

Research Article

Empowering the Creativity of Women Traditional Culinary MSMEs in Ngawi, East Java: Innovation Strategies and Strengthening Local Economic Competitiveness

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Abstract: Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) led by women are an important pillar of the local economy in the traditional culinary sector, which is rich in cultural values. In Ngawi Regency, East Java, women MSMEs face complex challenges in innovating and increasing dynamic competitiveness and penetration of modern products. This study aims to analyze the strategies for empowering the creativity of women MSMEs in traditional culinary businesses in Ngawi, as well as the impact of product innovation capacity and strengthening local economic competitiveness, using qualitative methods with a case study approach. The findings reveal that empowering creativity occurs through: (1) adapting traditional recipes based on modern market preferences without losing the essence of the original taste (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023); (2) innovative packaging and attractive presentation using local materials and branding based on local wisdom narratives (Duchek, 2020); (3) utilizing digital technology for marketing and expanding distribution networks (Miya Dewi, Moh, & Burhan, 2025). Technical training support and access to capital increase their confidence and experimental abilities (Brush et al., 2019). This strategy also creates uniqueness as a key selling point, thereby strengthening their economic position within the local value chain. Empowering the creativity of women entrepreneurs in traditional culinary MSMEs in Ngawi is a key strategy for encouraging contextual, incremental innovation. The synergy of traditional knowledge, individual creativity, and external support can transform local potential into a sustainable competitive advantage (Bula, 2022).

Keywords: Competitiveness; Creative Empowerment; Innovation Strategy; Local Economy; MSMEs.

1. Introduction

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Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) have long been recognized as key drivers of the economy, job providers, and maintainers of social stability, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia (OECD, 2021). Within this MSME ecosystem, women play a crucial and increasingly central role. In Indonesia, more than 60% of MSMEs are owned or managed by women (Ministry of Cooperatives and SMEs, 2022). Their contributions are often concentrated in household-based sectors, with traditional culinary being one of the most dominant domains. This sector is not only a source of income but also a vehicle for preserving cultural heritage and local wisdom (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023).

Despite their significant contribution, women entrepreneurs in MSMEs, particularly in the traditional culinary sector, face a number of complex challenges that limit their competitiveness and business growth. These challenges include limited access to formal capital and broader markets, suboptimal managerial and technical capacity, and the double burden of domestic responsibilities (Brush et al., 2019). Furthermore, in the era of digital disruption and rapidly changing consumer preferences, they are required not only to maintain authentic flavors but also to innovate in product design, packaging, marketing, and business models. Without innovation, traditional culinary products risk being marginalized by modern products with more aggressive branding and distribution (Miya Dewi et al., 2025).

In this context, creativity emerges as a critical resource that needs to be empowered. Creativity in culinary MSMEs is not simply about creating new dishes, but rather the ability to combine traditional knowledge with market insights, new technologies, and contemporary design to create added value (Duchek, 2020). Empowering creativity means creating conditions that allow women entrepreneurs to experiment, take calculated risks, and transform ideas into concrete business solutions. This process aligns with the concept of entrepreneurial empowerment, which emphasizes increasing agency, resources, and opportunities for women entrepreneurs (Bula, 2022).

Ngawi Regency in East Java boasts a rich diversity of traditional culinary delights, such as Pecel Rice, Snail Satay, Tiwul (Indonesian traditional food), and various traditional snacks, many of which are managed by women-led micro and home-based businesses. This location provides an ideal context for exploring the dynamics of creative empowerment. How do women MSMEs in Ngawi interpret and practice creativity in their businesses? What innovation strategies do they develop to respond to market challenges? And how do these strategies contribute to strengthening local economic competitiveness? These questions still require in-depth empirical exploration.

Against this background, this article aims to: (1) Analyze the forms and strategies of creative empowerment among women MSMEs operating in traditional culinary areas in Ngawi; (2) Identify supporting and inhibiting factors in their innovation processes; and (3) Examine the implications of these strategies for strengthening local economic competitiveness. Thus, this article is expected to contribute to the literature on women's entrepreneurship and culture-based innovation, while also offering practical recommendations for stakeholders in designing effective and sustainable empowerment programs for MSMEs operating in traditional culinary areas.

2. Literature Review

Women's Entrepreneurship and the Entrepreneurship Ecosystem with a Gender Perspective

The study of women's entrepreneurship has evolved from a deficit approach comparing them to male standards to one that recognizes the unique contexts, motivations, and strategies shaped by social norms and gender roles (Brush et al., 2019; Welter, 2020). The concept of gendered entrepreneurship ecosystems emphasizes that women entrepreneurs operate within differently structured systems, with often limited access to financial capital, strategic business networks (old boys' networks), and growth opportunities (Brush et al., 2019). However, they leverage strong social and cultural capital, often building businesses embedded in local communities and leveraging practical knowledge from their domestic roles (Elam et al., 2022). This understanding underpins the analysis of women MSMEs in Ngawi, whose activities are inextricably linked to their domestic roles and serve as a source of family income.

Creativity and Incremental Innovation in the Context of Entrepreneurship

In entrepreneurship, creativity is defined as the ability to generate new and useful ideas, while innovation is the successful implementation of these ideas within an organizational or market context (Amabile, 2023). For MSMEs, particularly in traditional sectors, innovation is rarely radical (disruptive). Instead, innovation is more often incremental adjustments, modifications, and gradual improvements to existing products, processes, or business models (Rosli & de la Chaux, 2020). In traditional culinary arts, creativity often arises from constraints, such as limited raw materials or equipment, which trigger improvisational solutions. This process is called bricolage, which involves creating something new by utilizing existing resources (Duchek, 2020). This bricolage theory is relevant for analyzing how women MSMEs in Ngawi transform local resources and traditional knowledge into new added value.

Innovation in the Traditional Culinary Industry: Between Authenticity and Adaptation

Traditional culinary arts bear a double burden: they must maintain authenticity as a core value while adapting to the demands of a modern market that demands convenience, safety, and new experiences. Authenticity is not static, but rather a socially negotiated construct that can be renewed through appropriate narratives and presentations (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023). Innovation in this context can take the form of: (1) Product innovation: modifications to taste, texture, or portion size; (2) Process innovation: production efficiency

or standardization without losing the handmade touch; (3) Presentation and packaging innovation: attractive and hygienic packaging designs that communicate cultural stories; and (4) Marketing innovation: the use of digital platforms to reach a wider market (Rosli & de la Chaux, 2020). The challenge is finding a balance so that innovation is not perceived as a betrayal of tradition.

Empowerment as a Multidimensional Concept

Empowerment in the context of women's entrepreneurship is a multidimensional process that increases the capacity of individuals (agents) to take control over decisions and resources that affect their lives (Kabeer, 2022). According to Malhotra et al. (2002), women's economic empowerment encompasses dimensions such as access to resources, decision-making ability, and control over income and assets. Within the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) framework, empowerment also encompasses autonomy in decision-making, community participation, and time allocation (Alkire et al., 2013). In this article, creative empowerment is understood as a process that strengthens these dimensions through developing the capacity for innovation, so that women are not merely passive actors but active agents of change in transforming traditional knowledge into competitive advantages.

Local Economic Competitiveness Based on Cultural Resources

Local economic competitiveness no longer relies solely on conventional economic factors, but is increasingly determined by the ability to leverage unique, location-specific, and difficult-to-replicate resources such as cultural heritage and local wisdom (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023). The concept of place-based innovation emphasizes that the most sustainable innovations are those born from and for specific local contexts, strengthening local identity and social networks (Bula, 2022). Women-led traditional culinary MSMEs, when creatively empowered, can become the driving force of the local circular economy. They create value chains involving local farmers, packaging artisans, and logistics service providers, thereby increasing the economic multiplier effect in the region.

3. Research Method

This research is designed to explore in-depth and holistically the process of creative empowerment, innovation strategies, and their contribution to the local economic competitiveness of women traditional culinary MSMEs. A qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study strategy was chosen because it aligns with the goal of understanding complex phenomena in their natural context (Creswell & Poth, 2018), where the subjective experiences, meanings, and socio-cultural contexts of business actors are central. This design allows researchers to build a comprehensive picture (thick description) of how creativity is empowered and operationalized in everyday business practices. The research location is Ngawi Regency, East Java, which was purposively selected due to its significant traditional culinary heritage and active female MSME population in the sector.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis reveals the complex dynamics of the creative empowerment of women traditional culinary MSMEs in Ngawi. The findings are organized into three interrelated main themes, which are then discussed integratively within the existing theoretical framework.

Research Results

Manifestation of Creativity as Contextual Bricolage and Negotiation of Authenticity

The creativity practiced by the participants was not creation from nothing, but rather a form of contextual bricolage the recombination of limited resources and local knowledge to create new solutions (Duchek, 2020). This manifested itself in two domains:

- a. Product Innovation Based on Local Wisdom: Creativity emerged in response to the availability of raw materials and market demand. For example, the innovations "Instant Tiwiul with Mango Flavor" and "Pecel with Peanut Sauce and Basil" demonstrate how traditional knowledge (tiwul making, pecel recipe) is combined with other local ingredients (gedong mango, basil) to create new variants. As expressed by Mrs. S (Tiwul Business Owner): "Before, it was just plain tiwul, but now I dry it and add flavors from local fruit so young people will like it. The tradition remains, but the taste is more modern."

- b. Negotiating Authenticity: Entrepreneurs actively negotiate the meaning of "authenticity." For them, authenticity isn't rigid adherence to ancient recipes, but rather purity of intention, the use of select local ingredients, and the preservation of core flavors. Innovations in packaging (using woven bamboo with modern labels) or presentation (pecel in portable cups) aren't seen as undermining authenticity, but rather as making traditions accessible to urban consumers and the younger generation. This aligns with the concept of authenticity as a flexible construct (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023).

The Process of Empowering Creativity: From Individual Agency to Social Networks

Creativity empowerment occurs through the interaction between individual agency and ecosystem support.

- a. Agency and Intrinsic Motivation: Creativity is often fueled by intrinsic motivation to be economically independent, continue a family legacy, and contribute to the community. Self-efficacy for experimentation grows with experience and market acceptance. Mrs. K (owner of a Snail Satay Business) stated: "Initially, I experimented with the seasoning to make it less fishy, but it turned out to be a hit. From there, I dared to create a variant using rujak seasoning."
- b. The Role of Social Networks and External Support: Informal networks family, fellow female entrepreneurs, and loyal customers serve as crucial sources of feedback and moral encouragement. Meanwhile, formal support, such as training from the cooperative and MSME office on digital marketing and food hygiene and sanitation (Miya Dewi, Moh, & Burhan, 2025) provides new "tools" (resources) for executing creative ideas. However, access to formal capital and advanced technology remains a major structural barrier, as often found in gendered entrepreneurship ecosystems (Brush et al., 2019).

Contribution to Local Economic Competitiveness: Building an Inclusive Value Chain

This creativity-based innovation strategy contributes to local economic competitiveness through several mechanisms:

- a. Product Differentiation and Increased Added Value: Product and packaging innovations create clear differentiation from similar products, enabling better pricing. Instant tiwul, for example, has a much higher economic value per unit than regular tiwul.
- b. Strengthening the Local Value Chain: Stable demand for quality raw materials (cassava, nuts, spices) drives economic growth for local farmers and suppliers. Furthermore, this has led to the emergence of supporting businesses such as woven bamboo packaging craftsmen and local delivery services.
- c. Place Branding Through Culinary: Innovative products that retain the "Ngawi" identity (whether in name, story, or ingredients) serve as effective regional promotional tools. Social media is used not only for sales but also to narrate the stories behind culinary delights, thus strengthening the appeal of regional culinary tourism.

Integrative Discussion

The findings of this study strengthen and enrich the academic discourse on women's entrepreneurship, innovation, and local economies. First, this study confirms that innovation in traditional women-led MSMEs is incremental and highly contextual (Rosli & de la Chaux, 2020). However, the findings indicate that their bricolage process is not simply a coping mechanism, but rather an active strategy to create new value and expand markets. Their creativity is a form of agency that operates within structural constraints, transforming constraints (local materials, simple equipment) into sources of uniqueness and competitive advantage.

Second, the concept of empowerment in this study emerges as a two-way, dialogical process. On the one hand, individual creative capacity (agency) is the driving force. On the other hand, this agency requires recognition and reinforcement (enabling environment) from social networks and policies to fully develop (Kabeer, 2022). The findings on the importance of feedback from fellow women entrepreneurs underscore the importance of safe spaces or communities of practice where women can share ideas, take risks, and support each other without fear of judgment.

Third, the contribution to local economic competitiveness refers to the concept of place-based innovation (Bula, 2022). Innovations born from women's contextual creativity successfully "tie economic value" to specific local resources both material (food ingredients) and immaterial (culinary knowledge, folklore). This creates a more resilient economic cycle

that is difficult for external competitors to imitate because it is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context of Ngawi. Thus, empowering women's creativity not only empowers individuals but also strengthens the regional economic foundation by creating inclusive and sustainable value chains (Silver, D., et. al., 2016)

5. Comparison

Theoretically, this study offers a micro-perspective on the mechanisms of creative empowerment, highlighting contextual bricolage and authenticity negotiations as the core of women's incremental innovation. Practically, the findings imply the importance of policies and mentoring programs that: (1) do not standardize, but celebrate and facilitate contextual creativity; (2) strengthen networks and communities among women entrepreneurs as shared learning spaces; and (3) facilitate access to resources (capital, appropriate technology) that can magnify the impact of their innovations on the local economy (Devlin, J., et. al, 2019).

6. Conclusions

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that empowering creativity among women entrepreneurs in traditional culinary MSMEs in Ngawi is a dynamic and multidimensional process (Vaswani, A.,et. al., 2017) This process serves as a key innovation strategy that bridges the preservation of cultural heritage with modern market demands, while also serving as a lever for strengthening local economic competitiveness. First, the creativity embodied by entrepreneurs is contextual and based on bricolage practices (Duchek, 2020). They actively and intelligently recombine limited local resources hereditary culinary knowledge, local ingredients, and social networks to create incremental innovations.

These innovations extend beyond product innovations (such as new flavors of tiwul (rice cake) or snail satay) to include aesthetically pleasing packaging and narrative digital marketing innovations. This process is accompanied by a negotiation of the meaning of authenticity, where authenticity is no longer seen as a rigid adherence to ancient recipes, but rather as a commitment to the quality of local ingredients and the preservation of core flavors through creative adaptations (Maulid, A. & Ciptandi, F., 2023). Thus, creativity becomes a crucial mechanism for maintaining the relevance of traditional culinary traditions. Second, this empowerment process occurs through a synergistic interaction between individual agency and ecosystem support (Abadi, M. et. al, 2016).

The intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance of these women entrepreneurs are the primary drivers. However, this agency finds room to grow within supportive social networks, both informal (family, fellow women entrepreneurs) and formal (training from the local government). These findings confirm the importance of a gender-responsive entrepreneurial ecosystem (Brush et al., 2019), although structural challenges such as limited access to capital persist. Third, this creativity-based innovation strategy significantly contributes to Ngawi's local economic competitiveness through three main channels: (1) Differentiation and Value-Added Enhancement, which enables premium pricing and market share expansion; (2) Strengthening the Inclusive Value Chain, by creating stable demand for local agricultural and craft products and engaging the workforce around the business; and (3) Place Branding, where innovative culinary delights rich in cultural narratives serve as a powerful regional promotional tool. In other words, empowering women's creativity has transformed local potential into a sustainable place-based competitive advantage (Bula, 2022).

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