

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Factors Contributing to the Success of Javanese Food Entrepreneurs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

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Abstract

The world of food and nutrition is a form of heritage deeply embedded in the culture of every ethnic group, representing the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next. Each ethnicity expresses its unique characteristics through oral traditions and actions that shape cultural accomplishments. The Javanese community is particularly well-known for the deliciousness of its cuisine, which has become a popular choice not only among the Javanese themselves but also among people from other communities. Therefore, this study examines the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to the success of food businesses among the Javanese community in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. This is a case study involving five Javanese participants in Kota Kinabalu who are actively engaged in the food business. The findings reveal that several intrinsic and extrinsic factors serve as motivating drivers that lead to the success of Javanese entrepreneurs in the food industry. The study also presents a new finding, highlighting that the success of the 4Ps of marketing, Product, Place, Price, and Promotion, must be supported by the value of honesty for a food business to continue growing and progressing. The implications of this study provide a new dimension of knowledge and offer practical contributions to enhancing indigenous entrepreneurship, particularly in the food retail business sector. The findings of this study are also useful to the government in advancing food-based entrepreneurship globally.

Keywords: Javanese Entrepreneurship Community, Intrinsic Factors, Extrinsic Factors, Honesty

Introduction

Food entrepreneurship has always been more than just a means of generating income; it serves as a powerful vehicle for preserving heritage, shaping identity, and sustaining livelihoods. In Sabah's rich and diverse cultural landscape, the food sector plays a pivotal role in enabling ethnic communities to express and promote their traditions while simultaneously contributing to the local economy. Among these communities, the Javanese, particularly those residing in urban centres such as Kota Kinabalu, have increasingly transformed their traditional culinary knowledge into the foundation for thriving small-scale food businesses. These enterprises are gaining popularity not only within the Javanese community but also among Malaysians from diverse backgrounds.

Despite the growing recognition of Javanese cuisine, academic research remains limited regarding the factors that drive the success of Javanese food entrepreneurs. Investigating these underlying factors can offer valuable insights into how cultural knowledge and business acumen intersect to empower the Javanese community economically and socially. Understanding this intersection is essential in appreciating how cultural heritage can be leveraged as a strategic asset in entrepreneurship, especially in multicultural settings like Sabah.

Such entrepreneurial success is closely tied to the informal learning processes embedded within ethnic communities. Every ethnic group possesses a body of informal education that evolves in tandem with societal changes, enabling the transmission of valuable knowledge and skills across generations (Caliskan et al., 2020; Saidatul Nornis Hj. Mahali, 2021). This dynamic process of experiential and communal learning contributes not only to professional competence but also to the sustainability of local livelihoods (Hazman Hassan et al., 2024). In the context of food entrepreneurship, this informal knowledge is often manifested in the mastery of traditional recipes, cooking techniques, and cultural values surrounding food preparation and sharing.

Therefore, the uniqueness of traditional cultural practices within the Javanese ethnic group can be seen as a wellspring of inspiration that fosters positive values, innovative actions, and strong career identities. These culturally grounded practices not only shape entrepreneurial behaviour but also contribute to long-term success and recognition in the food industry (Nor Hashimah Jalaludin, 2022). This synergy between tradition and innovation underscores the need for greater support and acknowledgment of small-scale ethnic entrepreneurs who, through every meal they serve, are not only building sustainable businesses but also actively preserving and promoting their cultural heritage.

Research Problem

In Sabah, the Javanese community stands out as one of the ethnic groups with a rich cultural heritage and deeply rooted culinary traditions. Renowned not only for their material culture and oral traditions, the Javanese are also distinguished by their unique culinary practices and enterprising spirit. Their traditional foods have gained widespread popularity across Sabah,

celebrated for their high quality, authentic flavour, and cultural significance—making them a staple attraction among the local population.

Despite their growing prominence in the local food scene, there remains a notable gap in academic literature concerning the entrepreneurial success of Javanese food businesses. Existing research has yet to adequately explore the interplay of cultural heritage, motivation, and entrepreneurship within this community. Preliminary fieldwork conducted by the researcher has identified a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as cultural values, personal motivation, and environmental influences, that contribute significantly to the sustainability and growth of Javanese food enterprises (Zahari et al., 2019; May et al., 2020). These factors warrant deeper academic inquiry, both for theoretical advancement and practical application in the broader context of food-based entrepreneurship.

Many aspects of Javanese cultural traditions in Sabah remain underexplored. The community has maintained a longstanding presence in the region and actively participates in diverse economic activities. Over the years, their resilience and entrepreneurial efforts have made meaningful contributions to the socioeconomic development of Sabah. Thus, this study is both timely and relevant, as it brings scholarly attention to how ethnic minority entrepreneurs transform cultural traditions into sustainable business ventures.

Moreover, the study challenges the conventional notion that entrepreneurial success is solely driven by capital or formal training. It highlights the importance of non-material factors, such as personal drive, inherited cultural values, community support, and effective marketing strategies. Notably, the research uncovers how deeply rooted values like honesty, often passed down through generations, play a critical role in sustaining business success. These cultural dimensions work hand in hand with conventional business elements such as product quality, pricing, strategic location, and promotional techniques.

By investigating these dimensions, this research aims to provide meaningful insights into the success factors of Javanese food entrepreneurs in Sabah. It seeks to bridge the academic gap, inform policy development, and support government efforts to empower local entrepreneurs. Ultimately, it contributes to the advancement of Malaysia's food-based entrepreneurship sector by recognizing and elevating the role of cultural heritage in shaping business excellence.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the structure and preparation methods of traditional Javanese food.
2. To analyse intrinsic and extrinsic success factors in Javanese food enterprises.
3. To evaluate how the Javanese apply the 4Ps of marketing (Product, Price, Place, Promotion) with honesty as the foundational value.

Review of Literature

Over the years, many researchers have explored economic development from a variety of angles. However, studies that specifically examine the experiences of particular ethnic groups, such as the Javanese community, remain quite limited. This lack of attention points to a clear gap in the literature that deserves further investigation, particularly in light of the important

role that cultural heritage and local entrepreneurship play in sustaining community livelihoods.

Several scholars (Johan Johnes et al., 2018; Md. Sharif et al., 2017; Ros Anita Kartini Mohamed, 2024) have noted that traditional economic practices are often closely linked to cultural traditions and social values. Yet, while food plays a central role in preserving cultural identity and generating income, traditional cuisines like Javanese food have not received as much scholarly focus. Zakaria and Hua (2022), for instance, observed that traditional dishes are highly appreciated by local communities, not only for their flavour but also for their cultural meaning. Still, the specific factors that drive the success of ethnic food entrepreneurs remain underexplored.

More recent research has started to examine the key elements that shape the performance of food-related businesses within minority communities. These elements can generally be grouped into two categories—intrinsic factors, which relate to internal qualities and business practices, and extrinsic factors, which involve external influences like the local environment and community support. These two dimensions are especially relevant in understanding how Javanese food entrepreneurs thrive in culturally diverse settings in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah.



Figure 1: Factors Influencing Food Business Attraction

Attraction Factors in Javanese Food Business Javanese food businesses often showcase uniqueness in taste, ambience, and cultural values. Intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) factors play a crucial role in ensuring the success of these businesses. When combined with the value of honesty, these factors form a strong foundation for the 4Ps of marketing—Product, Price, Place, and Promotion—effectively attracting customers to their eateries.

Figure 1 illustrates the intrinsic factors, referring to internal elements that are within the business owner's control. These factors demonstrate how the Javanese community can manage aspects such as:

Quality of Javanese Food Products

Javanese food vendors typically emphasize authentic, clean, and delicious food preparation, reflecting honesty in their cooking practices. For instance, they avoid using artificial or harmful ingredients to reduce costs. This aligns with the “Product” principle, as customers are drawn to consistently high-quality dishes with authentic flavors made from ingredients that are halal and hygienic by Islamic teachings. Ismail and Zulkifli (2022) highlighted that maintaining high standards of cleanliness, authenticity, and adherence to halal practices is crucial in ethnic food businesses. Many Javanese vendors go the extra mile to ensure that their recipes are traditional and unaltered, using natural ingredients without artificial flavourings or shortcuts. This reflects a strong commitment to honesty in food preparation, which not only resonates with Islamic values but also strengthens customer confidence

Friendly and Sincere Javanese Hospitality

Javanese vendors are known for their courteous and warm demeanour, driven by a sincere intention to offer the best service. This genuine hospitality becomes an effective word-of-mouth promotion, particularly for Javanese food businesses in Kota Kinabalu. Research by Faridah and Mohd Amin (2020) found that personal interactions between food vendors and customers can significantly influence repeat visits. Javanese entrepreneurs are often admired for their soft-spoken and welcoming nature, which reflects their cultural values. This form of sincere hospitality often turns first-time visitors into loyal customers and serves as an informal but powerful form of promotion through word of mouth

Cost Management and Pricing

Honest Javanese vendors avoid overcharging. They determine prices based on actual costs, reasonable margins, and the purchasing power of customers. Transparent and fair pricing builds customer trust and loyalty. A study by Liyana et al. (2023) noted that transparent and fair pricing models encourage customer trust. Instead of inflating prices for profit, many Javanese food vendors base their prices on reasonable profit margins and consider their customers' financial capabilities. This approach to pricing is consistent with the Javanese ethic of fairness and humility, and it helps build lasting relationships with the local community.

From the extrinsic perspective, external factors also influence the success of Javanese food businesses in Kota Kinabalu. These can be categorized into the following:

Strategic Business Location

Javanese food outlets are typically located in high-traffic areas or near popular spots like schools, markets, or mosques. These accessible locations make it easier for customers to visit. Hamzah and Karim (2021) found that many food businesses succeed due to their placement in high-traffic or community-centered locations. Javanese food stalls and eateries are often found near public places like mosques, markets, and schools, where they are easy to find and attract regular footfall. Choosing a visible and accessible site makes it more convenient for customers to stop by, especially during peak hours

Support From The Local Community

The trust that the community places in the honest practices of Javanese entrepreneurs makes them loyal customers, especially when the business is situated within the same community. Community trust strengthens reputation and ensures business sustainability. Siti Nurhaliza and Roslan (2022) pointed out that strong community backing can make a big difference, especially for small and medium-sized businesses. In areas with a sizable Javanese population, food vendors often benefit from the goodwill and trust of their own community members. This communal support not only brings in regular customers but also strengthens the business's reputation and resilience over time.

Cultural and Traditional Relevance of the Javanese Community

Businesses that preserve Javanese cultural elements, such as decorations, gamelan music, or traditional food presentation, attract customers who appreciate cultural values. These elements serve as added value that enhances both the product and promotional appeal. According to Zainab and Hafiz (2024), incorporating cultural elements—such as traditional music, Javanese attire, or themed interior design—can help a food business stand out. Many

Javanese entrepreneurs take pride in showcasing their heritage through the way they present their dishes and decorate their stalls or cafes. This cultural presentation attracts customers who value authenticity and enriches the dining experience beyond just the food.

The combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors creates a solid foundation for success in Javanese food businesses. Internally, values like honesty, cultural pride, and customer care are reflected in product quality and day-to-day practices. Externally, location advantages, community trust, and cultural branding contribute to market visibility and long-term growth. These insights echo wider discussions in ethnic entrepreneurship studies, where cultural capital, social networks, and value-driven decision-making are seen as vital ingredients for business success. What makes the Javanese case particularly interesting is the way cultural values such as *gotong-royong* (communal cooperation) and *kejujuran* (honesty) are actively practiced in the business setting, not just as ideals, but as real, measurable factors that drive customer engagement and business sustainability.

Research Methodology

This study involved interviews with five participants who have long been involved in the food business in Kota Kinabalu. The justification for choosing Kota Kinabalu lies in its status as a densely populated urban area where Javanese cuisine is a popular choice among the local community. This location is home to many fans of Javanese food across different ethnicities in Sabah. Based on this methodology, the study adopts a qualitative approach using a case study design.

Structure and Procedures of Food Preparation Among the Javanese Community

The structure and procedures in Javanese food preparation have their unique characteristics compared to other ethnic groups. This uniqueness stems from the traditional Javanese mindset, rooted in sincerity and honesty, especially in food preparation to ensure customer satisfaction. The Javanese uphold the principle of "*rezeki barokah*," which means that the livelihood gained from honest work brings blessings to both the seller and the buyer from Allah, the Almighty. Based on this philosophy, the following are key practices in their food preparation process:

Selecting Quality Ingredients

Selecting high-quality ingredients is essential in Javanese food businesses. This is because ingredient quality directly affects the outcome of the dishes sold. Therefore, careful selection has a significant impact on the final food product served to customers, as described by one participant:

"For us Javanese, in the food business, choosing quality ingredients is crucial. Even if we have to buy slightly more expensive items, it doesn't matter. For example, when buying chicken, it must be fresh, not just cheap. The same goes for vegetables; they must be genuinely fresh. Because it affects the final dish and helps us maintain food quality."

This statement highlights the importance of using only the best ingredients, reinforcing the need for thorough selection in food preparation. This careful attention to ingredient selection is rooted in their cultural values, where preparing food is seen as a responsibility that must be done with care and sincerity. It's not only maintaining high standards but also preserving the trust and loyalty of their customers

Wearing Proper and Modest Attire

Clothing also plays a significant role in Javanese food preparation. Proper attire reflects professionalism and hygiene, as explained by an informant:

“Wearing modest and appropriate clothing when cooking is very important. For example, wearing long pants, modest tops, women covering their heads, and men wearing hats, this is to prevent hair from falling into the food. If not taken seriously, it can affect the food.”

The above statement shows how appearance and dress are important, not just for hygiene but also for creating a positive perception among customers. Beyond cleanliness, their appearance reflects discipline and professionalism, which are closely tied to cultural values. By dressing modestly and neatly, they show that they take their work seriously, creating a positive impression and reinforcing the traditional Javanese belief that respect and presentation matter in every aspect of life, including food preparation.

Cooking in a Clean and Comfortable Environment

The cooking environment greatly contributes to the quality of the food prepared. Cleanliness is a core value in Javanese culinary culture, as a clean and comfortable space ensures smooth cooking processes. As explained by a participant:

“The food we cook is believed to carry a certain aura. If it’s prepared in an unclean or uncomfortable place, it can affect the taste.”

This view shows that the Javanese believe the environment influences the food’s outcome; poor conditions can result in less desirable food quality. This perspective shows how deeply cultural values are woven into their cooking practices. By ensuring their kitchens are tidy, organized, and pleasant to work in, these entrepreneurs aim to create food that is not only safe and delicious but also prepared with a positive and focused mindset. This respect for the cooking environment reflects their dedication to quality and the importance they place on serving meals that truly represent their cultural heritage.

Analysing Intrinsic Factors Contributing to Business Success

According to the Javanese, a sincere intention to help meet people's needs is central to doing business, particularly in feeding those who are hungry. They believe that delicious, fulfilling food brings joy and satisfaction to customers. Consequently, profit follows naturally when customers are happy and excited about the food; they return, and sales increase. Javanese food is renowned in Sabah not just for its taste but also for its quality and generous portions, making it a favourite among locals. As explained by a participant:

“Customers will come back if what we sell satisfies them. Of course, they will return to buy more and even tell their friends, neighbours, or anyone else to stop by. That’s a great sales strategy. Focus on quality first, then figure out how to promote it.”

This illustrates how both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and particularly the sincerity in transactions, contribute to the success of Javanese food businesses. They believe that when customers feel happy and full, they will naturally return and even spread the word to others, helping the business grow through trust and recommendation. This mindset places strong emphasis on quality, generosity, and authenticity, which in turn builds customer loyalty and

long-term success. The focus on doing good first, before thinking about profit or marketing, reflects a deeply rooted cultural belief that sincerity, care, and good intentions will ultimately bring about positive results in business.

Practicing Honesty in Business Activities

In Javanese business culture, honesty is considered a fundamental value and obligation in life. Honesty leads to success in both business and personal life. As explained by a participant: *“In business, we must not be dishonest. Do what we say. For example, if our menu lists certain ingredients, then those ingredients must be present in the dish. This builds customer trust.”*

From the interview, it's clear that honesty plays a big role in how Javanese food entrepreneurs in Kota Kinabalu run their businesses. For them, being truthful isn't just about following rules; it's a way of life and a key to gaining the trust of their customers. This value shows up clearly in how they prepare their food.

Sincerity and Warmth in Serving Food

Sincere and warm service is one of the key attractions for customers to try Javanese food. In the context of Javanese food businesses, the attitude and behaviour of the food vendor or restaurant staff are just as important as the taste and quality of the food itself. As explained by a participant:

“Every customer has feelings. As sellers, we need to understand them. Sometimes they ask for more food... and we give it to them. People want to eat more, we feel sorry for them too... It's about sharing our blessings on this Earth.”

This statement shows that people appreciate good behaviour and empathy. Being kind and warm-hearted becomes a key factor in attracting customers to enjoy the food offered. Sincere and warm service reflects a deep-rooted cultural value in the Javanese community, where hospitality (*ramah tamah*) and mutual respect (*tenggang rasa*) are highly emphasized. They believe that every customer deserves to be treated with care and small gestures, like offering a little extra food without expecting anything in return. This genuine concern creates a welcoming atmosphere that encourages people to return, not just for the food, but also for the heartfelt service. In Javanese culture, serving food is more than a transaction; it's an act of sharing blessings and building human connection. This warm and sincere approach not only fosters customer loyalty but also strengthens the cultural identity embedded in every meal served.

Model of Honesty as the Core of the 4P Marketing Principles in the Javanese Food Business

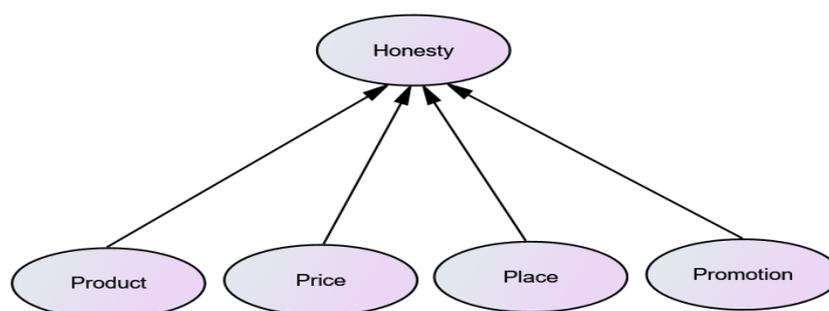


Figure 2: Model of Honesty in Javanese Marketing

Figure 2 illustrates how honesty serves as the foundation for the product in Javanese food businesses in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The food products are prepared with transparency, ensuring that customers are not deceived regarding ingredients or portion sizes in the meals served. It can be observed that fair pricing is practised, ensuring that prices are reasonable and not burdensome to customers in the Kota Kinabalu area.

In terms of presentation, the Javanese community ensures that their food outlets are kept clean, orderly, and accurately represented, without misrepresenting the actual condition of the premises. Additionally, their promotion strategies avoid excessive or exaggerated advertising. Instead, they adopt honest promotional approaches, such as using genuine customer testimonials to highlight the taste and quality of their dishes.

Conclusion

In summary, based on the analysis conducted, it was found that various intrinsic and extrinsic factors contribute to the success of Javanese food businesses in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. These diverse factors stem from the strength and richness of Javanese cultural values. The integration of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, combined with the honest business culture of the Javanese community, has produced food enterprises that are sustainable and trusted across generations. Honesty is not only a noble value but also a highly effective and reliable marketing strategy. This study has discovered a new insight: the 4P marketing principles, Product, Price, Place, and Promotion, must be anchored in honesty to successfully attract and retain customers over the long term. Therefore, the implications of this study provide meaningful contributions both academically and practically, particularly in empowering the local economy. Other ethnic communities can also learn from the success of the Javanese community in the food business sector, using their values and strategies as a source of knowledge and practical skills to strengthen their food-based enterprises.

Future studies should continue to explore how these unique cultural values of the Javanese community shape entrepreneurial behaviour, especially in increasingly diverse urban settings. Understanding how tradition and modern business needs can coexist will help illuminate new strategies for inclusive and culturally grounded economic development. The value of this research extends beyond just documenting the experiences of Javanese food entrepreneurs in Sabah. It provides practical insights for a wide range of audiences: policymakers interested in supporting grassroots enterprises, business advisors working with minority communities, and researchers looking to better understand indigenous entrepreneurship. It also offers inspiration and guidance for up-and-coming entrepreneurs, especially those who want to stay true to their cultural roots while navigating the realities of today's competitive food industry.

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