

Research Article

Fishermen and Consumptive Behavior: An Ethnographic Study of the Muncar Banyuwangi District Community

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Abstract

The fishing community in Kedungrejo Village, Muncar District, is deeply intertwined with a consumerist lifestyle. Every social group, from the fisherman owners, laborers, to factory workers, creates its own distinct reflection of this lifestyle. This study aims to depict the lifestyle or way of life formed within the fishing community. Using a qualitative approach, the research explains the phenomenon descriptively. The ethnographic study focuses on a group of fishing communities, providing a perspective from the fishermen as the primary informants. This allows for an understanding of consumerism patterns connected to the culture and traditions of the fishing community, along with the socioeconomic status linked to the impact of the fishermen's catch. Through data collection methods such as observation, interviews, and documentation, the study finds that the fishing community in Kedungrejo exhibits a consumptive lifestyle, as evidenced by their habit of purchasing luxury goods to maintain their social status in the surrounding environment. Additionally, their purchases are driven by personal desires. The fisherman owners, perceived to be in the upper social class, attempt to highlight their identity as wealthy and powerful. This research applies Jean Baudrillard's theory of consumerism, which assumes that individual identity is collectively shaped by commercial interests rather than utility. Just as societies represent needs, consumerism leads individuals or groups to believe in the symbolic power of possessing specific goods.

Keywords: *consumptive behavior, coastal communities, fishermen, socio-cultural, socio-economic*

Abstrak

Masyarakat nelayan pada Desa Kedungrejo Kecamatan Muncar sangat erat dengan pola hidup konsumerisme. Setiap elemen-elemen yang ada menciptakan cerminan tersendiri mulai dari nelayan juragan, nelayan buruh hingga karyawan pabrik. Penelitian ini dilakukan untuk menggambarkan pola hidup atau gaya hidup yang terbentuk di masyarakat nelayan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang menjelaskan fenomena secara deskriptif. Adapun riset etnografi peneliti memiliki fokus pendekatan pada sekumpulan masyarakat nelayan. Peneliti menghadirkan perspektif masyarakat nelayan sebagai informan utama sehingga memunculkan penjelasan pola konsumerisme yang berhubungan dengan kultur dan kebudayaan masyarakat nelayan, juga kaitannya status sosial ekonomi atas dampak hasil panen ikan nelayan. Dengan menggunakan metode pengumpulan data observasi, wawancara serta dokumentasi, hasil penelitian yang didapat menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat nelayan Desa Kedungrejo memiliki gaya hidup yang konsumtif tergambar pada kebiasaan membeli produk atau barang-barang mewah untuk menjaga gengsi pada lingkungan sekitar. Selain itu, mereka membeli barang-barang didasarkan atas keinginan mereka. Masyarakat nelayan juragan yang dipandang berada di posisi lapisan sosial atas berusaha menonjolkan identitas yang dianggap memiliki kekayaan dan kekuasaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori konsumerisme yang dikemukakan oleh Jean Baudrillard yang mengasumsikan identitas individu secara kolektif pada kepentingan komersial bukan pada *utility*. Selayaknya bagaimana masyarakat merepresentasikan suatu kebutuhan, konsumerisme menjadikan

perilaku individu atau kelompok meyakini akan adanya simbol kekuasaan dalam menguasai suatu barang tertentu.

Kata Kunci: perilaku konsumtif; masyarakat pesisir; nelayan; sosio kultural; strata ekonomi-sosial

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Introduction

Consumer behavior, particularly the habit of excessive consumption of goods and services, even when not needed, is defined as a tendency to buy beyond necessity (Moningka, 2006). Typically, individuals shop to fulfill basic needs; however, the need to satisfy these basic needs has evolved into a consumptive attitude. For many individuals with consumptive behavior, there is a desire for validation regarding their purchases. It is not merely about fulfilling a need; the use of material goods or resources also serves as a means of self-existence, which elevates one's social status (Fatonah, 2016).

As the largest fish producer, Muncar District in Banyuwangi Regency, East Java, is home to Muncar Harbor, a significant fish port. This has led to the establishment of fish processing industries clustered around the harbor. The prevalence of these industries presents substantial opportunities for local communities, particularly those living in coastal areas. In addition to working as factory employees, many individuals are employed as fishermen. Fishermen are categorized based on capital ownership, with two distinct groups: labor fishermen and owner fishermen (*nelayan juragan*).

The emergence of the term "*nelayan juragan*" has created social disparities in Muncar, particularly in the coastal areas (Budiyono, 2016). These social inequalities influence economic status, with social economic status representing the position of an individual or family in relation to average societal measures of cultural ownership, income, asset ownership, and participation in group activities within the community. The economic-social status of an individual is determined by their group affiliation. The owner fishermen, seen as part of the upper class, are perceived to have a higher lifestyle standard, which contributes to their elevated social status compared to labor fishermen.

Social status is often reflected in forms of address. Many families of owner fishermen are referred to as "*Pak Haji*" and "*Bu Haji*." Additionally, their use of luxury goods, such as branded clothing and excessive jewelry, further demonstrates their desire to showcase their social status. During the fishing season, owner fishermen can earn significantly more than labor fishermen, who receive only a quarter of the income generated. This phenomenon becomes especially interesting when examining how economic-social status between these groups plays a role in the consumptive behavior of Muncar's fishing community, as the primary driver of this behavior is often linked to one's economic-social standing (Cahyono, 2019).

The income generated from fishing serves as the primary livelihood for owner fishermen, with their economic stability largely dependent on the fish catch. Yuliasri (2017) explored survival mechanisms in the families of labor fishermen in Dusun Muncar, Kedungrejo Village, Banyuwangi, revealing that the low economic status of labor fishermen was primarily due to their limited education, which prevented them from acquiring skills outside the fishing industry, thereby forcing them to work as fishermen. Other studies have also examined the correlation between consumptive behavior among fishermen and their economic status. Kumala (2017) highlighted how the limited resources available to fishermen led them

to seek more lucrative employment, which subsequently brought about significant economic and social changes within the fishing community of Kedungrejo Village.

Despite these studies, the fundamental concept of how economic-social status and consumptive behavior impact the fishing community, particularly during the fishing season, remains insufficiently explored. Based on previous research findings, this study will focus on examining the economic-social status disparities between labor and owner fishermen in Muncar. Previous studies have not adequately addressed the impact of income disparity on consumptive behavior, particularly in terms of how these disparities shape lifestyles and consumer choices. For example, Yuliasri's (2017) study on survival mechanisms among labor fishermen in Muncar focused on how limited income led fishermen's wives to seek work. This contrasts with the focus of the current study, which emphasizes how income from fishing influences consumptive behavior.

Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap in existing literature and contribute to a deeper understanding of the consumptive behaviors within the fishing community of Muncar, particularly in relation to their social and cultural context. The findings of this study are expected to provide educational insights on how the Muncar community can better manage their income in a way that minimizes the detrimental effects of consumptive behavior. In the long term, it is hoped that the community will become more prudent in managing their finances, especially concerning their social and economic status.

Method

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach with an interpretive paradigm. Qualitative research begins with theoretical interpretation assumptions that shape and influence the focus of the ethnographic problem study. The focus of this research was to explain the patterns of consumerism related to the culture and traditions of the fishing community in Kedungrejo Village, Muncar, as well as the relationship between social-economic status and the impact of the fish catch. The study utilized Jean Baudrillard's consumerism theory, specifically his two core concepts: the social logic of consumption and personalization, or the smallest marginal difference.

The research subjects were drawn from multiple sources: the fishermen of Kedungrejo Village and their wives. The selection of the first group was based on the focus of the study, which concentrated on the fishermen of Kedungrejo as the key informants for the ethnographic study. The second group, the fishermen's wives, was selected due to their fundamental role as key actors in consumerism behavior, alongside the first group. The relationship between these two informants was essential in illustrating the unity of the fishermen's families.

Additionally, the study utilized primary data gathered from interviews with informants and secondary data from field observations and documentation. Secondary data also included literature studies from both online and offline sources to complement the research findings. Data collection involved three main methods: interviews with informants, observations, and documentation.

The research findings were analyzed using the perspective outlined by Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes data presentation, data reduction, and conclusion drawing. Before presenting the data and drawing conclusions, we conducted data reduction to filter out irrelevant information. As a result, the data presented focused on aspects related to the fishermen and their consumptive behaviors, which then allowed for the formulation of conclusions. The data was organized systematically according to the researcher's classification to interpret what required follow-up before drawing the final conclusions. In the conclusion, the key points from each sub-topic and the results were emphasized and elaborated upon.

Results

Consumerist Behavior as Part of the Culture and Traditions of the Muncar Community

This section discusses the consumerist behavior within the Muncar community. In this context, the consumerism observed among the Muncar population refers to the excessive and uncontrolled consumption of goods. In the Muncar fishing community, there are two main groups of fishermen: owner fishermen (*juragan nelayan*) and labor fishermen (*nelayan buruh*). The consumerist culture is particularly prominent among the owner fishermen, who tend to indulge in excessive consumption of luxury goods and jewelry without emphasizing their practical utility. For the Muncar community, such consumption is primarily used to enhance one's appearance and social standing. The need to be perceived as wealthy by wearing gold jewelry and expensive items has become a key indicator of social class among the fishermen. For instance, owner fishermen compete with each other by showcasing branded goods and jewelry to demonstrate their power and wealth.

The income derived from fishing plays a significant role in shaping the consumerist behavior within the community. Based on field observations, labor fishermen work for the owner fishermen using their physical labor. In contrast, owner fishermen invest in boats (*prau*), fuel, ice blocks, and other necessary supplies for fishing. Consequently, the income distribution is unequal, with labor fishermen receiving only a small portion of the total earnings. One informant, Pak Gondo, an owner fisherman, explained:

"As fishermen, we often have to manage the boats, ensure the necessary supplies like nets, ice, and fuel are sufficient for the trip. The weather also greatly affects the catch. During the off-season, fishing can be scarce, and sometimes we don't catch anything at all."

Upon visiting Kedungrejo Village and observing the living conditions, we found many houses in disrepair, raising questions about the apparent contradiction between the poor state of housing and the consumerist behavior of the local population, particularly women (see Figure 1). Most of the residents

are from the Madurese ethnic group, and Madurese is the dominant language spoken. One informant, Isya, further elaborated:

"Enggi bhing ning disah ka'ntoh mpon biasah mon mareh panen reng-orengah melleh reng phereng se'mabek larang dari hasel khik sebelummah panen engak emas, motor utawa kelampih engak roah. Tetih benni hal anyar pole bhing ontok masarakat dinnak apalagi bu-ibu eng la biasah ngangkui emas atas bebe dari bun leer, anteng, ghelleng, seloen kanan kiri bedeh kaphi."

"Yes, here it's quite common that when the fishing season starts, people tend to buy expensive goods with the earnings they made before the harvest, such as gold, motorcycles, or clothing. It's not unusual for people here, especially the women, to wear gold from head to toe, with necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and rings on both hands. (translate)"



Figure 1. Housing of the Fishermen's Community in Kedungrejo Village, Muncar

Impact of Socioeconomic Conditions in Muncar Before and After the Fishing Season

The buying and selling activities in Muncar are predominantly controlled by men, with the majority of the fish catch being sold or handed over to the middlemen (*juragan*). Fishing is not age-restricted, and we observed the specific roles assigned to family members based on gender. The physical requirements of the profession play a critical role in determining who can become a fisherman, rather than age. This profession influences the labor systems of both owner and labor fishermen. Fishermen's wives often work part-time in fish processing factories before returning to their familial and social responsibilities. They do so out of economic necessity, as their husbands' income from fishing is irregular, depending on the season. In some cases, the wives of fishermen, whose roles are typically confined to homemaking, resort to selling jewelry and household items to meet daily needs. This is often due to the uncertain income of their husbands, especially when fishing is less productive.

The average income from fishing is quite low, ranging from IDR 9,000 to IDR 11,000 per kilogram of fish caught. This means that fishermen typically earn between IDR 90,000 and IDR 100,000 per day. Meanwhile, the wives of fishermen working in fish processing factories earn around IDR 30,000 per day.

Their combined income is often spent on daily necessities such as food and children's school fees. The division of labor between the owner fishermen (*juragan laut*) and the land-based middlemen (*juragan darat*) is crucial in determining the income levels of the fishermen and their families. It is not uncommon for fishermen to be promised valuable items, such as jewelry, motorcycles, or even houses, as part of the income arrangement. However, these promises are conditional, and failure to meet expectations could lead to the replacement of the middleman or the fishermen.



Figure 2. Fish auction market during harvest

The income derived during the fishing season is heavily influenced by the management of the fishing crews by the owner fishermen. For example, during a successful fishing trip, one informant explained that the catch could be substantial enough for an entire family to fulfill their needs. The income earned, sometimes exceeding IDR 500,000 per day, is sufficient to cover basic necessities and even some luxuries. As illustrated by Figure 2, the wives of these fishermen often flock to the markets to buy essential goods.

We also observed a tendency among fishermen to squander their earnings on alcohol and gambling, while the wives of fishermen tend to purchase secondary goods rather than saving for long-term investments. Financial creditors, as well as vehicle salesmen, often visit fishermen's homes to offer the latest products. It is not unusual for large sums of money to be spent in a matter of hours. Many individuals admitted that their consumerist behavior had become a deeply ingrained habit, passed down through generations. This impulsive behavior is evident across all levels of the fishing community. Several women were seen wearing expensive clothing and jewelry while socializing with neighbors. Moreover, some individuals were observed riding unregistered vehicles, particularly during the fishing season.

Social relations among fishermen are characterized by the hierarchical system of the owner fishermen (*juragan laut*), engine operators (*pandega mesin*), boat drivers (*pengemudi*), and netters (*penyata lampu dan jaring*), as described in previous research (Nahdiyah & Ika, 2017). This system results in significant income disparities within the fishing community. The impact on social-economic status

becomes particularly noticeable after the fishing season, as fishermen's families fulfill their needs, which indirectly contributes to the formation of social constructions (Hamta, 2016). The imbalance in resources arising from impulsive spending behaviors leads to the formation of social images. Communities tend to respect and esteem individuals who possess a large quantity of jewelry or expensive goods (Pratiwi, 2015). This is evident in the wives of fishermen, who compete to adorn themselves with gold jewelry. Despite the fact that 7.37% of fishermen in East Java are considered poor in the fishing sector, consumerism remains strong within the community. Data from the Bappenas Simpadu system (integrated management information system of the National Development Planning Agency) indicates that the fishing sector represents the lowest 40% of welfare status within household categories. This consumerist behavior is a direct result of the quality of human resources within the community. Furthermore, social-economic status, as a prestige marker for fishermen in Kedungrejo, Muncar, remains a valid indicator for the social-economic disparities within the community.

Discussion

From the perspective of Jean Baudrillard's consumerism theory (1983), contemporary consumer societies are not structured based on social class but on consumption capabilities that allow individuals to become part of certain groups. In the context of the Muncar fishing community, this refers to the two main groups of fishermen: owner fishermen (*nelayan juragan*) and labor fishermen (*nelayan buruh*). Two core concepts emerge from this framework: *The Social Logic of Consumption* and *Personalization or the Smallest Marginal Difference*.

The Social Logic of Consumption

The social logic of consumption in the Muncar fishing community is based on individualistic principles, where personal desires for happiness drive the consumption of both primary and secondary needs. However, this behavior is also deeply rooted in the socio-historical context of Kedungrejo, Muncar, where happiness is perceived as being achieved through equality. Happiness, in this view, is linked to the fulfillment of needs measured by the possession of objects and symbols of well-being and comfort. In line with Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*, this happiness represents the modern societal pursuit of improved welfare, reducing the impact of social misfortune and promoting greater equality among groups.

In the Muncar community, happiness is viewed as a total pleasure, irrespective of the symbols that help individuals express their identity to others. Unquestionably, the Muncar fishing community embraces the ideology that happiness can be attained by achieving "sameness" in terms of prestige and consumptive capacity. This ideology has influenced the behavior of lower-status fishermen (labor fishermen), who often mimic the consumerist patterns of higher-status fishermen (owner fishermen), particularly after the fishing season when they spend their earnings on luxury goods and items to enhance their social standing. Instead of investing their earnings in long-term goals such as savings or home renovations, they purchase excessive quantities of gold jewelry and expensive items to showcase

their social status. This consumer behavior, rooted in social prestige, leads to the eventual sale of these luxury items at a loss when basic needs must be met.

In the Muncar fishing community, there are clear distinctions between social classes based on the income they earn from fishing. Consumption patterns highlight the growing social gap, increasing social hierarchies, and the rise of discrimination tied to power and responsibility (Setiawan, 2022). The consumerist ideology fosters the belief that everyone should possess the same material goods as those with higher social status in order to align with their prestige. However, in reality, these social institutions create inequalities that lead to discrimination based on environmental factors (Afistan & Azmi, 2020). Not everyone has access to the same objects or opportunities, which means that the consumer behavior of Muncar's fishermen often exceeds their actual social consumption needs. Social consumption in the fishing community is directly tied to their primary income source: fish catch. When the catch is small, consumption is limited, but when the catch is large, consumption is abundant. This consumptive behavior is shaped by local traditions and customs passed down through generations. The consumption patterns serve as social markers, based on the symbols and meanings attached to them. As Yuliasri (2017) observed in her research on the survival mechanisms of the wives of labor fishermen in Muncar, these social symbols represent status within the community (Eddy et al., 2019).

Personalization or The Smallest Marginal Difference

In this context, the excessive consumerism in Kedungrejo, Muncar, reflects the community's efforts to personalize their identities as affluent members of society. This results in the representation of their status through material symbols, differentiated according to their group affiliations. The differentiation between types of fishermen—owner fishermen, boat operators, and labor fishermen—represents a division of labor within the consumptive system. Similarly, the wives of fishermen follow patterns of consumerism based on material displays of wealth and social status.

The functional use of material objects in the Kedungrejo fishing community has long experienced marginal differentiation. The distinction of social-economic status is associated with the costs of maintaining a presence within the social circle. The use of luxury goods no longer serves as a business or long-term investment but rather as a means to project an image of class and social status. The additional costs required to maintain such an image often result in compensatory burdens in the future. During the pre-harvest period, the community tends to sell household items to cover these marginal costs, which accumulate after the fishing season (Yuli & Purwanti, 2017).

The pursuit of social-economic status in Kedungrejo is based solely on material symbols. The paradoxical nature of consumerism in this community—where symbols of wealth and poverty coexist—does not create significant opposition. The simplicity of the functional use of objects fades in importance as the community increasingly embraces this construction as an ideology to be preserved. The material exploitation of goods as symbols of social rank inadvertently defines consumption according to their

perceived utility (Bakti et al., 2019). This differentiation in prestige is evident in the symbols they attempt to display, such as the use of expensive items and new vehicles (Puspasari, 2017). These material signs aim to convey a particular social image and establish their class position within the community.

With the consumption map as described, the search for genuine needs becomes illusory or false (Bagus, 2017). For the fishermen of Kedungrejo, the use of gold jewelry and trendy items has become a normalized false reality. The need for such goods is driven by affective, not biological, factors, and the impulsive nature of their purchases leads them away from rational social consumption logic. They are aware that the presence of these material goods has long been advertised through others in their social circle, gradually becoming a normalized part of their social behavior. Thus, the social logic of consumption in Kedungrejo, Muncar, obscures the prioritization of their actual consumption needs.

Conclusion

The fishing community in Muncar has developed a culture of creating or shaping social strata. Among the Muncar fishermen, the owner fishermen (*nelayan juragan*) perceive consumptive behavior as a form of their identity, which has led to the adoption of a consumerist lifestyle. The excessive consumption of goods is not seen as a profitable investment but rather as a lifestyle choice aimed at enhancing their social status. This explains the consumerist behaviors adopted by the Muncar fishing community, which are influenced by income and socioeconomic status as both an identity and an ideology, passed down through generations of fishermen. This creates a social gap between owner fishermen and labor fishermen, fostering unhealthy social relationships. The existing social inequality within the Muncar fishing community indirectly leads to negative consequences for their social lives. This could worsen social instability within the community, especially considering the potential for marine pollution arising from the increased use of fishing equipment (Wijayanti & Hariyanto, 2022). The unstable or excessive consumerism of the owner fishermen also generates dissatisfaction among the labor fishermen, disturbing the social harmony of the community. Additionally, social inequality can impact the cultural identity of the fishermen (Nurlaili & Muhartono, 2017). Labor fishermen often face pressure to maintain their customs and culture, as they are frequently urged by the owner fishermen to work harder to meet their needs (Meilan, 2019).

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