their future job displacement by promoting the new, ostensibly safer, machine-rolled kretek. But A-Mild's success was not instant. According to one of Sampoerna's marketing consultants, its first slogan, "Taste of the Future," invited the sarcastic response, "What taste?" Smokers found that the cigarette lacked the kick to which they were accustomed, even if, according to lab smoking machines, A-Mild packs as much nicotine as Marlboro Reds and more tar. Smokers mockingly dubbed A-Mild transvestite (*banci*) cigarettes, associating them with stigmatized transgender femininity and consumption practices (Boellstorff 2005, 9, 11). The "Taste the Future" ad may have been successful in stirring an emotional response and linking Sampoerna's new cigarette to East Javanese and national imagery, but it could also be seen as grandiose and pompous, too clearly meant to awe with its breathtaking scenery, swelling music, company helicopter, and the sonorous command to "taste the future."

A-Mild achieved greater success after Sampoerna ditched the sincere, grown-up act and began to more openly target youth with animation, humor, and gently subversive and countercultural themes. A-Mild's languishing sales picked up in 1994, when Sampoerna became the first Indonesian brand to deploy animation in its advertisements and adopted a new slogan, "How Low Can You Go?" As a cartoon A performed limbo and other funny feats on television and billboards, sales climbed from eighteen to fifty-four million sticks a month (Kartajaya 2005, 439–40). In 1996, Sampoerna launched a new campaign, *Bukan Basa Basi*, implying liberation from conventional cultural norms such as socially obligatory polite and idle chit-chat (*basa basi*).<sup>6</sup> The new ads featured animated chattering teeth and subtly challenged the indirect, understated, hollow speech styles that were the

hallmark of elite political discourse under Suharto (Reynolds 1999, 87). Sampoerna went on to anoint itself the trendsetter and to accuse its competitors of being imitators (*ikut-ikutan*) in an “Others Can Only Follow” campaign that featured an assortment of adorable animated crustaceans, rabbits, and cows. A senior executive told me with false chagrin that Sampoerna’s use of animation had unfortunately led some to accuse the company of deliberately marketing to children.

After retiring its crew of animated animals, Sampoerna attached A-Mild to the cause of political and social reform, or *reformasi*, which was catalyzed by anti-Suharto protests in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Youth, especially middle-class college students who rapidly adopted activist practices and styles, saw themselves as central protagonists of the movement that toppled Suharto in 1998 after thirty-two years of authoritarian rule (Strassler 2010). Despite Sampoerna’s long-standing deference to and complicity with state authority, its new ads constructed the A-Mild brand as anti-authoritarian. An “If Things Could Talk” (*Kalau Barang Omong*) campaign gave voice to everyday and informal objects of student life with handwritten demonstration-style placards offering veiled political commentary on themes like protest purpose (a wok that demands not to be heated up for no reason), state violence against demonstrators (an alarm clock complaining about being beaten when it politely signals the time), sycophancy (a lollipop promising rewards to whoever licks the best), and the evergreen topic of corruption (boxer shorts weary of covering shame, a chocolate cake on which all will feast, and an armchair that requires cleaning to get rid of the bedbugs).<sup>7</sup> A-Mild’s newfound penchant for political and social critique next spawned the “Ask Why” (*Tanya Kenapa*) campaign, which urged viewers to question authority. One ad features a young man approaching a vending machine with a great sack of coins, which he feeds into the machine until it coughs up a mortarboard graduation cap. A young woman lugging her own sack of coins queues up behind him. The ad goads, “Why is becoming smart so expensive?” (*Mau pintar kok mahal?*). Another ad critiques the old guard for its mistrust of youth, showing a classic senior male figure (*bapak*) in an office forcing a young man to adopt his short stature, paunch, bald head and mustache (*Yang lebih muda yang gak dipercaya*).<sup>8</sup> Others take aim at the state. In one, two young men speedily cart furniture to the second story of their home, don flippers and mask, and dive from the upstairs window into the dun-colored river coursing through their street. Uniformed police bob along in a motorboat, waving cheerfully and advising residents to remain calm through a crackling megaphone, underscoring the perennially late and ineffectual government response to the floods that routinely devastate and displace Jakarta residents. “Banjir kok jadi tradisi?,” the ad quips. “Why have floods become a tradition?” Another criticizes state bureaucrats with their tiresome red tape and stamps for making simple tasks difficult (*Harusnya gampang dibikin susah*) and seizing ordinary citizens’ time (Verdery 1996). If satirical ads seemingly align Sampoerna with citizens against the state, they obscure the ways in which the



cigarette industry and the Indonesian state are deeply, if ambivalently, intertwined with one another in relations of “predatory reciprocity” (George 2010, 82).

By constructing A-Mild as the cigarette of choice for “progressive Indonesia,” Sampoerna offers brand identification and positions the act of smoking as a means to resolve the ambivalent political feelings its ads stir up (Sampoerna 2016). The term *progressive* strategically leaves room for interpretation concerning the kind of progress implied: individual or collective, material or social, modernizing or redistributive. The “Ask Why” ads embrace *reformasi* as a middle-class enterprise with a conservative rather than revolutionary critique of the present. They furnish a limited script for social action and leave nebulous whether political agency is located in individual or collective subjects. They provoke and prod but do not advise or resolve. They invite youth to reflect on their social position and lack of power but leave it unclear if they should do anything about this or just “relax and have a cigarette” and “wait until they come into their own” (Nichter et al. 2009, 105). The ads’ ambivalence vis-à-vis *reformasi* is reminiscent of how early advertisers in the United States served as “missionaries of modernity” through their tendency to “emphasize that which is new and changing and, at the same time, acknowledge, manage and alleviate signs of discontent with modernity” (Marchand 1985; Tinkler 2006, 83). Early cigarette ads framed women smoking as modern but unthreatening by subtly reasserting conventional gender relations (Tinkler 2006, 84).

A-Mild ads work at multiple levels, offering slapstick humor that appeals to all ages—down to very young TV viewers—and the pleasure of political critique delivered with a wink that demands interpretive work on the part of a more discerning audience. They are crafted to appeal to key Javanese tropes and rhetorical strategies valorizing indirect speech and word slippages that require an insightful and clever audience to decipher their meaning (Nichter et al. 2009, 104).<sup>9</sup> Sampoerna marketing staff, in fact, admitted that even they often found A-Mild ads puzzling. The appeal is, in part, exclusionary, asking viewers whether they are among the initiated. One ad explicitly suggests that the viewer lacks in-group status but might someday acquire it: “In the future you’ll understand” (Nanti juga lo paham).

In addition to wordplay and punning, A-Mild copywriters and marketers rely heavily on English and informal sociable speech (*bahasa gaul*) to interpellate cosmopolitan Indonesian youth. Many ads connote informality in the way they present text, evoking the materiality of chalk, graffiti-style spray-painted and stenciled writing, and paint applied to media such as bricks or paper that is crudely sewn, crinkled, or lined as if ripped from a schoolbook. A range of lexical items connote sociable (*gaul*) speech: alternative spelling, acronyms, shortening of words (e.g., *gak* or *nggak* rather than *tidak* for “not”), insertion of particles (*kan*, *sih*, *nya*), and the pronouns *gue* (I) and *lo/lu/loe* (you), which derive from Hokkien Chinese and are commonly used in Jakarta but can sound marked and somewhat crass to non-Jakartans (Djenar, Ewing, and Manns 2018; Sneddon 2003). Gaul



emphasizes solidarity and shared social identity as opposed to status differentials, formality, and hierarchy, but it entails its own coercive appeal, status signals, and valorizations that distinguish those who are cool, modern, urban, and youthful from those who are old-fashioned, traditional, awkward, and rural (Smith-Hefner 2007). Although its roots are in “the world of social marginals,” gaul style has come to incorporate middle-class concerns as well as English words and phrases, becoming more strongly associated with “an increasingly cosmopolitan, Indonesian youth culture”—precisely the demographic that A-Mild’s marketing targets (Smith-Hefner 2007, 184, 197).

Sampoerna has freely deployed English in A-Mild slogans, ad copy, and marketing materials since the brand’s inception. Sampoerna’s “Go Ahead People” campaign marketing props invite youth to “Find Your Path,” “Follow Your Heart,” “Change Status Quo,” “Change the Ordinary,” “Take Risk,” “Deliver the Unexpected,” and “Don’t Think Twice.” A-Mild English often sounded grammatically off or peculiar to me, but I was not its intended target. It matched how young Indonesians use English in ways that signal their membership in a global youth community familiar with transnational flows of ideas without subordinating their expression to the rules and constraints of “proper” English grammar and spelling. In speech and social media, youth often code-switch or combine Indonesian, regional languages, and English. In so doing, they liberate themselves from the stultifying baggage of both the government-policed and -standardized “good and correct” (*baik dan benar*) national language and ethno-local languages, which are unappealing insofar as they are framed as “traditional” and frozen in time (Djenar, Ewing, and Manns 2018; Keane 2003). Such linguistic experimentation, and the more pronounced flouting of conventional linguistic rules in the post-Suharto era, is flourishing within a broader array of youth practices that appropriate codes, style, and signifiers as found cultural objects (Luvaas 2012). Writing of similar language mixing in the Philippines, Rafael (1995, 113) suggests that Taglish furnished “the means for evading the pressures of the linguistic hierarchy, an action that at certain points broached the possibility of reconfiguring the social order.” A language that summons and mobilizes a mass audience can be turned to the purposes of mass political action, but it can also be harnessed in the service of mass consumption. A-Mild’s signature linguistic mixing suggests the voice of the commodity masquerading as the voice of political action (Rafael 1995, 117–18).

A-Mild advertisements have played a critical role in attracting consumers and setting key brand themes. The rest of this chapter is devoted to understanding how brand production labor—which takes place outside the sphere of traditional advertising—builds on the themes established across the prior decades’ commercials and explores how Sampoerna recruits, choreographs, and monitors this work. I build on Foster’s (2008) ethnography of the global soda industry, which goes beyond the relationship between ad agencies and client firms to bring together production- and consumption-centered accounts of brands and show

how brand managers seek to capture the value produced by consumers. Banks (2022) has similarly shown that US corporations use Black cultural patronage to accrue diversity capital and enlist ordinary people as “prosumers” who both consume and produce brand meaning. The examples that follow illustrate Sampoerna’s approach to identifying, recruiting, incentivizing, coordinating, and monitoring brand producers.

### SALES PROMOTION GIRLS

While Sampoerna markets A-Mild as a brand associated with self-expression, creativity, independence, and spontaneity, the company aims to tightly control and regiment the speech, dress, makeup, and bodies of A-Mild’s sales promotion girls, or SPGs. As a professional title, “sales promotion girl” has negative connotations; it underscores the gendered nature of the labor, infantilizes women, and evokes the sexual objectification and age discrimination the work entails. When we met in a café, Dia and Ayu, two SPGs who had concluded an eight-month contract with Sampoerna and moved on to work for Sampoerna’s largest competitors, Djarum and Gudang Garam, told us that some firms were beginning to refer to them as brand presenters, or BPs. They found the new title to sound better, but they referred to themselves and peers by the more familiar SPG as we talked. Defending their work against detractors, they noted that they earned six million rupiah a month working four days a week, which was double what they would make as bank tellers working significantly longer hours (and still facing considerable scrutiny over their appearance and dress). Ayu was saving for a college degree.

Cigarette companies contract female SPGs and male “team leaders” through vendors rather than hiring them directly. This enables them to associate brands with a rotating crop of new, fresh, and youthful—rather than familiar and aging—faces without directly carrying out the sexist, ageist, colorist, and weight-discriminatory work of hiring and firing these workers and directly enforcing normative ideals of attractive femininity and masculinity. A social media post advertising SPG recruitment included age and physical requirements: twenty-five years old or younger, at least 163 centimeters in height, good looking, and with a “proportional” body. Most are light skinned, suggesting that pale skin color is an unstated requirement of the SPG selection process. Four SPGs typically work with one team leader who also has to be tall, slender, young, attractive, and, as one acknowledged, “maybe a bit of a playboy” (*sedikit playboy*). Akin to a sanitized pimp, the team leader benefits from the sexual attractiveness of multiple women, monitoring and controlling their interactions with men, and also potentially serves as their protector, ready to heroically insert himself into and rescue her from encounters with rude, inebriated, or ignorant customers who violate the implicit boundaries governing their interactions. The team leader plans their weekly routes, inputs data, and records SPG-customer interactions on an iPad.



FIGURE 14. A sales promotion girl closes a sale. Photo by author.

Cigarette companies dictate the clothing, hairstyle, and makeup that constitute the SPGs' brand identity. Compared to its competitors, Sampoerna applied more elaborate and stringent rules to the visual spectacle of SPGs' bodies. Sampoerna insisted on natural black rather than dyed hair, disallowed jewelry and accessories, styled them with identical hair and makeup for events, and provided their uniform down to handbags and shoes (Keds, wedges, or heels). Each brand had a dress uniform, typically reserved for night events, and a pants uniform that they mostly wore for daytime rounds. Sometimes, Dia was forced to cram her size-40 feet into painfully small and tight shoes. Male team leaders are allowed to smoke, but SPGs in uniform must not be seen smoking and are supposed to cover their uniform with jackets when eating. Their beautiful bodies were not supposed to be caught in acts of consumption (or excretion, for that matter). At events, we caught glimpses of SPGs furtively eating in cars and smoking while queuing up for public toilets, where we overheard one ask a colleague if she feared the impact of her smoking on her children.

Dia and Ayu expressed a preference for day over night shifts. Daytime venues include government offices, markets, cafés, and "hangout places" with company sponsorship, whereas night shifts often involved dark, noisy clubs. The team leader typically schedules seven daily site visits, with each workday officially starting at 9:00 a.m. and ending at 5:00 p.m., although in fact, they meet at 7:00 a.m. at the vendor's office to don uniforms and apply makeup. Except for special events, they apply their own makeup, which video tutorials instruct them should be "minimal" but sufficient to ensure a "fresh" appearance. At 8:00 a.m., they go to Sampoerna's

office, where marketing officials take attendance and brief them, and they pray together. Over a weekly recap, they relay feedback on consumer reactions to products and on which venues were bustling or quiet.

Sampoerna specifies how many packs SPGs must sell, who is a potential customer, and how interactions should unfold. SPG sales targets were typically forty-five packs a day, although at nighttime events, they may be set higher (fifty-five packs, for example). They are not supposed to sell to existing Sampoerna customers and are supposed to limit sales to two packs per customer. According to these rules, SPGs should confine themselves to recruiting new customers from the population of existing legal-aged smokers of non-Sampoerna products. This shores up cigarette executives' refrain that they are only trying to gain market share from competitors rather than recruit new smokers to replace or exceed the number who quit or die. SPGs are supposed to request identification from the "baby-faced." They practiced their scripted customer interactions via roleplaying, aiming to radiate warmth and enthusiasm (Hochschild 2012). Dia and Ayu modeled approaching a young man with a polite yet familiar "Excuse me, do you smoke?" (*Permisi, masnya merokok?*). They follow a positive response with "Which brand?" (*Merokok apa?*). If the answer is no, or if he already smokes a Sampoerna brand, they're supposed to "close" the interaction and move on. If he smokes a competitor's brand, they try to lure him into purchasing a compatible Sampoerna brand, using a special offer like a pack and lighter. If he tries and dislikes the cigarette, they sweetly respond, "Maybe you're just not used to it yet" (*Mungkin belum terbiasa Mas*). The worst customers, Dia complained, were the chatty ones who asked lots of questions then bought nothing (*diajak ngobrol, nanya-nanya aja, banyak omong tapi nggak beli*). SPGs had to memorize three important points for each brand, referred to as the key brand message. A Marlboro SPG shared that the brand was "the number one cigarette in the world; the international market leader, modern and masculine; made from choice tobacco for the smoker's enjoyment." A-Mild "is number one in Indonesia; invites you to have positive thoughts, go ahead; and if you'd like to learn more please visit [goaheadpeople.com](http://goaheadpeople.com)." SPGs are not allowed to take photos with customers, offer personal information (*identitas*), or upload selfies of themselves in uniform.

Not surprisingly, SPGs found ways to bend the rules governing their behavior. To achieve sales targets, SPGs might violate rules restricting to whom and how much they were allowed to sell by approaching non-smokers and selling to existing Sampoerna customers or even retailers in a pinch. Although team leaders are officially in charge of SPGs, veteran SPGs taught naïve new team leaders taking a by-the-book approach to adopt alternative strategies to meet their quotas and produce the right data. These script departures and small acts of subterfuge did not undermine Sampoerna's goal of selling cigarettes.

In addition to their contractual wages, Sampoerna used discretionary gifts and prizes to motivate SPGs and team leaders to work hard, assimilate brand knowledge, and compete with one another. Sampoerna officials quizzed them on new promotions and rewarded correct answers with prizes like T-shirts. When a

promotional program concluded, the highest performing SPG and team leader won public praise and prizes. The SPG's prize might be a bag or makeup, either of which would enhance the key value—attractiveness—she held for Sampoerna.

The brand producers described in the following sections enjoy greater apparent agency and latitude in their relations with Sampoerna than SPGs. Yet they, too, are often subject to company tracking and targets, asked to parrot key brand messages, made to compete for recognition and rewards, and gifted strategic prizes that enhance their value to Sampoerna. As influencers, many face targets and popularity indicators over which they have incomplete control, such as social media metrics (followers, visits, likes) and audience size at events they create and promote. Whereas SPGs work long hours with misleading start times, influencers are always potentially working, being active on social media, monetizing social relationships, and rendering their lives Instagrammable. SPGs do not choose the brand identity and markers they wear, but they can detach them at the end of each shift (Goffman 1959). The identity of the influencer becomes implicated in that of the cigarette brand, and Sampoerna constantly probes and assesses this identity for how it contributes to or detracts from the brand. The depersonalized and scripted nature of SPGs' work interactions also distances them from their professional speech acts, whereas influencers must try to maintain personal appeal and authenticity while also promoting company products and events. The lower-visibility forms of control to which influencers are subject, then, arguably exert more insidious effects on them and their social relations, which they are urged to constantly expand, exploit, and commodify.

#### THE ROCK STAR: MUSIC BANDS, SELF-BRANDING, AND MERCHANDISE

Arian Arifin, lead singer in the Jakarta-based heavy metal rock band Seringai and national key opinion leader in the eyes of Sampoerna, served as an Averbland workshop leader. At his popular workshop, participants squeezed tightly onto low benches under a large army-green tent and listened attentively as Arifin dispensed lessons on how to conform to an aesthetic of dissent and appear creative, countercultural, and rebellious while being shamelessly capitalist.

Arifin skillfully worked the crowd with his jokes and informal manner. While staff worked on starting his PowerPoint presentation, he comfortably began dispensing advice, telling his rapt audience to follow the Rolling Stones' example: "You need to be photographed smoking and drinking whiskey, even if maybe you don't actually smoke." "Don't think you can live off your music earnings alone if you're in indie, rock, or pop genres," he cautioned. "Get a real job! And, even if your fan base is limited to five hundred people, you need to maintain them."

Launching into his presentation, titled "Band's Image and Merchandising," he explained, "Bands have various images. Duran-Duran: fashion. The Cure: goth,





FIGURE 15. A rock star dispensing marketing advice to aspiring musicians. Photo by author.

alternative. The Sex Pistols: punk rock, anti-establishment. Morrissey: a dandy.” As he listed these musicians, Arifin refrained from passing judgement on them, opting instead to present their distinct identities as equal and neutral insertion points for capitalism (similarly, see Banks 2022 on corporate sponsorship of Black musical genres).

“Logos,” he continued. “Choose something that works with your music, like Kiss did.”

“Fashion! Black shirts are safe for heavy metal.” Joking about their ubiquity, he pretended to search for a friend at a concert, yelling into an imaginary mobile phone, “I’m by the stage, black T-shirt!” (Gue di panggung, baju hitam!).

“Consider your look carefully. If you’re handsome, you’re already safe” (Kalau ganteng, sudah aman). Later, when an audience member raised his hand to ask a question, Arifin told the young man, to his surprise, that he was handsome (*lu ganteng*).

“Keep your image consistent, but it can change and evolve. Pearl Jam looked better when they were younger, like a garage band; now they’re more like uncles” (*lebih Om-Om*).

Turning to merchandise, Arifin explained who the Grateful Dead were and how they sold T-shirts. The Misfits? Super capitalists (*kapitalisme banget*). “With declines in sales of music in physical format,” he counseled, “merchandise has become more important.” He did the math on potential profits from T-shirt sales, then described how his band had come up with patches, denim vests, jackets, and

colorful bandanas. “One person will buy like five bandanas. Is this capitalism? YES!!!” he roared with an evil laugh. After describing a controversy over a Seringai T-shirt criticizing the police, he observed, “If your fans think a T-shirt is forbidden, they just want it more. The same goes for mistakes in the screening process.” These strategies had apparently worked for Seringai, which had had the good fortune of having one of their T-shirts feature in the magazine *CosmoGirl*.

To ensure that the Q&A would get off to a lively start, Arifin announced that the first five people who asked questions would get a free T-shirt. After inspecting what he held in his hands—a mock tuxedo shirt emblazoned with the slogan “Change the Ordinary”—he irreverently rebuked Sampoerna for its ugly swag (“Maaf Sampoerna tapi kaos lu jelek sekali”).

As he nourished young people’s musical dreams and advised them on how to style and market themselves, tend their fan base, sell merchandise, and make use of assets like good looks, Arifin obviated the tension between rebellion and capitalism by proposing that the former serve the latter. Smoking and drinking burnish a rebellious brand image. Pissing off police sells T-shirts. Selling T-shirts and bandanas is its own form of gleeful rebellion against (outmoded and puritanical) punk and death metal values of anticapitalism and authenticity.<sup>10</sup> Even his small act of rebellion against his sponsor—telling Sampoerna its T-shirt sucked—was nicely consistent with the transgressive persona Sampoerna cultivates for A-Mild, and thus could be not only tolerated but valued by the company.

Cigarette manufacturers take advantage of *indie fleksibel* musicians who identify as “independent” and embrace an anti-commercial DIY ethos while “flexibly” accepting cigarette brand sponsorship. Sponsored musicians defend the commodification of their cultural production and claim they maintain creative autonomy and authenticity because brands like A-Mild do not intervene into their output or decisions to air social and political views (Bagaskara 2017). Framing cigarette companies’ role as normal and positive, they insist that sponsorship helps build and promote the music scene, provides funding for tours, pays for album production, guarantees the quality of audience experience and music venues, and improves musical quality with better instruments and sound checks. Audiences, meanwhile, have grown accustomed to free or heavily sponsored and discounted music festivals (Banks 2022, 71–72). Arifin similarly reassured his youthful audience that cigarette sponsorship supported self-marketing and that neither was cause for shame or embarrassment.

#### THE COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE SELFIE IMPERATIVE

By encouraging youth to take photographs and post them through brand-affiliated and “independent” social media, Sampoerna worked around regulations restricting its own social media activity and associated A-Mild with a creative and informal aesthetic and attractive youth.



Yohan, a national key opinion leader with a more sedate personality than Arifin, facilitated these goals in the Averland afternoon photography workshop I attended. I hoped to pick up some useful pointers to improve my photography skills, but the workshop proved brief and geared toward controlled composition. Yohan went over lighting, styling, composition, point of interest, backdrops, cameras, and editing apps. After discussing genres and styles—minimalist, flat lay, mood, freestyle, artsy, high key, low key—Yohan announced that participants would have the opportunity to shoot photos with three models. They could post the results under the Averland hashtag on Instagram, and Yohan himself would review entries and select a winner who would receive an unspecified gift from Sampoerna.

Behind the tent, the models' handler brusquely roused them: "You can't play with your mobile phones all day. Time to get up and work!" An MC attracted to the scene joked, "You're not allowed to take the models home with you!" (*Gak boleh dibawa pulang ya!*).

Shyly at first, the mostly male budding photographers began interacting with the models, asking them to engage in various activities or assume certain postures. The exquisitely awkward and uncomfortable scenes that ensued produced Sampoerna's desired results. Averland participants posted Instagram photos with the requisite hashtags, connecting A-Mild with colorful images of attractive young people. For those not in the know, the models appear to be ordinary unpaid participants in the events. Participants also posted plenty of flat lay compositions that appeared to be inspired by Yohan's work, often incorporating cigarettes and A-Mild paraphernalia. These photos attracted many likes as well as comments in the youthful social media prose style that slides between regionally inflected and familiar Javanese, Indonesian, Jakarta slang, and English.

Encased in a spirit of learning, fun, and potential rewards, the competition concealed how Sampoerna was inducing participants to perform "aspirational labor" (Duffy 2017). They produced social media content benefiting Sampoerna in the hope that they might access more remunerative opportunities and potential acclaim via a competition win, a connection with Yohan, or a paying sponsor somewhere. The competition fostered the cruel optimism that feeds the gig economy and licenses the economic vulnerability of a large, young, and underemployed middle class who, with limited decent job prospects, get to be creative (Berlant 2011; McRobbie 2016). Averland participants' aspirational labor produces the impression of grassroots, spontaneous support for A-Mild.

The competition was consistent with Sampoerna's broader practice of encouraging photography and social media use. At its regular promotional events, Sampoerna's event organizers set up irresistible selfie walls with marketing objects and props including hashtags. Sampoerna also encourages selfie-taking by provisioning branded selfie sticks (*tongsis*, short for narcissism sticks [*tongkat narsis*]) as a promotion with the purchase of two packs of cigarettes or as part of the goody bag each participant received upon arrival in Averland.

## MC, DJ, AND SPECIAL BRAND AMBASSADOR

In larger cities like Medan, Surabaya, Bandung, and Jakarta, Sampoerna hires third parties to recruit, coordinate, and monitor “special brand ambassadors.” These ambassadors, whom Sampoerna values for their coolness, creativity, and specific community links, serve as influencers and event planners. In 2016, they earned an average base pay of 3.5 million rupiah per month for the duration of their year-long contracts, at the end of which they were subject to review and potential contract renewal. Bu Tina, a marketing manager in Jakarta, explained that most Sampoerna ambassadors were in entertainment and “still college students, with a community and organization.” Sampoerna sought “social media freaks” who are “very strong in their community as online users, someone that has a lot of followers, they speak up, make comments, they are very active in social media.” Once ambassadors were under contract, a third party monitored them to see how they wielded their influence for Sampoerna. “Their conversations can be tracked. How active are they in talking about our brand? They can also see, what is the impact of that? If they put the words Soundsation or AZone [A-Mild promotional events] in the search engine they can see how frequently it is being visited, how quickly it is being discussed, how far it is connected with our brand A Mild. This technology focus fits with consumer profile, they belong to the AB [middle and upper] economic class, LA [legal age] to 24/29.”

We met Mas Marko, a DJ, MC, and former Marlboro Brand ambassador, at a McDonalds in Surabaya. He arrived at eight o'clock for our 7:00 p.m. appointment. Marko considered himself a well-known act in Surabaya. As an MC, he explained, his job was to “be the connector cable between the DJ and the audience, touching the audience and sharing their feelings.” He got out his phone and rapidly scrolled through videos of his performances, pausing to display clips of him and a female DJ in tiny shorts “pumping up” audiences in Madura, Surabaya, and Bali. He lingered on moments where the audiences went wild, showing a touch of irritation when we failed to sufficiently appreciate the heady atmosphere he had generated (*Ini pecah! Paling pecah!*).

To be selected as a special brand ambassador, candidates had to demonstrate their capacity for creativity and attracting a community. Sampoerna contacted Marko out of the blue to interview alongside fifty others, of whom eleven were eventually selected as brand ambassadors. They represented various groups: radio, entertainment, event organizers, internet, music, bikers. Sampoerna had them individually explain their “fashion and roles,” then broke them into groups and issued challenges: “Say you have twenty million rupiah. How will you create a cool event?” Marko recalled how he had responded: “I thought urban; go to the communities like DJs, dance, clubbers, soccer players, sneakers.” Sampoerna asked them to “show off your potential and creativity.” “Back then, my ideas included foam parties, glow parties. Foam parties had existed for a while, but not in Indonesia, so it

was new and cool back then” (*hits saat itu*). He had seen examples from Singapore and Riau on YouTube. “In addition to displaying creativity,” Marko added, “you need to have at least one hundred real—not Facebook—friends.” Marko didn’t hesitate to accept the offer of becoming a Marlboro ambassador, adding in English, “It’s a challenge.” At various events, he soon discovered that long-standing acquaintances were, unbeknownst to him, also ambassadors (“Lho, ternyata kamu juga!”).

Sampoerna required ambassadors to “cocreate” six events a year with the company and set audience targets, such as a minimum audience of a thousand people at a medium-sized Marlboro event. The number of friends on the guest list who attend Marlboro events is a key performance indicator (KPI). Ambassadors, event organizers, and Sampoerna staff brainstormed potential events, coming up with half-baked ideas and then discussing how to realize them. “Events require a gimmick,” Marko elaborated. “For example, sneakers. You sell them, you demonstrate how to clean them, how to put your own designs on them, how to repair them. You make the hashtag, like #wecreatesneakers.” Sampoerna also put together small Marlboro events in Surabaya nightclubs like 360, Coyote, and Foreplay that ambassadors were expected to attend and promote on their social media.<sup>11</sup> Sponsored events invariably feature SPGs and often include games with swag prizes, selfie walls, and props with marketing messages.

Marko enumerated the rote series of stages involved in event promotion, starting with a countdown. “First you upload Sampoerna’s flyer. Closer to the event, you upload and rotate video flyers. After an event there’s more work to be done—making a movie with lots of graphics and a report. If you make a good movie, people will think, ‘I wish I’d been there!’ If a video is popular, you keep using it until it’s downgraded [getting less views] and it’s time for refreshing. You use various hashtags and handles until they get saturated, like #neversaymaybe and @mbigchallenge.” By equipping ambassadors with iPads for taking selfies and producing designs, Sampoerna deprived them of potential excuses for not being active on social media such as exceeding their data quota, running out of battery charge, or breaking their mobile phone.

Third-party team leaders policed what brand ambassadors smoked. A Gudang Garam International smoker, Marko tried Marlboro but disliked the cigarette, which he found burned too fast. Ambassadors are supposed to upload photos from every meeting, and once he accidentally left his pack on the table, prompting the team to do a retake without the offending cigarettes. One team leader confiscated ambassadors’ non-Sampoerna cigarettes on multiple occasions, crushing a half-filled pack in his fist or tossing cigarettes on the ground one by one while taunting “What’s this? What’s this for (*Apa ini? Buat apa ini?*)?” Unhappy with his own smoking habit, Marko employed various tactics to try to smoke less, including buying single sticks or not carrying a lighter, so he would have to approach someone for a light.

The coolness and popularity that Sampoerna valued in Marko were laborious and always provisional achievements. While learning his craft as an MC and DJ, Marko had initially felt awkward and then ashamed of his own feelings of awkwardness (*awal kaku, tapi aku malu jadi kaku*). He was terrified of being berated, of people shouting, “Get down!” or, “Why are you up there?” (Orang suruh turun! Kenapa di situ?). He learned his trade from a close female DJ colleague, from friends, and from YouTube videos. He tried different approaches and figured out what worked with his style, when to go mic up and mic down. He learned to confidently wield English expressions: “Say what?” “Let’s go!” and “Three-two-one!” Marko’s contract ended in December 2015, but like other alumni ambassadors, he was always invited to events where, with free or reduced-price tickets, he could see the work of his “younger siblings” and enjoy free drinks. Marko roundly condemned one junior ambassador (*adik*) who was uncool (*dia nggak hits*) and held an event that attracted an anemic turnout and low KPI (*event kurang KPI*). Although he might have recalled his own self-doubts and sympathized with this ambassador, he instead displayed disdain for the youngster’s failure, contemptuously distancing himself from the spectacle of unpopularity and low KPI.

Still in his twenties, Marko described a generation gap between ambassadors and Sampoerna’s marketing staff, whom he described as being in their thirties and up. This generation gap is also code for a yawning gap in hipness, in knowing and being cool, or *hits* in Marko’s parlance. Indeed, dressed in their uniforms—beige shirts with company logos and black slacks—marketing staff often looked uptight and out-of-place at their own events. Brand ambassadors possessed something marketing staff lacked: youth, coolness, and social influence among networks of young friends. At the same time, marketing staff enjoyed job benefits and security that the youth they contracted or manipulated to promote and consume cigarettes lacked.

#### THE VISUAL ARTIST AS LOCAL HERO

Below national key opinion leaders like Arifin and special brand ambassadors like Marko, Sampoerna recruited regional key opinion leaders or influencers whom it anointed as “local heroes” for A-Mild marketing purposes. We met artist Mas Rizki at a Sampoerna-sponsored café in Malang. He arrived wearing a pleather jacket atop a blue-and-white striped shirt and shorts. Between his tattooed arms and long hair, which he played with constantly, he looked the part of the alternative artist. After he accepted Sampoerna’s one-year contract, his friends teased him about his new identity, hailing, “Here comes the local hero!”

Rizki insisted that his artistic work and identity were uncompromised even as he described his relationship with Sampoerna in mercenary terms as monetizing his cultural cachet and influence. Rizki divided the art world into those who produce commercial or corporate work and those who do not, identifying with

the latter. He worked with Sampoerna to “survive” (he used the English word) but saw his real artistic endeavors elsewhere. “I’m able to adjust to Sampoerna’s frequency,” Rizki explained. “Sampoerna’s tactic is to use local heroes to introduce young people to products that Sampoerna isn’t allowed to promote directly.” While under contract, Rizki invited people to Sampoerna’s events using word of mouth and social media, urging friends to attend. Local heroes sent out Sampoerna’s official event announcements and crafted their own versions as well. Sampoerna instructed them to use A-Mild’s classic black, white, and red color scheme, but he violated their rules, using black and white and ignoring their pleas to throw in occasional red accents.

Like Marko, Rizki felt that Sampoerna’s marketing staff were hopelessly uncool in contrast to himself. Whereas Marko spoke of bridging a generation gap, Rizki saw himself as a youth culture pedagogue for Sampoerna’s marketing staff who were profoundly ignorant regarding art and music. “They don’t know what’s what, so I provide recommendations and guidance, explaining how zines work, different musical genres, and their audiences. I connected Sampoerna with good bands. I introduced them to the concept of collage, with which they were unfamiliar, and suggested event ideas which proved very popular.” In his view, the cigarette industry makes the music market. “There are lots of young people who want to see this or that band. With cigarette industry support, it’s not only possible to see them in Malang, it’s even free! Because I’m close to young people, I can share their desires and dislikes with Sampoerna.” He believed—correctly—that Sampoerna staff often “stalked” him on the internet and could therefore appreciate the scale of his contributions. Out of the blue, Sampoerna gave him a turntable as a reward for his services. He felt other local heroes were passive, whereas he spoke up frequently and constructively. Nevertheless, he found it arduous to change and influence Sampoerna staff.

Once Sampoerna had attached a monetary value to his social networks and influence, Rizki also began regarding them through the lens of their pecuniary value. Rizki’s contract ended after Averland, but Sampoerna continued to inform him about promotional events and paid him to take part on a per-event basis. “Some Sampoerna events get small turnouts because Sampoerna misunderstands young people.” At this point, he said, “I’m not interested in attending Sampoerna events or mobilizing friends unless I’m paid for my services [*jasa*]. If they want a popular event, they need to offer me a contract first [*harus kontrak dulu*].” When competitor firm Gudang Garam approached him to participate in its promotional event program (Urban GiGs), he agreed, but he continued to tend his relationship with Sampoerna and hoped for a more substantial future contract. When Shahnaz asked him to meet with us, he informed Sampoerna marketing staff and requested their permission to hold the meeting, which he felt was the right thing to do.

Rizki commodified his ideas, networks, and influence for Sampoerna despite his personal reservations around the cigarette industry. He had stopped smoking

and drinking three years earlier after joining a walking hobby group and finding himself short of breath after only a few meters. On occasion, he had pulled cigarettes from the mouths of friends who had committed to quitting and tossed them in the garbage can. I asked him if, as a former smoker himself who quit for health reasons, he felt any hesitation about contributing to events that promote smoking. “Smoking is a free choice that people make,” he responded, “and people can see that I in fact do not smoke.” I asked Rizki what he knew about who owns Sampoerna, whether it’s domestic or foreign or anything beyond that. “I cannot answer that question,” he responded stiffly. “I just know the people I’m acquainted with in Sampoerna.” Rizki rhetorically salvaged his own moral and artistic integrity by reducing Sampoerna to a collection of ignorant and uncool marketers with deep pockets and a keen interest in supporting youth culture.

#### EVENT ORGANIZERS

Sampoerna relies on event organizers (EOs) not only to plan and execute events but also to attract audiences of the right size and demographic composition, to identify, recruit, and coordinate individuals and communities as brand ambassadors, and to perform the social media outreach that Sampoerna is forbidden by law from doing itself. Sampoerna marketing staff may be uncool, but they can contract skilled and networked event organizers who broker and sell coolness. Event organizers were the intermediaries who identified Rizki and Marko and connected them with Sampoerna. We interviewed some Sampoerna EOs in a mall food court and others in their office, the rear of which functioned as a graveyard-cum-recycling-center for marketing props. They estimated that their small firms depended on Sampoerna for 70–80 percent of their revenue.

Typically, Sampoerna decides to hold an event, determines its target audience size, then works with EOs who are supposed to propose a creative theme, mobilize a community, and find a venue. “We need to show creativity when we make tender bids, have our fingers on the pulse of the latest trends, and maintain relations with the trendsetters,” Kardi explained. To achieve target audience sizes (for example, five hundred for an “A-Zone” event), Kardi employed tricks such as inviting friends who themselves have many friends, hiring good bands, and involving students. “If we don’t work with communities, we can’t get a large enough audience.” EOs perform grunt work like obtaining permits, reserving venues, and (for larger outdoor events) hiring a *pawang* (shaman) with the supernatural ability to prevent rain. Event organizers also supply hashtags and post their own photos to social media sites after events to ensure an appealing aesthetic and the appearance of popularity.

To boost the size and activity levels around Sampoerna’s events and to ingratiate the company with youth, event organizers often invited young entrepreneurs to erect stands selling artfully arranged products at sponsored events. These entrepreneurs specialized in small-batch silkscreened T-shirts, backpacks, herbal face





FIGURE 16. Celebrating the four top Sampoerna Hijau brand ambassador communities at a promotional event. Photo by author.

masks, used clothing, cutesy foods and drinks, pomade, and more. Some wrote their Twitter handles and Facebook pages on little prop blackboards. Such DIY production makes stylish and appealing the precarious gig economy and its entrepreneurial imperative of relentless self-promotion and self-branding (Enriquez 2022; Gershon 2018; Ravenelle 2019; Rosenblat 2018).

With increasing regulations on cigarette industry marketing, event organizers concluded, “communities are the future of smoking.” Their job was to find, cultivate, and insert themselves into these communities, which were often organized around a hobby and/or commodity like a camera. To create a “food photography” event promoting Instagram use, for example, event organizers contacted relevant communities and coordinated with student activity groups and campus hobby clubs, especially those focused on photography. They also created events for young artists to play music and exhibit their work in front of the mall and were considering creating a “base camp” where artists could meet and encourage and mentor one another.

More formally, event organizers mobilized communities to promote and sell Sampoerna products through the community ambassador program, which, Kardi recalled, started around 2012. His firm had hosted a smaller number of events over



the past year but still earned significant income from managing twenty A-Mild and Sampoerna Hijau community groups, each of which had a minimum of twenty members. Sampoerna Hijau communities included farmer groups, flower sellers, and old-fashioned bicycle (*sepeda onthel*) hobbyists and sought out well-known people such as hamlet leaders. “The community ambassador program works like an SPG,” Kardi explained. “If they achieve their target sales, they get a bonus and a prize, for example a generator. We drop off the goods, and if they aren’t sold, they’re returned.” Sales targets vary, but they average roughly ten packs a day. Sampoerna teaches groups the key brand message. Kardi observed that event organizers must “keep tight tabs on their groups and interact with them frequently. If they aren’t properly maintained, there’s the danger that they might switch vendors.”

Through the work of event organizers, local communities are transformed into non-innocent sites for smoker recruitment and brand promotion, with their parameters (e.g., twenty-member minimum) shaped by cigarette company demands and their activities nudged in directions that favor industry interests, including formalization, outreach, and social media activity (Amit and Rapport 2002; Creed 2006; Joseph 2002; Rose 1999; Welker 2009; Williams 1983).

#### THE CAMPUS HOBBY GROUP

Sampoerna appointed Andy, a figure in the Malang college music scene, as a team leader for its community ambassador program. The company valued Andy for his connections rather than his appearance. Heavyset and homely, with missing and tarnished teeth, he did not meet the standards set for male SPG team leaders. In a campus room reserved for his hobby group, Andy smoked Marlboro Black Menthol and A-Mild, casually flicking ash on the filthy floor where we sat and chatted. A former Surya smoker, he felt obliged to switch to Sampoerna products—or at least to pretend to—once he started working for Sampoerna. He had worked with Djarum and Gudang Garam before and, like Rizki, expressed a willingness to work with whichever company would pay him. Cigarette swag and promotional debris were everywhere: a multi-charger A-Mild “CommunityPeople” cord, a discarded “Enjoy Together” (*Nikmat Rame-Rame*) decoration he had removed from a Sampoerna Hijau waist pack because it embarrassed him; a Go Ahead sticker that he had pulled off a promotional lighter and pasted on a desk, and four stickers with different potential designs for the next A-Mild Limited Edition packs stuck on a plastic tub.

Andy explained that the “Switch In” program aims to convince community members who smoke competitor brands to switch to Sampoerna products. They promoted A-Mild—“the number one progressive product in Indonesia,” he recited in rehearsed, singsong speech. Sampoerna counts a community member who buys six Sampoerna packs in a month as a brand switch. They have achieved decent success, he mused, converting three hundred out of six hundred community smokers

to A-Mild. They chose an ambassador each month who was paid 900,000 rupiah and tried to sell forty-five packs a week. I asked whether they confined themselves to non-Sampoerna smokers since it would be easier to sell packs and cartons to different buyers. “That’s true,” Andy admitted, and proceeded to lay out alternative strategies for achieving targets. “You can calculate that if you’re selling 180 a month that means you’re getting about 5,000 rupiah for each pack you sell. You could sell them faster for a cheaper price than the 18,000 rupiah retail average, which is a lot for students. You could sell them at wholesale prices or make them seem cheaper by offering the pack for 17,000, plus a lighter from which you’ve removed the ‘GoAhead’ labeling and charge 2,000 rupiah rather than the 1,000 they are supposed to go for. There are various possibilities.” Like SPGs, community ambassadors had sales targets and key brand messages, and could bend the rules without imperiling Sampoerna’s ultimate goals.

#### COLLEGE STUDENTS AS CHILDREN OF AVERLAND

Averland alumni, or the “children of Averland” (*anak Averland*), had various responses to their experience. Two male participants who were themselves smokers were quite ambivalent. Mas Irfan explained that some friends first approached him about participating in the competition. He had made a zine, which he showed us on his mobile phone. They proposed new ways to attract people to underappreciated tourist sites. At a “technical meeting,” he recalled, Sampoerna gave them an MOU (memorandum of understanding) and encouraged them to read it carefully before signing. He was perturbed by the provision that all competition entry ideas belonged to Sampoerna, and those who submitted them had no claim to royalties or other forms of compensation if Sampoerna decided to use them. “I looked around at my friends, but no one else seemed to have a problem with it, so I signed it and handed it over.” After the trip to Averland, he gave his swag—a hooded snap-front jacket and backpack—to his younger sibling and created artwork to cover up the Averland logo. “An event organizer later approached me about becoming a cigarette seller, like an SPG. ‘That sounds like fun [*seru*],’ I said, although in reality, I felt tired [*capai*]. I guess we’re just used to display logos,” he concluded dolefully.

By contrast, Mbak Dewi, an undergraduate education major and artist whom we met at a campus café, was uncritically supportive of Sampoerna and breathlessly thrilled by the experience. When her friends decided to enter the Averland competition, she recounted, their group was initially all young women. After learning that they required a smoker, they recruited a male member. Sampoerna interviewed them at a café, where they described their plans for putting up murals in alleys to cover vandalism and make them more inviting places. Fortunately, Sampoerna selected her group (*Alhamdulillah menang*). At the technical meeting in a Chinese restaurant, their group received a generous 200,000 rupiah

voucher—more than enough to cover their meal. They signed an MOU, but she could not recall any details.

At Averland, Dewi attended Fine Art and Fashion workshops, learning about “very contemporary” artistic techniques as well as collage; she was now trying to incorporate collage into her artwork, which had previously been more realistic. The speakers at Averland, including the Sampoerna staff, “gave me motivation, although I’m still young. I long to be like them but know I’ll have to work hard first.”

Averland also offered Dewi a peer bonding experience. On the way to Averland, the bus was very quiet (*senyap*), while the way back was more fun (*seru*). She wistfully sang a line of the song they made up, and still sing: “At Taman Dayu, we exchange ideas” (Di Taman Dayu tukar pikiran). Sampoerna created a WhatsApp group for Averland alumni who send texts like “Hey, come visit my café.” She longed to participate and see everyone again, but she was very busy in her final semester.

Dewi saw Sampoerna as a company that “greatly contributes to and benefits the community and appreciates and empowers young people.” She assumed that it was an Indonesian company. I pointed out that it was owned by a foreign firm and asked if she thought the company might harm Indonesians. “No,” she responded. “Sampoerna gave us lots of presents, more than we could have imagined. The bag, the jacket, the pocket money, the black Casio watches. And this special wooden watch! Oh, but I loved it at Averland [*aduh kerasan banget di sana*]. I had never been camping before! It was all a valuable experience.”

I returned to the question of tobacco’s toll on Indonesians. Dewi admitted that her father quit smoking a few months ago due to high blood pressure. He had smoked Surya, A-Mild, and Dji Sam Soe. Her friend’s father, she reflected, died due to something tobacco-related. “But this all comes down to the choices of smokers,” she hastened to add, “for whom smoking is like snacking [*cemilan*].” Student artists in the United States, I observed, are often critical of large companies. She gazed down at the table and drew her finger along the wood, repeating the word “criticize” (*kritik*) but not responding otherwise to my words or the pious and problematic distinction between art and commerce they implied.

#### STEPCHILDREN OF AVERLAND AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Fatma, Shahnaz, and I felt certain the Sampoerna marketing team regarded us as unwanted stepchildren at Averland and other Sampoerna-sponsored events. If individuals are equipped with a style radar, “an embodied instrument of knowing that responds affectively to the projected coolness of those within visual distance,” mine screeched that I was profoundly uncool and out of place (Luvaas 2019, 246). Promotional settings triggered social anxieties and resurfaced dormant high school insecurities, which I quelled by recalling that I was too far outside the peer

group to even count in the social hierarchy.<sup>12</sup> Between my height (five feet six) and white (*bule*) racial identity, I stood out like a sore thumb. Then forty-two years old, I was roughly double the age of the company's target market, some members of which seemed to regard those in their forties as suffering from an affliction that would never visit them. Recent college graduates, my research assistants were the right age and class background, but Fatma dressed in a gender-ambiguous fashion that led the occasional SPG to do a double-take and try to figure out if she was a man to whom she should proffer cigarettes or a woman whom she should bypass. Fatma relished their confusion, but her rebellion against gender conventions somehow lacked A-Mild-style transgressive appeal. Shahnaz was more petite, easily passing as an attractive, feminine cisgender college student, but her neatly pinned veil served as a reminder of Islamic norms and piety that was not fully welcome in some of these settings. As a trio, we formed a frequent and not entirely welcome presence. We were recurring figures in event organizers' photos of Sampoerna events, but they avoided selecting images that included us in social media postings, and we likely inadvertently ruined otherwise usable images of attractive youthful fun.

Back when our appearance was a novelty, or on the occasional slow night, MCs who otherwise ignored us instead singled us out for public fun and display. Once, a gregarious female MC lobbed questions at me, holding her microphone under my nose to broadcast my responses. "Who are you? Where are you from? Do you think everyone in Malang is good and beautiful?" My panicked response to the last question was a halting "ummm, everyone . . ." (*ah, semua . . .*), which she swiftly converted to "Malang people are all sour!" (*asem semua!*) to everyone's amusement. She then insisted that Fatma and I play a game that involved blowing up balloons, billing our battle as Indonesia versus the United States (for the record, Indonesia won). MCs specialized in quick-thinking patter, wordplay, and sexual innuendo, but their humor could also be sexist or involve shaming people for their age, body size, or otherwise physically unattractive or unstylish appearance. They played on everyone's insecurities, including their own—insecurities that cigarettes are supposed to be strategically placed to resolve.<sup>13</sup>

Event organizers appreciated how our presence raised their audience numbers and often informed us about events, but Sampoerna marketing staff were more ambivalent. I suspect that when Edy told us we smelled like we'd been eating durian and put Fatma in a headlock at Averland, he was acting on the antipathy he and his colleagues felt toward us, picking on Fatma rather than me due to her youth, Indonesian status, and gender ambiguity, which allowed for a physical style of joking ordinarily more appropriate between men. In a subsequent and more discomfiting and humiliating encounter at a food photography event, Edy put Fatma in a headlock with one arm and covered her eyes with the other. His displays of masculine dominance took advantage of surprise and a joking quality to go unchallenged but left us retrospectively wishing we had responded differently.<sup>14</sup> I wondered if the



FIGURE 17. An MC calls attention to artists body-painting models at a promotional event. Photo by author.

Sampoerna marketing staff's ambivalence toward us was rooted in concern that we might publish a damning account of their work or report on their performance to Sampoerna's head office or perhaps in awareness that our presence, like their own, made these events less cool and harmed rather than benefited the brand. Whatever it was—perhaps some combination of these concerns—they seemed to find little upside in our presence. Sometimes it seemed to me that they were trying too hard to project that they were having a good time with their intricate cool handshakes and laughter. On the second night at Averland, one confessed that he felt like he was getting a cold, would rather be home with his family, and had no desire whatsoever to be there. When his boss had asked him to attend, however, the obligatory response was yes. If feigning fun and enthusiasm formed a sometimes burdensome chore, at least he was rewarded with a regular paycheck, unlike influencers whose fluctuating and intermittent contracts hinged on their popularity and likes.

. . .

This chapter has moved beyond agricultural and factory labor and wage relations to examine brand production labor. The labor may not feel like much and might even seem hyperlocal, community oriented, or self-motivated and self-promoting, encompassing activities like taking a selfie still or video and uploading it to Instagram or TikTok, attending a fun event or spreading the word about it on

WhatsApp, voting on the next A-Mild Limited Edition design, or posting an image of your latest work of art for others to admire and comment on. Globally, cigarette manufacturers have invested their attention, skills, and resources into eliciting and tracking this labor and its impacts. Ever adept at turning an obstacle into an opportunity, cigarette companies not only circumvent social media restrictions but also enlist a broad swath of Indonesians—students, underemployed youth, aspiring and actual celebrities—to commit their time, labor, creative ideas, and social influence to expanding cigarette consumption. Many of them even perform this work for free or for low pay and possible prizes. Others are quite savvy about what cigarette companies want from them and monetize their influence accordingly. Yet even those who are savvy tend to be uncritical of the cigarette industry, which provides so much support to underfunded creative spheres.

Given the dearth of industry critique among most influencers, I was surprised when a “local hero” from Semarang said of Averland, “What Sampoerna is doing is terrible, right?” He had quickly struck up a conversation with me in fluent English while silk-screening my free Averland souvenir T-shirt. A grindcore musician who also ran a silkscreen shop, he said he tried to parry Sampoerna’s demands for his ideas on how to get closer to Semarang youth and keep their relationship limited and “professional,” like working the silkscreen stand at Averland. His candor may have reflected his fast-approaching release from Sampoerna sponsorship and demands; he and his American wife were moving to California soon. Smoking would be harder to quit. His go-to brand was A-Mild.