



Local Wisdom and Career Meaning-Making among Final-Year University Students: An Ethnographic Study of Minangkabau Culture

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Abstract: Career development is often conceptualized as an individual and rational process; however, in culturally embedded societies, it is profoundly shaped by local values, social norms, and collective identities. This study aims to explore how local wisdom influences career meaning-making among final-year university students within the Minangkabau socio-cultural context of Tanah Datar, West Sumatra. This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design involving 21 participants: 15 final-year students from diverse academic disciplines and 6 key informants, including lecturers, career practitioners, and community leaders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using thematic analysis through systematic coding and categorization. The findings reveal that career development is constructed as a culturally embedded process characterized by five key themes: collective responsibility, value-based filtering through local wisdom, merantau as a culturally embedded career pathway, negotiation between tradition and modernity, and cultural identity as the foundation of career orientation. Career decisions are strongly influenced by family expectations, moral values, and social recognition, while local wisdom functions as both a symbolic and evaluative framework guiding career choices. This study contributes to the development of culturally grounded career theory by emphasizing the importance of integrating local wisdom and socio-cultural contexts into career guidance practices in higher education.

Keywords: career meaning-making; ethnography; local wisdom; minangkabau culture

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INTRODUCTION

Career development has traditionally been understood as an individual, rational process shaped by personal interests, competencies, and access to educational opportunities in modern knowledge-based societies (Azhenov et al., 2023; Karaca-Atik et al., 2023; Kuijpers, 2025; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In contemporary global contexts characterized by rapid technological change and socio-economic transformation, individuals are required to construct flexible career paths and adapt to increasing labor-market uncertainty (Blokker et al., 2019; Luwei & Huimin, 2024). However, recent perspectives in career studies emphasize that career trajectories are not solely individual choices but are deeply influenced by social, cultural, and contextual factors that shape meaning and identity (Martin et al., 2024; Mohebi & David, 2024; Schleithoff et al., 2026). Furthermore, career development is increasingly conceptualized as a process of meaning-making, in which individuals interpret their life experiences through cultural narratives and socially constructed values (Rashid et al., 2025; Schleithoff et al., 2026).

In non-Western societies, particularly those characterized by collectivist orientations, career decisions are often influenced by shared values, community expectations, and cultural norms rather than purely individual aspirations (Aisyawati & Akbar, 2022; Akosah-twumasi et al., 2018; Kitayama & Salvador, 2023). Cultural frameworks function as symbolic systems that guide individuals in understanding success, responsibility, and life purpose within their social environments (Day et al., 2023; Stephenson, 2023). In this regard, local wisdom constitutes an essential component of indigenous knowledge systems that shape behavior, decision-making processes, and intergenerational social interactions (Lestari et al., 2024). Therefore, understanding career development within specific cultural contexts requires a shift from universalistic approaches to culturally grounded, context-sensitive perspectives. Recent literature also highlights the growing importance of socio-cultural contexts in shaping individuals' life choices and career trajectories (Akinlolu et al., 2023; Yasdin et al., 2025). This perspective positions individuals not merely as rational agents but as actors embedded within social systems influenced by inherited values, norms, and expectations (Puerta & García, 2026). Within this framework, the concept of career meaning-making becomes central, enabling individuals to connect their lived experiences with the cultural values they uphold (Tsuchimoto & Sato, 2024). Consequently, a career cannot be understood solely as a functional or economic pursuit, but rather as a process of interpreting meaning within a broader socio-cultural context. In the Indonesian context, particularly in West Sumatra, Minangkabau society represents a distinctive cultural system in which local wisdom plays a central role in shaping both individual and collective

life orientations (Moeis et al., 2022). The philosophical principle adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah reflects a profound integration of customary law and Islamic values, forming a comprehensive socio-cultural framework that governs everyday life (Alhamuddin et al., 2022; Anwar et al., 2020). This system not only regulates social behavior but also influences how individuals understand their roles, responsibilities, and aspirations within society (Diapepin & Febrina, 2024). Accordingly, career-related decisions are inseparable from the cultural and moral structures that shape individual identity and social expectations.

Moreover, within Minangkabau society, collectivist values, customary norms, and kinship relations play a significant role in shaping life trajectories (Nasution et al., 2023). The matrilineal social structure, for instance, not only regulates inheritance systems but also influences decision-making processes, including those related to education and career (Blackwood, 2020; Sanday, 2020). The interaction between traditional values and the demands of modernity creates a dynamic and complex process of identity construction and career orientation (Appadurai, 1996; Kudaibergenov et al., 2025; Yao & McWha-Hermann, 2025). This indicates that individuals continuously negotiate between inherited cultural values and emerging global opportunities. One of the most prominent cultural practices in Minangkabau society is the tradition of merantau, which functions as a socio-cultural mechanism for self-development, economic mobility, and social recognition (Ismira et al., 2018; Merican, 2022; Rahman, 2016). This tradition is not merely a physical act of migration but represents a symbolic journey reflecting independence, resilience, and maturity (Aldi & Khairanis, 2025; Diapepin & Febrina, 2024; Murisal et al., 2026). For final-year university students, merantau often becomes a culturally embedded pathway in envisioning future careers and life trajectories. Through this practice, individuals construct their identities and career orientations in relation to both local cultural values and broader global contexts (Diniaty & Kustati, 2016; Izmayanti et al., 2022). Thus, career meaning-making among students approaching graduation is closely intertwined with cultural practices that mediate the relationship between tradition and modernity. At the same time, globalization and modernization have transformed how individuals perceive career and success, including within traditional societies (Alam & Heikal, 2024; Surata et al., 2025). These transformations often generate tensions between local cultural values and global expectations, requiring individuals to balance cultural identity with adaptive responses to social change (Alam & Heikal, 2024; Benson et al., 2020). In this context, local wisdom serves not only as cultural heritage but also as an adaptive resource that helps individuals navigate complex socio-economic transitions (Bakke, 2023). Therefore, integrating cultural values with global dynamics becomes essential in understanding career meaning-making in contemporary society.

Despite increasing recognition of cultural influences in career development, many existing studies remain dominated by Western frameworks that emphasize individual agency while overlooking the role of local wisdom and indigenous knowledge systems (Mahaswa & Syaja, 2025; Selin, 2003; Varghese & Crawford, 2021). Much of the literature focuses on measurable outcomes such as employability and career readiness (Herbert et al., 2020; Salmiah et al., 2025; Wallis, 2021), with limited attention to the symbolic and cultural dimensions of career meaning. This indicates a significant gap in understanding how cultural contexts shape the construction of career meaning, particularly in non-Western settings. This gap is further evident in value-based and Islamic-oriented societies, where cultural and religious principles significantly shape life orientations and career aspirations. Previous studies have rarely examined how local wisdom is integrated into career meaning-making, especially among university students transitioning into the workforce (Goodwill et al., 2019; Noviati et al., 2025; Ramdhani et al., 2025). Consequently, there is a need for context-sensitive research that bridges career theory with local cultural realities.

This study offers a novel contribution by examining local wisdom as a cultural framework in shaping career meaning-making among final-year university students in Minangkabau society. By employing an ethnographic approach, this study explores the symbolic meanings, cultural values, and social practices embedded in everyday life. It shifts the focus from technical and individualistic perspectives to a more holistic, culturally grounded understanding of career development. Furthermore, this study positions local wisdom not merely as a contextual factor but as an active epistemological lens through which career choices are interpreted and constructed. It also highlights the dynamic interplay between cultural continuity and contemporary career aspirations in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. In doing so, the study provides deeper insight into how culturally embedded values inform decision-making processes. This perspective enriches existing career development theories by incorporating non-Western cultural dimensions. Ultimately, it underscores the urgency of developing culturally responsive career guidance frameworks in higher education contexts.

This study offers a novel contribution by positioning local wisdom as a cultural framework through which career meaning-making is constituted among final-year university students in Minangkabau society. Rather than conceptualizing career as a purely technical and individualistic endeavor, it is situated within the realm of lived experience, where meanings are continuously constructed through social interactions, culturally embedded narratives, and everyday practices within the community. Within this context, symbolic meanings, cultural values, and relational dynamics function not as peripheral influences but as constitutive forces that shape how individuals interpret, negotiate, and legitimize their career trajectories. Such a perspective, informed by an ethnographically oriented lens, enables a more nuanced understanding of career as a culturally mediated

process embedded within socially structured realities (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This reconceptualization foregrounds career development as a contextually situated and meaning-laden process, reflecting the dynamic interplay between individual agency and socio-cultural structures. This study aims to explore how local wisdom shapes career meaning-making among final-year university students within the socio-cultural context of Minangkabau society in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra. Specifically, it seeks to examine how cultural values, religious principles, and the tradition of merantau influence students' interpretations of career, success, and life purpose as they transition from higher education to the world of work. In addition, this study examines how these culturally embedded factors interact with contemporary career expectations to shape students' decision-making processes.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative, ethnographic design to explore how local wisdom shapes career meaning-making among final-year university students in Minangkabau society. Ethnography was selected to capture participants' lived experiences and the cultural meanings embedded in everyday practices, particularly those related to career construction within a socio-cultural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was conducted in Tanah Datar, West Sumatra, Indonesia, a region widely recognized for its strong adherence to Minangkabau cultural values and traditions. The research specifically involved students from UIN Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, an Islamic higher education institution that integrates academic learning with cultural and religious values. The primary participants were 15 final-year undergraduate students in transition from university to the world of work. These participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) being in the final year of study, (2) actively preparing for career entry, and (3) having a strong socio-cultural background in Minangkabau society.

To ensure comprehensive disciplinary representation, the study engaged participants from eleven distinct academic programs. The student cohort comprised individuals from Counseling Guidance, Islamic Education, Islamic Educational Management, and Primary School Teacher Education, with two representatives selected from each program. Additionally, single representatives were drawn from Mathematics, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Early Childhood Islamic, English, and Arabic Education. This deliberate academic diversity facilitated the capture of a wide array of perspectives on career meaning-making across different fields. Furthermore, to enrich the data and mitigate potential bias, the research incorporated six supplementary informants, encompassing two academic lecturers, two career guidance practitioners, and two traditional community leaders (*tokoh adat*). The inclusion of these individuals provided essential cultural, educational, and social insights, thereby enabling data source triangulation and enhancing the overall validity of the findings. Ultimately, the study encompassed a total of twenty-one participants, a sample size deemed adequate for ethnographic research that prioritizes analytical depth over broad generalization (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Data were collected through prolonged engagement using three main techniques: 1) In-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants (21 informants). Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and explored themes related to career meaning, cultural values, and future aspirations; 2) Participant observation. The researcher conducted observations in both academic and social environments to understand how cultural values such as *adat*, religiosity, and *merantau* are practiced in daily life. Field notes were systematically recorded; 3) Documentation. Supporting data were collected from institutional records, cultural documents, and reflective field notes to enrich contextual understanding.

Data analysis employed a thematic approach based on the framework developed by Miles et al. (2014), encompassing data condensation, data display, and the formulation of conclusions. The analytical procedure progressed sequentially from open coding to isolate preliminary concepts, through axial coding for categorical grouping, and culminating in selective coding to establish overarching themes. This systematic approach facilitated the emergence of central motifs, particularly cultural responsibility, the symbolic significance of a career, and the function of *merantau* (migration). To establish methodological rigor and qualitative credibility, the researchers implemented comprehensive validation techniques. These encompassed source triangulation across students, lecturers, and community leaders, alongside method triangulation utilizing interviews, observations, and document analysis. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the findings was fortified through member checking, allowing participants to verify core interpretations, and prolonged field engagement to achieve a profound contextual understanding, thereby systematically mitigating potential researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2). The study adhered to ethical standards in qualitative research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings on the implementation of career guidance and counseling services to enhance students' motivation to pursue higher education. The findings were derived from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with guidance and counseling teachers, homeroom teachers, and students, and relevant school documents. The analysis revealed three main themes: career guidance materials, strategies used by guidance and counseling teachers, and forms of career guidance and counseling services implemented in the school. A summary of these themes and representative extracts from participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Themes, Sub-themes, and Representative Extracts

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Extract
Career Guidance Materials	Information about higher education	Guidance and counseling teachers provide materials about types of universities, admission pathways, study programs, and career prospects after graduation.	"Students are given information about types of universities, admission pathways, and how to choose a suitable major." (C1)
	Motivational learning media	Teachers use motivational videos and cinema therapy to illustrate the differences in career opportunities between high school and university graduates.	"We often show motivational videos comparing jobs for high school graduates and university graduates." (GC2)
	Alum success stories	Alumni who studied at national and international universities are used as examples to motivate students.	"We share stories about alumni who studied in China, Turkey, and Egypt." (C1)
Strategies to Motivate Students	Personal approach	Guidance and counseling teachers conduct individual approaches to understand students' backgrounds, including their economic conditions and career aspirations.	"We approach students personally to understand their background and guide them accordingly." (GC1)
	Alum engagement	Schools invite alums studying at well-known universities or abroad to share experiences and motivate students.	"When alumni come to share their experiences, students become more motivated to continue their studies." (GC2)
	Career support for disadvantaged students	Teachers help students apply for scholarships, such as the Indonesia Smart Card (KIP), to support their higher education plans.	"Students with financial difficulties are guided to apply for scholarships such as KIP Kuliah." (GC1)
Forms of Career Guidance and Counseling Services	Classical guidance	Career information is delivered to all students through classroom guidance sessions focusing on higher education pathways.	"Career guidance is delivered through classical guidance sessions for all Grade XII students." (C1)
	Group guidance and individual counseling	Students receive group discussions and individual counseling on career planning and university choices.	"Many students consult individually about university majors and admission pathways." (GC1)
	Collaboration with school stakeholders	Career guidance services involve collaboration with homeroom and subject teachers, as well as alums, to support students' career planning.	"We collaborate with homeroom teachers and subject teachers to guide students in choosing suitable majors." (HT)

The findings indicate that career meaning among final-year students in the Minangkabau context is not constructed within an individualistic framework but is deeply embedded within a relational and moral structure that prioritizes collective responsibility. This orientation reflects a culturally internalized logic in which personal aspirations are continuously negotiated within the expectations of family and extended kinship systems. Across participants, career decisions were consistently framed not as expressions of personal ambition but as moral obligations tied to familial reciprocity. This reflects a socio-cultural system in which individuals perceive themselves as part of an interdependent network rather than autonomous agents. In this context, the notion of "repaying parents" is not merely symbolic but functions as a guiding principle that shapes life trajectories. As

expressed by a Counseling Guidance student (P3): *"I cannot choose a career only for myself. My parents have struggled for me..."* This statement reflects more than gratitude; it reveals a deeply embedded moral economy in which education is understood as an investment that must yield social and familial returns. Similarly, a PGMI student (P6) articulated: *"I want a job that can support my family..."*. This reinforces the idea that a career is perceived as a mechanism for redistributing benefits back into the family structure. Importantly, this orientation transcends disciplinary backgrounds, indicating that the phenomenon is not situational but cultural.

Further analysis suggests that this collective framing of career is closely tied to the preservation of social honor (marwah keluarga). A participant from MPI (P15) emphasized: *"A job carries the family name..."*. Here, a career is not only about economic survival but also about symbolic representation. Individuals act as carriers of family identity, and their career choices become public reflections of familial dignity. Triangulated insights deepen this interpretation. A lecturer (L1) noted: *"Students often prioritize family expectations over personal interests."* Meanwhile, a community leader (TA1) framed this phenomenon within a broader cultural logic: *"An individual represents their extended family."* Taken together, these findings suggest that career functions as a social institution through which cultural values are reproduced, rather than merely an individual life decision. The collective orientation observed here challenges dominant Western models of career development that emphasize autonomy, instead highlighting the importance of relational identity in shaping career trajectories.

The findings of this study demonstrate that career decision-making among Minangkabau students is deeply embedded in a collectivistic and relational framework, challenging dominant individualistic models of career development. This aligns with contemporary career construction perspectives that emphasize the role of social context in shaping career trajectories (Ran et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). Unlike Western paradigms that prioritize autonomy, the present findings reveal that a career is constructed as a moral obligation within a network of familial relationships. The strong emphasis on reciprocity and family responsibility reflects what Malik and Garg (2026) conceptualize as the relational theory of work, in which work is inherently connected to relationships and social contribution. Similarly, Khanijou and Zakariah (2023) argue that relational expectations rather than individual preferences often shape career choices in non-Western contexts. The present findings extend this perspective by demonstrating how reciprocity is not merely a social expectation but a moral imperative embedded in cultural consciousness. Furthermore, the notion of marwah keluarga (family honor) resonates with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, where social recognition and honor function as key drivers of action (Khanijou & Zakariah, 2023). Career choices, in this context, become symbolic acts that reinforce family identity and social positioning. This supports Oyserman (2015) that identity is socially constructed and contextually activated, particularly in collectivist societies.

An important implication of these findings concerns the extent to which collective orientation shapes individual autonomy in career decision-making among Minangkabau students. The findings indicate that autonomy is not constrained but redefined within a relational framework, where decisions are not experienced as external pressure but as culturally internalized responsibilities aligned with collective values. This reflects a form of "relational autonomy," in which agency is exercised by considering family expectations rather than opposing them. In this context, collective orientation strengthens decision-making by providing moral clarity and social direction. However, tensions emerge when personal aspirations diverge from familial expectations, requiring individuals to negotiate between personal desires and social obligations. These findings are consistent with cross-cultural studies showing that individuals in collectivist cultures prioritize group harmony and social expectations (Akosah-twumasi et al., 2018; Azhenov et al., 2023; Noviati et al., 2025), and they also demonstrate that this orientation reflects an internalized moral framework that actively shapes individual agency.

The second theme reveals that local wisdom operates as an active evaluative system through which students interpret and filter career opportunities. Rather than passively inheriting cultural values, participants actively engaged with them to make sense of what constitutes a "good" or "appropriate" career. This evaluative process reflects a layered understanding of success that integrates material, moral, and spiritual dimensions. For many students, economic benefits alone were insufficient to justify a career choice. Instead, alignment with cultural and religious principles emerged as a critical criterion. A student from MPI (P7) stated: *"Success is not only about money..."*, but this also reflects a rejection of purely materialistic definitions of success. Similarly, a student from English Education (P1) explained: *"If a job does not match my values, I hesitate..."*. This hesitation indicates the presence of an internalized evaluative mechanism that filters external opportunities through a moral lens. Importantly, this filtering process is not rigid but interpretative. Students do not simply accept or reject opportunities; they actively negotiate meanings based on context. A PAI student (P4) emphasized: *"A career must be meaningful and blessed..."*. This introduces a spiritual dimension to career decision-making, where concepts such as barakah become integral.

Triangulated data further reinforces this pattern. A career practitioner (CP1) observed: *"Students sometimes reject good opportunities because they feel they are not appropriate."* Meanwhile, a community leader (TA2) stated: *"Adat is a guide for life."* This indicates that local wisdom functions not as a passive cultural backdrop but as a living epistemological system that shapes decision-making processes. Thus, career selection becomes an act of moral reasoning, where individuals continuously interpret and apply cultural values. This

positions local wisdom as a symbolic filter that mediates between modern career opportunities and traditional value systems. The findings indicate that local wisdom operates as a culturally embedded evaluative system that shapes career decision-making processes. This supports the growing recognition that career development is influenced by cultural epistemologies rather than universal rational frameworks (Rashid et al., 2025). The role of moral and spiritual evaluation in career choices aligns with the concept of "cultural preparedness" in career counseling, where individuals interpret opportunities through culturally grounded schemas (Arulmani, 2014). In this study, students actively filter career options based on alignment with religious and cultural values, reflecting a form of culturally mediated rationality. This finding is also consistent with Di Fabio and Blustein (2016), who emphasize the importance of meaning-centered career development, where individuals seek purpose beyond economic gain (Indinger, 2024). The integration of barakah (blessing) into career considerations further supports the argument that career decisions in certain contexts are deeply intertwined with spiritual well-being.

Moreover, the concept of local wisdom as a "symbolic filter" resonates with Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology, which views culture as a system of meanings through which individuals interpret their experiences. In this sense, career decision-making becomes a process of meaning-making rather than mere choice selection. Empirical studies in Asian contexts also support this pattern, showing that cultural values significantly influence career preferences and decision-making styles (Yasdin et al., 2025). However, this study adds depth by demonstrating that individuals are not passive recipients of cultural norms but active interpreters (Arulmani, 2014; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Therefore, the study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing local wisdom as an active cognitive and symbolic system that mediates between modern career opportunities and traditional value structures. The findings highlight merantau as a central cultural mechanism in shaping career meaning. Unlike conventional notions of mobility, merantau is not merely a strategy for economic advancement but a culturally prescribed pathway for self-transformation and social recognition. Participants consistently described merantau as an essential phase in their life trajectory. A Mathematics student (P5) stated: *"Merantau is a way to prove myself..."* This reflects a performative dimension of mobility, in which individuals seek validation through experiences outside their place of origin. Similarly, a Biology student (P11) noted: *"Without merantau, it feels incomplete."* This sense of incompleteness indicates that merantau is not optional but normative.

Further analysis suggests that merantau functions as a rite of passage. Through this process, individuals acquire not only economic capital but also social and cultural capital. A Physics student (P10) explained: *"Outside, we learn about life..."*. This highlights the transformative nature of mobility. Triangulated data confirms this interpretation. A lecturer (L2) observed: *"Most students plan to leave their hometown."* A community leader (TA1) emphasized: *"Merantau is part of becoming a complete person."* Thus, merantau can be understood as a cultural script that structures career pathways, linking individual development with collective expectations. It represents a bridge between tradition and modernity, where global mobility is framed within local cultural logic. The findings highlight merantau as a culturally embedded pathway that integrates career development with identity formation and social recognition. This extends existing career mobility theories by situating mobility within a cultural framework rather than purely economic or structural factors (Martiniello & Rea, 2014). The conceptualization of merantau as a rite of passage aligns with anthropological perspectives that view mobility as a transformative process (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960). In this study, mobility is not merely a transition but a culturally prescribed stage in becoming a socially recognized individual.

This finding also resonates with boundaryless career theory, which emphasizes mobility across organizational and geographical boundaries (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). However, unlike the individualistic orientation of boundaryless careers, merantau is culturally structured and socially expected, highlighting the limitations of applying Western frameworks universally. Furthermore, the role of merantau in identity formation aligns with social identity theory (Rahman, 2016), which holds that identity is shaped through interaction with broader social contexts. The experience of living outside one's hometown enables individuals to reconstruct their identity while maintaining cultural roots. Recent studies also indicate that migration can enhance career adaptability and resilience (McMahon & Abkhezr, 2025). The present findings support this but extend it by showing that adaptability is culturally framed rather than purely individual. Thus, this study contributes by conceptualizing merantau as a cultural career script that integrates mobility, identity, and social recognition within a single framework.

The findings reveal that students engage in ongoing negotiation between cultural expectations and personal aspirations. This negotiation is not characterized by conflict alone but by adaptive strategies that allow individuals to reconcile competing demands. Participants frequently described experiences of tension. A student from Arabic Education (P9) stated: *"I want to follow my passion, but there are expectations..."*. This reflects the coexistence of individual desire and collective obligation. Similarly, a Chemistry student (P14) noted: *"I have to think about family conditions..."*. This indicates that decision-making involves both rational and emotional considerations. However, rather than rejecting cultural values, students tend to reinterpret them. A PAI student (P13) explained: *"I try to find a middle ground..."*. This suggests that negotiation is a constructive process. Triangulated insights support this. A lecturer (L1) observed: *"Students are more flexible but still rooted in*

culture." A practitioner (CP1) added: *"They usually compromise."* These findings indicate that career meaning is not fixed but dynamically constructed, shaped by continuous interaction between tradition and modernity. The findings reveal that career decision-making involves an ongoing negotiation between traditional values and modern aspirations. This supports the notion that career development is a dynamic and context-dependent process (Keumala et al., 2018; Yao & McWha-Hermann, 2025). The tension between personal aspirations and cultural expectations aligns with the concept of identity negotiation, in which individuals continuously construct their identity through interactions with multiple value systems (Breakwell, 2015). In this study, students do not reject cultural values but reinterpret them in light of modern opportunities. This process also reflects the concept of adaptive career behavior, where individuals adjust their strategies to align with changing contexts (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). The tendency to seek compromise indicates a form of cultural adaptability that balances continuity and change. Additionally, the findings resonate with theories of globalization, which highlight the coexistence of local and global influences in shaping individual behavior (Appadurai, 1996). Students navigate between these influences, creating hybrid career orientations. Empirical research also shows that young people in transitional societies often experience similar tensions but develop coping strategies to manage them (Steffy & Langfeldt, 2023). This study shows that such negotiation is not merely reactive but also constructive. Therefore, career meaning-making is best understood as a dialectical process in which individuals actively integrate tradition and modernity into coherent life narratives.

The final theme demonstrates that cultural identity serves as the foundational framework for career orientation. Rather than viewing a career as a purely economic pursuit, students perceive it as an extension of their identity. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining cultural values regardless of career location. A PIAUD student (P2) stated: *"I want to succeed but remain Minangkabau."* This reflects a dual orientation toward global mobility and cultural rootedness. Similarly, a PGMI student (P12) noted: *"Wherever I go, I carry my values."* This indicates that identity is not tied to place but to internalized values. A student from MPI (P15) further articulated: *"Career is part of who we are."* This suggests that career choices function as expressions of identity. Triangulated data reinforces this perspective. A community leader (TA2) stated: *"Identity must not be lost."* A lecturer (L2) added: *"Students bring their identity into their careers."* Thus, careers become a medium for identity expression and cultural continuity, allowing individuals to navigate modern contexts while maintaining their cultural roots.

The findings demonstrate that cultural identity serves as the core framework for career orientation, reinforcing the idea that career is an extension of self-concept (Syska et al., 2026). However, this study expands the concept by emphasizing the role of collective cultural identity. The strong emphasis on maintaining Minangkabau identity aligns with identity theory, which posits that individuals strive for consistency between their actions and self-concept (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Career choices, in this context, become expressions of identity rather than merely functional decisions. This also resonates with the concept of "calling," where work is perceived as meaningful and aligned with personal values (Duffy & Dik, 2013). However, unlike individualistic notions of calling, the present findings suggest a culturally embedded form of calling. Furthermore, the ability to maintain identity across different contexts reflects cultural resilience, a key factor in navigating globalization (Mohyeddin, 2024). Students demonstrate the ability to adapt without losing their cultural core. Studies in intercultural career development also highlight the importance of integrating cultural identity into career guidance practices (Martin et al., 2024; Pintor & Premazzi, 2024). This study provides empirical support for such integration. Thus, the study contributes by positioning career as a medium of identity expression and cultural continuity, particularly in culturally rich societies.

CONCLUSION

Career construction among final-year university students in the Minangkabau socio-cultural context is not an individualistic or purely rational process, but one embedded in relational, cultural, and moral frameworks. Career decisions are shaped by collective responsibility, particularly reciprocity, family expectations, and the preservation of social honor (*marwah keluarga*), while local wisdom functions as a normative and symbolic system that guides how students define career success in economic, moral, and social terms. The cultural practice of merantau also emerges as a structured pathway linking career development with identity formation, independence, and social recognition. At the same time, students actively negotiate between traditional values and modern career aspirations, producing adaptive and hybrid career orientations rather than rigid adherence to cultural norms. This shows that individuals act as active agents who reinterpret cultural values in response to changing socio-economic contexts. These findings call for career guidance frameworks that are culturally responsive and recognize family, local wisdom, and relational identity, especially in Islamic higher education contexts, where career interventions should move beyond individualistic models and address the socio-cultural dimensions of decision-making. The study remains limited by its qualitative, ethnographic scope and focus on a specific cultural setting; future research should use comparative and mixed-method approaches to test culturally grounded career models across diverse contexts and assess their long-term effects on career outcomes.

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