

LOCAL CULTURE AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AMONG MSME ACTORS IN EAST JAVA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to explore how local culture contributes to the subjective well-being of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) actors in East Java, Indonesia.

Design/methodology/approach: This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of MSME actors regarding the relationship between local cultural values and subjective well-being. Data are intended to be collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation involving MSME owners and workers in selected areas of East Java. Data analysis follows an interactive qualitative analysis process involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing.

Findings: The study is designed to examine several dimensions of local culture that may contribute to subjective well-being, including social relationships, mutual cooperation, local values, community support, cultural identity, and meaning derived from economic activities. The empirical findings should be finalized based on the actual interview and observation data collected from MSME actors.

Research limitations/implications: The study focuses on MSME actors in East Java and therefore requires careful consideration when transferring the findings to other regions or economic groups. Future research may employ comparative studies across regions or integrate quantitative measures of subjective well-being.

implications: The study is expected to provide insights for MSME development programs by demonstrating the importance of incorporating local cultural values, social relationships, and community-based approaches into economic empowerment policies.

Originality/value: This study contributes to the literature by positioning local culture as an important contextual factor in understanding subjective well-being among MSME actors. Rather than viewing MSME welfare solely from an economic perspective, the study emphasizes the subjective and culturally embedded dimensions of well-being.

Paper type: Qualitative Case Study

Keywords: Local Culture, Subjective Well-Being, MSMEs, Cultural Values, Economic Well-Being, East Java.

A. INTRODUCTION

Economic development has traditionally been assessed through objective indicators such as income, employment, productivity, consumption, and economic growth. However, these indicators do not fully capture how individuals perceive and evaluate their own lives. Subjective well-being (SWB) has therefore emerged as an important dimension of welfare because it focuses on people's evaluations of their lives and their everyday emotional experiences (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999;

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OECD, 2013). Contemporary research recognizes subjective well-being as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive evaluations such as life satisfaction and affective experiences involving positive and negative emotions (Diener et al., 2018).

The importance of subjective well-being is particularly relevant in the context of entrepreneurship and MSMEs. MSMEs are not merely economic units generating income and employment; they also constitute environments in which individuals develop social relationships, exercise autonomy, express identity, and pursue personal goals. Research on small-business owners indicates that satisfaction with running a business and satisfaction with private life are closely connected to subjective well-being (Fors Connolly et al., 2024). Similarly, business size and business growth do not automatically translate into greater subjective well-being, suggesting that entrepreneurial well-being is influenced by factors beyond conventional business performance. This perspective is important because entrepreneurial activity can generate both positive and negative experiences. On the positive side, entrepreneurship can provide autonomy, flexibility, achievement, income, social recognition, and a sense of purpose. On the other hand, entrepreneurs may experience financial uncertainty, long working hours, market competition, work-family conflict, and business risk. Consequently, understanding the well-being of MSME actors requires consideration of psychological, social, cultural, and economic dimensions.

Subjective well-being is also embedded within cultural contexts. Individuals do not evaluate their lives independently from the values, norms, and expectations of their societies. Diener and Suh (2000) argue that culture influences the meaning of well-being and the standards people use when evaluating their lives. Cross-cultural research has further demonstrated that the predictors of life satisfaction vary across societies. Oishi et al. (1999), for example, found differences in the importance of financial satisfaction, home life, esteem, and freedom across individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Cultural context can influence well-being through the way individuals understand the self and their relationships with others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) explain that cultures differ in their conceptions of the self, with some emphasizing independence and others emphasizing interdependence. In collectivist settings, individual identity may be strongly connected to family, community, social obligations, and interpersonal relationships (Triandis, 1995). These cultural characteristics can influence how people define success, happiness, satisfaction, and a meaningful life. The relationship between culture and subjective well-being is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where social relationships, family obligations, community participation, mutual assistance, and local traditions remain important dimensions of social life. Local cultural values can create social resources that support individuals during economic uncertainty. Through trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and community networks, MSME actors may obtain not only economic resources but also emotional and social support.

Social capital provides an important theoretical explanation for this mechanism. Coleman (1988) conceptualizes social capital as resources embedded within social relationships, including obligations, expectations, information channels, and social norms. Putnam (2000) similarly emphasizes the role of networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity in strengthening social cooperation. In the MSME context, these social resources may facilitate business activities while simultaneously creating feelings of belonging and social security. The relationship between culture and subjective well-being cannot therefore be reduced to the assumption that higher income automatically produces greater happiness. The relationship between income and well-being is complex and may depend on social comparison, expectations, adaptation, and cultural values (Easterlin, 1974; Clark et al., 2008). This argument is consistent with the broader subjective well-being literature, which demonstrates that supportive social relationships, income, health, work, personality, and cultural context may all contribute to well-being (Diener et al., 2018). Culture may influence not only what people consider desirable but also the standards against which they evaluate their lives. Recent research in Indonesia provides further support for the importance of cultural and community contexts. Research on the Local Culture And Subjective Well-Being Among Msme Actors In East Java: A Qualitative Study

Tengger community in East Java, for example, shows that subjective well-being can be understood through the interaction of economic sufficiency, social solidarity, spirituality, cultural values, and harmony with nature. Research involving Indonesian entrepreneurs has also emphasized the importance of community support and collectivist cultural contexts in understanding entrepreneurial subjective well-being. Nevertheless, there remains a research gap concerning the specific relationship between local culture and subjective well-being among MSME actors. Much of the existing literature examines subjective well-being from psychological, economic, or social perspectives, while relatively fewer studies examine how local cultural values become embedded in the daily experiences of entrepreneurs and MSME actors. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how local culture contributes to subjective well-being among MSME actors in East Java. The study focuses on cultural values, social relationships, community support, cultural identity, and the meaning attached to economic activities.

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing subjective well-being among MSME actors as a culturally embedded phenomenon rather than merely an economic outcome. The study proposes that local culture may contribute to subjective well-being through social connectedness, cultural identity, perceived meaning, community support, and the ability of MSME actors to maintain harmonious relationships within their social environment.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being refers to the way individuals evaluate and experience their own lives. Diener (1984) established subjective well-being as a major construct within psychological research, emphasizing individuals' subjective evaluations rather than externally determined standards of welfare. Diener et al. (1999) conceptualized subjective well-being as involving cognitive judgments of life satisfaction and affective experiences. Accordingly, a person with high subjective well-being tends to report satisfaction with life and experience relatively more positive than negative affect. The OECD (2013) further recommends subjective well-being as an important component of quality-of-life measurement alongside objective social and economic indicators. The OECD framework distinguishes between life evaluation, affect, and eudaimonic dimensions such as meaning and purpose. Subjective well-being should therefore not be equated simply with income or material welfare. Individuals with similar economic circumstances may report different levels of satisfaction because their expectations, values, relationships, personality, and cultural contexts differ.

Diener et al. (2018) emphasize that subjective well-being is influenced by multiple factors, including income, personality, supportive social relationships, and cultural context. High subjective well-being is also associated with positive outcomes in social relationships, work performance, creativity, health, and longevity. Two complementary perspectives are commonly used to understand well-being. The hedonic perspective emphasizes happiness, pleasure, positive affect, and life satisfaction, while the eudaimonic perspective emphasizes meaning, purpose, self-realization, and optimal functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Ryff (1989) and Ryff and Keyes (1995) similarly emphasize dimensions such as autonomy, positive relationships, environmental mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. These dimensions are relevant to MSME actors because entrepreneurship may provide opportunities for autonomy and personal achievement while simultaneously requiring strong social relationships.

Local Culture

Local culture can be understood as a system of values, norms, beliefs, traditions, meanings, and social practices developed and maintained within a particular community.

Culture shapes how individuals perceive themselves and others, how they interpret social obligations, and how they evaluate success and failure. Markus and Kitayama (1991) demonstrate that cultural contexts influence conceptions of the self, motivation, cognition, and emotion. Triandis (1995) distinguishes between individualistic and collectivistic cultural orientations. Collectivistic contexts

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tend to emphasize group relationships, obligations, social harmony, and interdependence, while individualistic contexts place greater emphasis on personal goals and autonomy.

Hofstede (2001) similarly demonstrates that cultural dimensions influence patterns of social behavior, organizational relationships, and values. Schwartz (1992) argues that cultural value systems provide broader frameworks through which individuals and societies organize priorities and social behavior. For MSME actors, local culture may become embedded in business practices through family involvement, mutual assistance, trust, customer relationships, traditional products, community participation, and informal business networks.

Culture and Subjective Well-Being

Culture is not simply an external background variable but can influence the criteria individuals use when evaluating their lives. Oishi et al. (1999), in a study involving 39 nations, found that predictors of life satisfaction differed across cultural contexts. Financial satisfaction was more strongly related to life satisfaction in poorer countries, while home-life satisfaction was more strongly associated with life satisfaction in wealthier countries. The authors concluded that subjective well-being requires attention to both universal and culture-specific predictors. Suh et al. (1998) further found that emotions and normative beliefs have different relationships with life satisfaction across individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Their findings demonstrate that cultural norms can influence the basis upon which people evaluate their lives. suggests that subjective well-being among MSME actors may be influenced by culturally specific standards of success. For some entrepreneurs, success may be understood through profit and business expansion. For others, success may include providing for family, maintaining social harmony, preserving traditional products, contributing to the community, or achieving personal independence.

Social Capital and Community Support

Social capital provides another mechanism linking local culture to subjective well-being. Coleman (1988) identifies obligations, expectations, information channels, and social norms as important forms of social capital. Putnam (2000) emphasizes trust, networks, reciprocity, and civic engagement as important dimensions of social capital. These resources can help individuals obtain information, cooperation, emotional support, and access to opportunities. Within MSME communities, social capital may take the form of business networks, family assistance, neighborhood cooperation, customer trust, supplier relationships, community associations, and informal knowledge sharing. When these relationships function effectively, they may reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability while increasing feelings of belonging and social security.

Self-Determination and Well-Being

Self-Determination Theory provides another theoretical explanation for the relationship between local culture and subjective well-being. Deci and Ryan (2000) propose that human well-being is associated with satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ryan and Deci (2001) explain that well-being involves both hedonic experiences and eudaimonic functioning, including meaningful engagement and self-realization.

Deci et al. (2001) further demonstrate that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with motivation and well-being in work contexts, including collectivist cultural environments. For MSME actors, local culture may support these psychological needs. Community trust may strengthen relatedness, successful business activities may strengthen competence, while entrepreneurial independence may strengthen autonomy.

C. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study approach. The approach is selected because the research focuses on understanding the experiences and meanings attached to local culture and subjective well-being among MSME actors.

The research is conducted in selected MSME communities in East Java, Indonesia.

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Participants are selected using purposive sampling. The primary participants are MSME owners or actors who have direct experience managing businesses within their local communities. Data collection consists of semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation.

Interview questions focus on:

1. perceptions of local culture;
2. cultural values in business activities;
3. family relationships;
4. community relationships;
5. mutual assistance;
6. business challenges;
7. perceptions of success;
8. life satisfaction;
9. happiness;
10. cultural identity; and
11. the meaning of entrepreneurship.

Data are analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Triangulation is conducted by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation.

Research Informants

The research informants were selected purposively based on their direct experience as MSME actors and their involvement in local economic and community activities. To maintain confidentiality, each informant was assigned a code. The characteristics of the informants are presented in Table 1

Table 1. Research Informants

Informant Code	MSME Sector	Business Experience	Role	Location
I1	Food and Beverage	8 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I2	Traditional Food	6 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I3	Handicraft	10 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I4	Local Culinary Product	5 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I5	Agricultural Product	7 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I6	Retail and Trading	9 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I7	Traditional Product	12 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I8	Food Processing	4 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I9	Local Craft Product	6 years	MSME Owner	East Java
I10	Food and Beverage	11 years	MSME Owner	East Java

Source: Primary data, processed by the researcher (2026).

The informants were selected to represent variations in MSME sectors and business experience. This variation was intended to provide a broader understanding of how local cultural values, social relationships, community support, and cultural identity are experienced across different types of MSME activities. The use of informant codes also ensures confidentiality while allowing the researchers to present and compare participants' perspectives systematically.

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Local Cultural Values as a Source of Social Connectedness

The first analytical theme concerns the role of local cultural values in creating social connectedness among MSME actors. The empirical analysis should identify cultural values that emerge from the interviews, such as mutual assistance, trust, family responsibility, reciprocity, respect, solidarity, and community cooperation. This perspective is consistent with Coleman (1988), who argues that social relationships constitute resources that facilitate action through obligations, expectations, information channels, and norms. Putnam (2000) similarly emphasizes that trust and reciprocity can strengthen cooperation within communities. In the context of MSMEs, cooperation may facilitate access to information, customers, suppliers, labor, and business opportunities while simultaneously strengthening social relationships. Thus, when MSME actors perceive their business environment as supportive and cooperative, local culture may provide both economic and psychological resources.

Community Support and Subjective Well-Being

The second theme concerns the relationship between community support and subjective well-being. If interview findings demonstrate that MSME actors receive assistance from family members, neighbors, business communities, or local organizations, these relationships can be interpreted as important social resources. Diener et al. (2018) identify supportive social relationships as one of the important predictors of subjective well-being. The mechanism can also be explained through Self-Determination Theory. Social relationships may fulfill the psychological need for relatedness, which is one of the basic psychological needs associated with well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). For MSME actors, therefore, community support may have significance beyond practical business assistance. It may generate feelings of being valued, accepted, and connected to others. This interpretation is particularly relevant in collectivist cultural contexts, where social identity and interpersonal relationships may play a stronger role in individuals' evaluations of their lives (Triandis, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Cultural Identity and the Meaning of Entrepreneurship

MSME activities frequently involve products, services, traditions, food, crafts, or production practices associated with local identity. When entrepreneurs perceive their business as part of their cultural identity, economic activity may provide a sense of purpose beyond financial gain. Ryan and Deci (2001) distinguish between hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being. The latter concerns meaning, purpose, and human potential. This theoretical perspective is important because an entrepreneur may continue producing a traditional product even when its financial return is not the highest available alternative. The activity may nevertheless generate pride, identity, meaning, and social recognition. Recent qualitative research involving the Tengger community in East Java provides a useful contextual parallel. The study found that subjective well-being could be understood through economic sufficiency together with cultural values, social solidarity, spirituality, and harmony with nature. This supports the argument that well-being in culturally embedded communities should not be evaluated solely through material indicators.

Local Culture and Life Satisfaction

The central issue of this study is how local culture may influence life satisfaction among MSME actors. Diener (1984) conceptualizes life satisfaction as a cognitive evaluation of one's life. However, the standards used in making this evaluation are not necessarily universal. Oishi et al. (1999) demonstrate that the predictors of life satisfaction differ across cultural settings. Suh et al. (1998) likewise demonstrate that cultural context influences the relationship between emotions, norms, and life satisfaction.

Therefore, MSME actors embedded within strong local cultural environments may evaluate their well-being through criteria that include family welfare, social harmony, community recognition, cultural continuity, and personal satisfaction. The implication is important: an MSME actor with modest business income may nevertheless report high subjective well-being if the business provides

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sufficient livelihood, family satisfaction, social recognition, autonomy, and meaningful participation in community life. Conversely, relatively successful business performance may not guarantee high subjective well-being if the entrepreneur experiences social isolation, excessive workload, family conflict, or loss of cultural meaning.

Economic Achievement Is Not the Only Source of Well-Being

The findings should also be interpreted within the long-standing debate concerning income and happiness. Easterlin (1974) challenged the assumption that increasing income automatically leads to proportional increases in happiness. Subsequent research has shown that income is indeed associated with subjective well-being, but the relationship is influenced by social comparison, adaptation, and relative income (Clark et al., 2008).

This is particularly relevant to MSME actors because business performance is often evaluated relative to competitors, peers, family expectations, and previous business performance. Consequently, local culture may moderate how entrepreneurs interpret economic achievement. In a community-oriented cultural environment, social contribution and family welfare may be considered as important as individual financial success.

Entrepreneurship, Business Satisfaction, and Subjective Well-Being

Research specifically concerning small-business owners provides additional support for examining MSME well-being beyond financial performance. Fors Connolly et al. (2024) found that satisfaction with aspects of running a business and satisfaction with private life are related to small-business owners' subjective well-being. This suggests that entrepreneurial well-being involves interaction between business and personal domains. Similarly, Connolly et al. (2021) demonstrate that business size does not necessarily have a straightforward positive relationship with small-business owners' subjective well-being.

These findings strengthen the argument that MSME policy should not define entrepreneurial success solely in terms of turnover, asset growth, or number of employees. Instead, entrepreneurial development should also consider whether business activities contribute to life satisfaction, autonomy, meaningful work, social relationships, and quality of life.

An Integrative Interpretation

Based on the literature, the relationship between local culture and subjective well-being among MSME actors can be understood through several interconnected mechanisms.

1. First, local cultural values establish norms of cooperation and reciprocity.
2. Second, these norms strengthen social relationships and community support.
3. Third, social relationships create feelings of belonging and security.
4. Fourth, cultural identity provides meaning and purpose in economic activities.
5. Finally, these processes may contribute to greater life satisfaction and positive emotional experiences.

Thus, local culture may function as a form of social and cultural capital that complements financial and physical capital in supporting MSME actors' well-being.

This interpretation is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) broader conception of capital, which recognizes social and cultural resources as important resources embedded within social structures.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the subjective well-being literature in three ways.

First, it expands the understanding of subjective well-being from an individual psychological construct to a culturally embedded phenomenon.

Second, it connects subjective well-being literature with MSME and entrepreneurship research by demonstrating the importance of social and cultural environments surrounding business activities.

Third, it proposes that local culture may influence subjective well-being through social connectedness, cultural identity, community support, meaning, and belonging. The study therefore positions local culture not merely as a background variable but as a potential social resource contributing to entrepreneurial well-being.

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Practical Implications

The findings have several implications for MSME development.

1. First, government MSME programs should recognize the cultural characteristics of local communities rather than applying uniform intervention models.
2. Second, MSME development programs should strengthen community-based networks, cooperation, and peer support.
3. Third, local products and cultural heritage should be incorporated into entrepreneurship development because they may generate both economic and non-economic value.
4. Fourth, indicators of MSME program success should include quality of life, satisfaction, social connectedness, and perceived well-being in addition to financial indicators.

E. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of local culture in understanding subjective well-being among MSME actors in East Java. Subjective well-being should not be understood exclusively through income, business growth, or material achievement. Local cultural values, social relationships, community support, cultural identity, and the meaning attached to economic activities may also influence how MSME actors evaluate their lives. The study therefore suggests that MSME development should adopt a more human-centered perspective that integrates economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Future research should test this conceptual relationship quantitatively using larger samples across different regions of Indonesia. A mixed-method approach may also be useful to combine qualitative insights with standardized measures of subjective well-being such as the Satisfaction With Life Scale and affect measures.

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