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# Giving colour to emotions in entrepreneurship

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## ABSTRACT

This paper introduces colour as a visual resource for accessing the emotional experience of entrepreneurs. Colour has been demonstrated throughout the past decades to contain strong affective meanings and the ability to communicate specific emotional experiences. In this paper I show how colours are used by entrepreneurs through the colour timeline approach as a tool to facilitate the process of making sense of and expressing emotion. In particular, I show how colour can give form to complex emotions, draw out significant emotional events, and provide visual space for holistic reflection. This paper thus highlights the potential of colour for research on emotion in the context of entrepreneurship.

## 1. Introduction

Emotion<sup>1</sup> is a “hot topic” in the field of entrepreneurship (Cardon et al., 2012). As entrepreneurship is a highly emotional journey (Baron, 2008; De Cock, Denoo and Clarysse, 2020), scholars have increasingly endeavoured to examine how the affective state of entrepreneurs plays different roles in various stages of the entrepreneurial process (see Delgado García et al., 2015 for review). Despite the growing interest, the methods used in this field of research tend to be limited to verbal self-reports that require research participants to classify their emotional experience into pre-determined categories or to describe it in written or spoken form (Cardon et al., 2012; Dasborough et al., 2008). These approaches assume that research participants could accurately identify and express their emotion through words alone, thus ignoring individual differences in emotional awareness and verbal literacy (Elfenbein, 2007; Fineman, 2004).

To address this limitation, scholars have increasingly called for a multimodal form of inquiry that combine verbal and non-verbal methods (Clarke and Holt, 2017, 2019; Höllerer et al., 2019). Different modes have the potential to express meaning differently (Iedema, 2007), hence having multiple resources (modes) available for research participants to draw on could lead to different and richer responses. Visual resources in particular have been highlighted for its ability in communicating emotion (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002; Müller and Kappas, 2011). Visuals can provide holistic and immediate information without being restricted by linguistic rules (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Meyer et al., 2013). Further, visuals could serve as prompts for individuals to reflect more deeply and to elicit a richer response (Clarke and Holt, 2017, 2019; Slutskaya et al., 2012). Visual methodologies are therefore argued to be especially helpful when studying a sensitive topic or a phenomenon that is emotionally- or value-laden (Höllerer et al., 2019). However, while several studies have used visual methods to explore emotions around critical organizational events (e.g., Barner, 2008; Vince and Broussine, 1996), this approach remains underutilized in exploring emotion in entrepreneurship.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, emotion and affect are used interchangeably as an umbrella term that encompasses the general phenomenon of subjective feelings (Barsade, 2002) of pleasure or displeasure and of activation or deactivation (Russell and Barrett, 1999), which include dispositional affect, specific emotions, and moods (Kelly and Barsade, 2001).

In this paper I introduce colour as a visual tool for making sense of and expressing emotions generated through entrepreneurship. Colour is a visual attribute that carries meaning and has implications to emotion, cognition, and behaviour (Elliot and Maier, 2013). Especially in relation to affect, colour cannot be separated from its affective capacity and is even considered as “thinking’s affective accompaniment” (Massumi and Manning, 2014, p. 80). Colour also has a communicative function (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002) and it is possible to perceive and express emotions through colours (Beyes and De Cock, 2017; Connellan, 2013). Having this in mind, I argue that the use of colour as a visual resource can help enhance the participants’ reflective and meaning making process (Clarke and Holt, 2017, 2019), and so help uncover and shed light on affective experiences that would otherwise remain hidden (Höllerer et al., 2019; Slutskaya et al., 2012). To demonstrate the use of colour as a method of inquiry, I introduce the colour timeline approach and outline the insights generated from using the approach in examining the affective experiences of self-employed women in rural Indonesia. In so doing, this paper opens up new avenues for future research on emotion and contributes to the development of visual methodologies in the field of entrepreneurship.

## 2. Colour and emotion

Scholars have since long been interested in the association between colour and emotion (Adams and Osgood, 1973; Goldstein, 1942). Experiments have, for instance, demonstrated that bright colours are generally associated with pleasant emotions, while dark colours with unpleasant emotions (Hemphill, 1996; Jonauskaitė et al., 2019). The strong association between colour and affect is also reflected in our everyday language. Taking the English language as an example, there are many phrases using colours for expressing emotions, such as *seeing red* (anger), *feeling blue* (depressed or sad), and *tickled pink* (happy or pleased). Colour has therefore been suggested to have a strong affective capacity and the agency to communicate affective meanings (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002; Massumi and Manning, 2014). However, colour-affect association is not universal, as the meanings associated to colours are influenced by different factors, such as personal experience and culture (Chen et al., 2020; Madden et al., 2000). Colour can also have multiple, and sometimes competing, meanings. The colour white, for instance, can be “both uplifting and suppressing at the same moment” (Connellan, 2013, pp. 1546–1547). The meaning of colour is therefore situated in time and context, and it can be used differently depending on the individual or group that employs it.

Despite the strong association between colour and affect, colour has been rarely considered in entrepreneurship and organization studies in general. In fact, organizational scholarship has been criticized as being “colourless” due to the absence of colour in its body of research (Beyes and De Cock, 2017). With this in mind, I argue that there is untapped potential in using colour as a resource in research, particularly for examining the complexity of emotion in the context of entrepreneurship (Baron, 2008; Cardon et al., 2012; De Cock et al., 2020). Colours can be distinguished based on multiple components, such as hue and saturation. Each of these components has its own meaning potential, which when combined allows for the creation and expression of complex and composite meanings. Saturation, for instance, which signifies the intensity and purity of a colour, can be used to convey the ‘temperatures’ of emotions (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002)—colours with high saturation tend to be associated with positive feelings and energy while low saturation with subtle and repressed emotions. Through its features, colour can therefore be utilized to express pleasant/unpleasant and activated/deactivated feelings. Like emotion, colours can also be mixed or ambivalent (e.g., cyan or blue-green). While colours can be used in a straightforward manner, I argue that the complexity of meaning that colour can communicate makes it highly promising as a resource in emotion research.

## 3. Colour timeline approach

To demonstrate the use of colour as a research tool, I will draw on my experience of using the colour timeline approach for examining affective experiences in the context of entrepreneurship. Colour timeline as a method is a combination of visual timeline interviewing (Adriansen, 2012; Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp, 2012) and colour selection activity (Jonauskaitė et al., 2019). The examples used in this paper were collected as part of a project on transitions into self-employment by women in rural Indonesia. For this project I conducted interviews and used the colour timeline approach with 31 self-employed women in villages in Central Java who had prior experience working as domestic worker in large cities in Indonesia (e.g., Jakarta, Pekalongan) or abroad (e.g., Malaysia, Taiwan). The interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and divided into two parts. At the start of the interview, participants were asked about their work history. They were invited to share their stories and reflections around each work period—of wage-employment, self-employment, and the periods in-between. Once they had recounted their work history and experiences, I created a visual timeline together with each participant. As my interest was in the transition between work contexts, the timeline was divided based on different work periods.

The second part of the interview was specifically focused on emotion through the colour selection activity. Here, colour is used as an additional resource for making sense of and giving shape to affective experiences. Combining colour with the visual timeline also allows for capturing affective experience over time and contexts (Mazzetti and Blenkinsopp, 2012). The participants were asked to recall the emotions they experienced during each work period. I then presented them with 24 coloured markers and invited them to represent those emotions with a colour. Out of awareness that this activity could cause anxiety, I assured the participants that there are no right or wrong response and that every person could have different interpretations on what colour fits which emotion best. The particular work period was then coloured with the selected marker either by the participant or the researcher, depending on the participants’ preference. After a period has been coloured, I asked the participants probing questions on why they felt a certain way and why they chose a specific colour for that emotion. This allows the participant to reflect on their choice and its relation to their entrepreneurial journey as a whole (Clarke and Holt, 2017). This whole process continued until all work periods have been coloured (see Image 1).

As the colour timeline was meant as a tool for research participants to make sense of and communicate their emotion, the colours itself were not analysed independently by the researcher. Instead, interpretation was done by the participant themselves when they provided explanation on why they selected a specific colour and how they associate it with a certain (work) period, as is exemplified here:

I think this one is red. The problem here is my mind was heated (laughs). Not red for happiness, but red for heat. [...] Because here, my husband cheated with my neighbour. This heated up my mind. (Rahmi<sup>2</sup>)

Unlike in traditional interview, the analytical power is thus shared with the participant (Adriansen, 2012; Kearney and Hyle, 2004). Even though this would again make us rely on verbal explanations, interpretation by the researcher is avoided as the meaning of colour is context-specific (Elliot and Maier, 2013; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002) and could differ based on personal experiences (Chen et al., 2020). As an example, some of the participants I interviewed selected the colour pink for periods they perceived positively because pink was their favourite colour. However, there were also those who disliked the colour pink and therefore used it to represent unpleasant feelings. By having the participants provide the meaning, the risk of misinterpretation is thus minimized.

#### 4. Insights generated through the colour timeline approach

In this section I outline the insights generated from using the colour timeline approach. These insights highlight the potential of using colour as a means for studying emotion in entrepreneurial contexts, which can be categorized into three: (1) giving form to complex emotions, (2) drawing out significant emotional events, and (3) providing visual space for holistic reflection.

##### 4.1. Giving form to complex emotions

Due to the dynamic and complex nature of emotion, expressing and defining one's subjective feelings can sometimes be a challenge (Fineman, 2004). Expressing emotion can be further limited by linguistic constraints when only verbal approaches are used (Barone and Eisner, 2012). Manda, for instance, had difficulty in finding words to explain her feelings when doing farm work after returning from Malaysia. However, the colour selection activity allowed her to describe her emotions upon entering self-employment through an alternative form (see Image 2):

Manda: With farming there is this feeling, I cannot express it in words. Do not know how to imagine it, cannot express it with words. From [Malaysia] I had to do this again. I do not know how to express it with words.

Interviewer: Maybe with a colour? Maybe it will be easier to choose.

Manda: Maybe easier with colour because I cannot express with words. Maybe aubergine blue, this maybe.

Interviewer: Aubergine blue.

Manda: So there is gloominess in it but also a bit of happiness. But not as dark as black.

As shown in the above excerpt, Manda was more able to verbalize her emotions after selecting a colour to represent it. She mentioned that she felt a mix of emotions, which could explain why it was difficult for her to verbalize her emotions at first. However, she was able to describe her feelings after she gave physical form to her emotions through colour.

The ease of expressing emotions by using colour is also reflected in how some self-employed women prefer to describe their feelings with a colour *before* explaining it in words. After expressing her emotions around her first work period, Yuni described her second work period as follows (see Image 3):

Interviewer: And then when you first went to Jakarta, how were your feelings?

Yuni: What would that one be. They were bad people. Maybe black.

Interviewer: Were you still with your husband back then?

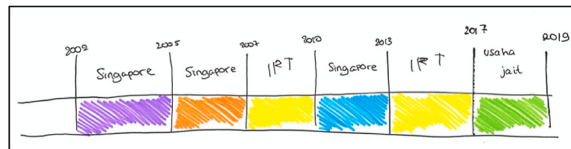
Yuni: No, already divorced. It was not nice back then, that is why black.

Here, Yuni immediately represented her feelings with the colour black without first describing what she felt in words. The strong association between colour and emotion can therefore be argued to help participants in articulating their subjective feelings, making the intangible part of their experience more tangible (Ward and Shortt, 2013). Especially in entrepreneurship studies involving individuals with limited linguistic capabilities for complex verbal expressions, colour can be a useful alternative resource for giving form to emotions.

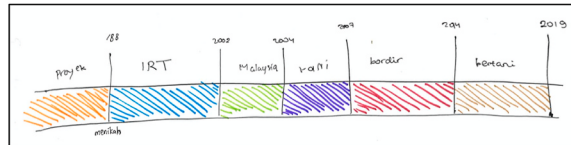
##### 4.2. Drawing out significant emotional events

Individuals have different levels of emotional awareness and they do not always know what they feel (Cardon et al., 2012; Dasborough et al., 2008; Elfenbein, 2007). Through the colour selection activity and the discussion around it, research participants are invited to reflect more deeply on their emotion in order to select and explain their choice of colour. This process helps them to be more aware and to move from general descriptions of their emotion to more detailed accounts, as exemplified in the following by Ajeng (see Image 4):

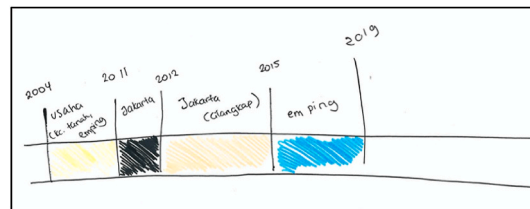
<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonymised.



**Image 1.** Example of colour timeline. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from the colour reflection: (1) Singapore: not so happy, scared; (2) Singapore: more relaxed, calm; (3) housewife: happy; (4) Singapore: discontented, tense, stressed; (5) housewife: happy; (6) sewing business: more excited, enthusiastic.



**Image 2.** Colour timeline by Manda. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Manda's colour reflection: (1) project: content, not gloomy; (2) housewife: ambivalent, joyful, sad, gloomy; (3) Malaysia: happy, content, longing (for family); (4) farming (note: self-employed): gloomy, hint of happiness, stressed; (5) embroidery (note: self-employed): tired, motivated; (6) farming (note: self-employed): content, relaxed.



**Image 3.** Colour timeline by Yuni. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Yuni's colour reflection: (1) self-employed (peanuts, crackers): happy, tired; (2) Jakarta: disappointed, stressed; (3) Jakarta (Cilangkap): happy, satisfied; (4) crackers (note: self-employed): calm, relaxed.

Interviewer: For example, when you went to Malaysia for the first time, what feelings-

Ajeng: What is the colour for happiness? I do not know.

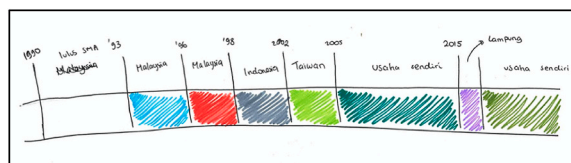
Interviewer: It is up to you. There is no right or wrong, only what you think is the most suitable.

Ajeng: I do not know the colour for happy. Happy. Happy, happy. It is more of being thankful. Thankful and thankful. Until the leader, you know in the department I became like a leader who was smartest. Supervisor, yes supervisor [said], 'Ajeng, why [are] you different [from] your friends? You here, you look for money, money, money. You have friends that go shopping every day, but you do not go.' I was asked that. 'I came here to look for money, money for my future.' I am like that. What [colour] is for feeling thankful? I do not know.

Interviewer: It is up to you, your choice.

Ajeng: The feeling of thankfulness, happy, joy. What would be the colour?

In the above excerpt, it can be seen how Ajeng first described her emotion as "happiness." However, through the colour selection process, she started to reflect more on that work period and the feeling of happiness became more specific to include thankfulness. She also mentioned how she felt appreciated by her supervisor and was considered different from her colleagues. Even though she struggled in selecting a colour at first, Ajeng's reflection during the process allows us to draw out the source of her happiness and thankfulness, which also sheds light to what she considers as important.



**Image 4.** Colour timeline by Ajeng. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Ajeng's colour reflection: (1) graduate from high school; (2) Malaysia: happy, thankful, joyful, motivated; (3) Malaysia: happy, motivated, courageous; (4) Indonesia: bad, sad; (5) Taiwan: optimistic; (6) self-employment: indifferent, happy, hopeful; (7) Lampung: happy, stressed, a bit gloomy; (8) self-employment: thankful, peaceful, hopeful.

Another participant also started out with providing a short, general description of her emotion. Yet, as she contemplated on which colour to choose, she added more context to her feelings and tried to develop an understanding on why she felt a certain way (see [Image 5](#)):

Interviewer: If your feelings in Semarang can be described with a colour, what will it be?

Widi: The colour is crying (laughs)

Interviewer: It was difficult?

Widi: Yes.

Interviewer: These are the colours to choose from. There is no right or wrong, only what you think is the most suitable.

Widi: What would be the colour, because it is true I had many friends there, of course, but I thought of my mom all the time. Well, I was still young. What colour can describe my first work experience? Grey.

In the above excerpt, Widi mentioned that she had good memories from her work period but being far from her mother outweighed it. Widi was only 12 years old during the work period described, and through her reflection we discover that being close to family was important to her but was unfortunately not possible due to her work. In sum, the use of colour helps research participants to reflect and become more aware of their emotions, which allows them to provide a more detailed description of their subjective feelings. It also allows the researcher to have more contextualized understanding of the participant's lived experience.

#### 4.3. Providing visual space for holistic emotional reflection

One of the advantages of visual methods is that it provides physical space for research participants to create meaning ([Clarke and Holt, 2017, 2019](#); [Höllerer et al., 2019](#)). Visual timeline in particular allows participants to see their life events as a whole and to create meaning in the light of wider life experiences ([Adriansen, 2012](#)). Combined with the colour selection activity, colour timeline approach thus enables participants to have a holistic view of their emotional experience and to reflect on one period based on how they have given colour to others. Tyas, for instance, was comparing different periods when asked about her feelings (see [Image 6](#)):

Tyas: Yes, this [third period] was an improvement, a bit improved. This [fourth] one, this was better. The best was in the day care.

Interviewer: What colour will it be?

Tyas: What is the colour for winning. I will pick green.

When doing the comparison, Tyas used the colour timeline as a physical tool, thus allowing for a more embodied sensemaking ([Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011](#)). She looked at the coloured periods to decide which colour to give to the next one. In this way, research participants make sense of their emotions and experiences through their (visual) senses in addition to their cognition. While the timeline itself provides a holistic view of their life history, colour helps participants to focus more on the emotional aspects in particular.

Another example was Indri, who at the beginning wanted to colour the whole timeline in one colour:

Interviewer: Like how your feelings were like when in Jakarta-

Indri: All pink (laughs)

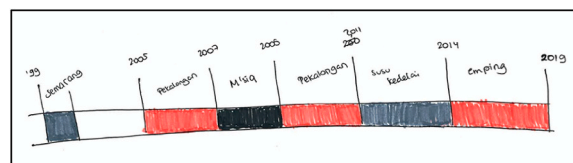
Interviewer: All the same?

Indri: All happy.

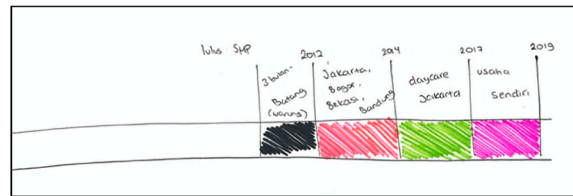
Interviewer: It is ok if you want one colour.

Indri: Yes, just one colour. Because when in Jakarta my boss was kind. [...] so I was happy (laughs) all happy. Just colour it all pink.

After deciding on the colour, Indri started to share more stories about her past employments. The stories were all positive at first, but she also mentioned unpleasant experiences as she continued. Afterwards, Indri returned to the colour timeline and asked: "Is it ok if it is all pink? Later it will be thought to be all happy. A colour that is not too happy then. What colour would that be?" Indri's question indicated how seeing the colours on the timeline made her reflect more on her emotions and to reconsider the colour she selected. Even



**Image 5.** Colour timeline by Widi. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Widi's colour reflection: (1) Semarang: sad, longing (for family), miserable; (2) Pekalongan: happy, feeling valued, content; (3) Malaysia: tired; (4) Pekalongan: happy; (5) soy milk (note: self-employed): happy, sad, motivated; (6) crackers (note: self-employed): happy, content.



**Image 6.** Colour timeline by Tyas. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Tyas' colour reflection: (1) graduate from middle school; (2) three months Batang (shopkeeper): sad, confused; (3) Jakarta, Bogor, Bekasi, Bandung: ambivalent, more satisfied; (4) Jakarta day care: feeling successful, excited, enthusiastic; (5) self-employed: thankful.

though she still chose pink for the first two periods (see [Image 7](#)), when asked about her emotions during self-employment her response was: "Not pink (laughs). It is not pink." This illustrates how Indri had the whole colour timeline, and thus her different emotional experiences, in mind when asked about her feelings for one particular period. The colour timeline approach thus allows for a more holistic reflective process around emotions.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this paper is to introduce the use of colour as means for examining emotion in the context of entrepreneurship. Through the colour timeline approach, this paper shows how colour selection activity and visual timeline combined can be useful for entrepreneurs to give form to complex emotions, draw out significant emotional events central to one's (life) history, and provide visual space for holistic reflection. Building on these insights, the use of colours can contribute to future emotion research in entrepreneurship in several ways.

First, colour can be used to develop more nuanced understanding of specific emotions that are central in the entrepreneurial process. Entrepreneurial passion, for instance, has generally been understood as intense positive feelings towards key entrepreneurial activities ([Cardon et al., 2009](#)). However, entrepreneurial passion is in fact multifaceted as it has been argued to have both positive and negative dimensions which can be expressed through a plurality of forms ([Ho and Pollack, 2014](#); [Simpson et al., 2015](#)). A multimodal approach that utilizes colour could therefore be suitable to delve deeper into the subjective experience of entrepreneurial passion beyond the dominant single dimension of positive affect, as entrepreneurs will be able to explore and communicate their felt passion through a plurality of resources.

Going further, colour can help expand the facets of emotions that are examined in entrepreneurship studies. Emotions that are generated through entrepreneurship are often mixed and ambivalent ([Farny et al., 2019](#); [Podoyunitsyna et al., 2012](#); [Spivack et al., 2014](#)). However, entrepreneurship research on emotions has mainly focused on specific positive affect, with the exception of studies on grief following business failure (e.g., [Byrne and Shepherd, 2015](#)). The possibility of creating complex and composite meanings through colours makes it highly suitable for examining the interplay between positive and negative affect, thereby shedding light on both the good and dark side of entrepreneurship ([Shepherd, 2019](#)).

Combined with the virtual timeline, colour can be an especially useful resource for examining emotions throughout the whole entrepreneurial journey and to study the role of emotions over time. Existing emotion research in entrepreneurship tend to focus on specific processes at the early stages of business venturing (e.g., opportunity recognition) or following business failure. However, entrepreneurship is a journey that takes place over time ([McMullen and Dimov, 2013](#)) and there is a need to shift the focus from examining emotion at a single point in the entrepreneurial process to understanding how the emotional journey of entrepreneurship unfolds ([Cardon et al., 2012](#)). The use of colour through the colour timeline can be especially useful as it has the ability to not only map out the whole entrepreneurial process from beginning to end but also to draw out the emotional aspects of the entrepreneurial journey.

In addition to emotion research, colour has the potential to be used to further develop understanding about other complex and multifaceted aspects in the context of entrepreneurship that are hard to capture through verbal approaches alone, such as entrepreneurial identity and sensemaking. As identity construction and sensemaking are both fluid and dynamic processes that are emotionally laden ([Ahuja et al., 2019](#); [Maitlis et al., 2013](#)), employing colour as an additional resource that entrepreneurs can draw on could be useful for gaining access into these processes and for subjective experiences to be shared in a multimodal way.

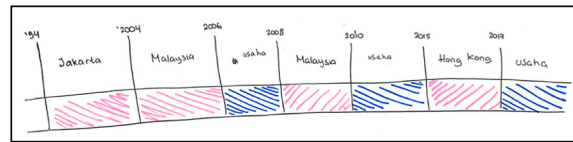
Taken together, the introduction of colour as a research tool expands the methodological toolbox available to creatively advance entrepreneurship research ([Van Burg, Cornelissen, Stam and Jack, 2020](#)). Future research could combine colour with other existing, though not yet commonly used, visual methods such as drawings ([Clarke and Holt, 2017, 2019](#)) and photography ([Shortt and Warren, 2019, 2020](#)). This would allow for further advancement of visual methodologies and multimodal research in entrepreneurship.

## Author statement

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, funding acquisition, data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and manuscript preparation.

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**Image 7.** Colour timeline by Indri. Translation of timeline periods and list of relevant words from Indri's colour reflection: (1) Jakarta: happy, content, feeling valued; (2) Malaysia: happy, content, stressed; (3) self-employed: discontented, not so happy; (4) Malaysia: content, excited; (5) self-employed: discontented, not so happy; (6) Hong Kong: content, feeling valued; (7) self-employed: discontented, not so happy.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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