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What Does Subjective Well-Being Mean to Orang Asli Seletar Youth? A Case Study in Johor, Malaysia

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Abstract

The concept of subjective well-being among Orang Asli youth remains insufficiently understood due to limited empirical research on the community. Orang Asli youth represent a unique social group whose experiences are shaped by their culture, language, belief systems, and traditional lifestyle. These elements influence how well-being is perceived beyond economic indicators. Therefore, this study aims to explain the concept of subjective well-being among the Orang Asli Seletar youth. A case study research design was employed in this qualitative study. Twenty (20) informants aged 18 to 30 years, residing in Johor, participated in focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. This study's findings identified seven (7) main themes related to the concept of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth: (i) tranquility; (ii) happiness; (iii) comfort; (iv) sufficiency; (v) preferences; (vi) awareness; and (vii) satisfaction. In conclusion, this study provides a basis for understanding the subjective well-being of youth within the Orang Asli Seletar community. From the perspective of mainstream society, their lifestyle may appear modest and inadequate. However, this does not accurately reflect their true experience, as objective well-being should not be the sole measure of this community's development. Greater emphasis on subjective well-being is essential to support this community's thriving.

Keywords: subjective well-being; Orang Asli Seletar; youth; community development



Academic Editor: Heather Scott-Marshall

Received: 25 February 2026

Revised: 3 June 2026

Accepted: 5 June 2026

Published: 8 June 2026

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1. Introduction

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that is open to various interpretations, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. Scholars often distinguish between objective well-being, which focuses on external indicators such as income, health, and education, and subjective well-being, which refers to individuals' internal evaluations of their own lives [1–3]. A comprehensive understanding of well-being should integrate both dimensions to reflect the full complexity of human experience. Subjective well-being provides valuable insights into how individuals perceive and evaluate their quality of life, accounting for their unique circumstances. It includes assessments of emotional states, life satisfaction, perceived sufficiency of resources, personal preferences, and overall psychological well-being. Hence, subjective well-being is best understood through individuals' reflections on the different dimensions that shape their everyday lives [1,4].

This study focuses on Orang Asli Seletar youth, one of the indigenous tribes in Malaysia, who occupy a critical position within the community's social structure. They are at a life stage where decisions related to education, employment, identity, and future aspirations are actively negotiated. For the Orang Asli Seletar, this negotiation occurs within the context of rapid socio-economic change, coastal development, and increasing interaction with mainstream institutions. Therefore, exploring subjective well-being among youth provides insight into how structural constraints and cultural resources shape life evaluations, emotions, and aspirations during a formative period. Most existing studies on Orang Asli well-being focus on income, education, and health status, paying limited attention to their internal evaluations and emotions that influence their worldview as Orang Asli.

Orang Asli communities often live in rural and suburban areas. This geographic isolation makes it difficult for them to access education, healthcare, employment opportunities, and basic infrastructure, which contributes significantly to their socio-economic disadvantages [5,6]. This is a unique case study, as the Orang Asli Seletar are an indigenous people's tribe that lives near a development area. They reside along the coast of the Johor Straits, which is undergoing rapid development due to its proximity to Singapore. Nevertheless, they remain trapped in severe socio-economic conditions and continue their customary practice of gathering seafood on a limited basis in the Johor Straits area [7,8]. The development aims to improve the living standards of nearby communities, including the Orang Asli Seletar. Nonetheless, the development has intruded into the Orang Asli Seletar community and the surrounding sea [7,9]. Note that the destruction impacts their subsistence economy and threatens their identity, as well as culture [7]. The rapid development in the surrounding area of their village has made this minority group vulnerable to societal changes and compelled them to adapt to the advancements in their social and cultural environment. These interactions have affected their lifestyle and influenced their subjective interpretation of well-being.

To provide a clearer analytical focus, this study is guided by the following research questions: (i) How do Orang Asli Seletar youth conceptualise subjective well-being within their socio-cultural and environmental context? (ii) What are the key dimensions that shape their understanding and experience of subjective well-being? and (iii) How do these dimensions reflect the interaction between cultural values, environmental attachment, and contemporary socio-economic changes? These questions are grounded in the theoretical perspective that subjective well-being is not solely an individual psychological evaluation, but a culturally embedded construct shaped by collective values, lived experiences, and relationships with the natural environment.

This study aims to explore the concept of subjective well-being among the Orang Asli Seletar youth. Understanding their well-being requires sensitivity to their worldview, cultural values and lived experiences, which are deeply rooted in their relationship with the natural environment and their traditions. Their interpretation of well-being may differ from mainstream development frameworks. Thus, it is essential to explore how they define and express well-being in their own terms. This concept enables a more nuanced understanding of how they respond to, negotiate with, and make sense of the forms of development introduced to their community. Recognising this culturally grounded worldview is a crucial entry point for understanding the meanings they attach to well-being and how these meanings inform their identity, behaviour, and aspirations.

1.1. Who Are the Orang Asli Seletar?

The Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) is the Malaysian government agency responsible for managing the affairs and development of the Orang Asli. It func-

tions both as a welfare agency and a development driver, aiming to uplift Orang Asli communities while safeguarding their identity and rights. The total Orang Asli population in Malaysia was 221,098, comprising 18 tribes categorised into three main groups: Senoi, Negrito, and Proto-Malay [10]. The Orang Asli Seletar tribe belongs to the Proto-Malay group with a current population of 2110 in Malaysia [10]. They can also be identified in Singapore, where most are assimilated into the local Malay community [11]. This distribution is linked to their historical nomadic lifestyle on boats along the Straits of Johor, which allowed them to move freely across the waters [7,11]. This mobility explains why Orang Asli Seletar communities exist in both Malaysia and Singapore.

Orang Asli Seletar, also known as “*Orang Laut*”, is a coastal community that is the only Orang Asli tribe in Malaysia residing by the sea [9]. Western researchers refer to them as the Sea Gypsies [7]. Traditionally, they resided in boats called *Pau Kajang*, made from *meranti* or *seraya* trees and with thatched roofs crafted from *mengkuang* leaves [12], where they slept, cooked, and travelled with the boat [7,12,13]. They reside nomadically in mangrove forests and waterways bordering the Straits of Johor, which separate Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, and freely roamed between the shores of Singapore and Malaysia before a border was established [11,12]. Other than that, they rely on the environment for their survival. For example, they harvest fish, crabs, shrimps, and mussels for sustenance [7], and have extensive knowledge of the wildlife and plants in mangrove forests and riverine areas [11]. They also hunt wild pigs and gather tubers and yams [14].

Following Singapore’s secession from Malaysia, the Orang Asli Seletar could no longer travel freely on their *Pau Kajang* across the Johor Strait. Singapore’s government enforces stringent regulations to prevent smuggling beyond its borders. Feeling fearful of being apprehended, the Orang Asli Seletar chose to migrate to Johor, as they could cross the Johor Straits without passing through immigration, given their enduring patron–client connection with the Sultan of Johor [13]. Currently, they no longer reside in boats as they did previously; they now reside on land and have settled on the coast of the Johor Straits through the Re-settlement Programme introduced by the Malaysian Government [7]. They are mostly located in eight villages in Johor: Kampung Simpang Arang, Kampung Bakar Batu Perling, Kampung Sungai Temon, Kampung Teluk Jawa, Kampung Pasir Putih, Kampung Kuala Masai, Kampung Teluk Kabung, and Kampung Pasir Salam [9,10]. Socio-economic changes have changed the Orang Asli Seletar’s way of life, and they have begun utilising contemporary equipment for seafood collection, with some individuals being employed in the industrial field. They have opted to practise Islam and Christianity as their belief systems, but some still follow animism.

1.2. Subjective Well-Being Among Orang Asli

Subjective well-being among indigenous peoples globally is increasingly understood as a multidimensional construct that extends beyond individual life satisfaction to encompass relational, cultural, spiritual, and territorial dimensions. In many indigenous worldviews, well-being is inseparable from collective identity, ancestral land, kinship systems, and the continuity of cultural practices. Research conducted among indigenous communities in countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand demonstrates that well-being is often framed holistically, integrating emotional balance, community cohesion, cultural resilience, and connection to land [15–17]. These perspectives challenge dominant Western models that privilege economic indicators and individual psychological states as primary measures of well-being. Instead, indigenous conceptualisations emphasise harmony with nature, intergenerational responsibility, and cultural continuity as core determinants of a meaningful life. Consequently, disruptions caused by colonisation, land dispossession, and cultural marginalisation have profound implications for subjective

well-being, as they weaken the very foundations upon which indigenous identities and social structures are built.

In the Malaysian context, subjective well-being among indigenous communities, particularly the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia, reflects similar holistic orientations while being shaped by local socio-historical realities. For many Orang Asli groups, well-being is closely linked to communal harmony, subsistence practices, spiritual beliefs, and secure access to customary land [18]. The persistence of a subsistence economy lifestyle in certain communities illustrates that well-being cannot be reduced to income level alone, but must be understood through culturally embedded values and lived experiences [1,2]. Nevertheless, processes of modernisation, re-settlement, and socio-economic integration introduce complex tensions between traditional worldviews and state-driven development agendas [7,19,20]. These structural transformations influence how indigenous youth negotiate identity, aspiration, and belonging. Therefore, a study of subjective well-being in Malaysia requires sensitivity to indigenous epistemologies and contextualised interpretations that recognise community-defined meanings of a good and dignified life. To provide a clearer and more systematic overview of existing studies, Table 1 summarises the key literature on subjective well-being among indigenous communities.

Table 1. Literature on subjective well-being among indigenous communities.

Author	Subject	Research Focus	Methodology	Findings
Gall et al.	Indigenous Canada, New Zealand, United States	Holistic well-being	Qualitative	Well-being is multidimensional and relational
Durie	Māori (New Zealand)	Holistic health model	Qualitative	Integration of physical, spiritual, and family well-being
Gee et al.	Aboriginal Australia	Social and emotional well-being	Qualitative	Emphasis on land, culture, and community
Hatala et al.	Indigenous youth in Canada	Human–nature relations	Qualitative	Land connection shapes well-being
Vivien et al.	Orang Asli Jakun Tribe	Quality of life	Qualitative	Cultural values shape well-being
Mohd Fariz et al.	Orang Asli Mah Meri Tribe	Financial well-being	Quantitative	Income and financial factors influence well-being
Muhamad Luqman et al.	Elderly Proto-Malay group	Subjective well-being	Qualitative	Well-being is shaped by social relations, spirituality, and daily experiences

Based on Table 1, existing studies on subjective well-being among indigenous and Orang Asli communities consistently highlight the importance of relational, cultural, and environmental dimensions. Nonetheless, several limitations remain evident. First, existing studies focus on specific demographic groups, such as the elderly, while youth perspectives remain underexplored [21]. Second, research in the Malaysian context often emphasises the economic or financial dimensions of well-being, leading to a relatively narrow interpretation of subjective well-being [22]. Third, existing studies tend to adopt either broad conceptual frameworks or general community-level analyses, with limited attention to how well-being

is constructed and experienced in everyday life from the perspective of specific indigenous sub-groups. Hence, there remains a need for a contextually grounded and youth-centred exploration of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar communities.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Setting

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory case study design to investigate the subjective well-being of Orang Asli Seletar youth in Peninsular Malaysia. A qualitative approach is particularly suited to exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings, as it allows participants to express their views in depth and in their own terms [23,24]. The exploratory case study design is appropriate when the goal is to gain a detailed understanding of a specific, under-researched population within its natural context [25]. This study was conducted across eight Orang Asli Seletar villages in Johor, as illustrated in Table 2: Kampung Simpang Arang, Kampung Bakar Batu Perling, Kampung Sungai Temon, Kampung Teluk Jawa, Kampung Pasir Putih, Kampung Kuala Masai, Kampung Teluk Kabung, and Kampung Pasir Salam. These villages were selected as they constitute the primary community setting for the Orang Asli Seletar population in Peninsular Malaysia, which represents a significant portion of the community.

Table 2. Composition of informants.

Village	Number of Informants
Kampung Simpang Arang	3
Kampung Bakar Batu Perling	5
Kampung Sungai Temon	4
Kampung Teluk Jawa	1
Kampung Pasir Putih	3
Kampung Kuala Masai	2
Kampung Teluk Kabung	1
Kampung Pasir Salam	1

2.2. Participant Selection

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, which is well-suited to qualitative research seeking in-depth insights from individuals with relevant lived experiences. This sampling strategy is commonly used in qualitative studies involving indigenous communities, where the emphasis is placed on selecting participants with relevant lived experiences and cultural knowledge [2]. The inclusion criteria were: (i) belonging to the Orang Asli Seletar tribe, (ii) aged between 18 and 30 years, and (iii) willing and able to participate in both focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Access to informants was facilitated through the Tok Batin (community leader) and Orang Asli Village Development and Security Committee (JPKKOA), who assisted in identifying individuals who met the study's criteria and provided meaningful perspectives on their lived experiences. This approach ensured that informants were appropriately selected while also respecting community protocols and cultural norms, particularly important when conducting research in indigenous settings. The sample size was not predetermined, as the principle of data saturation guided the study. A total of 20 informants participated in the study. Note that data collection continued until no new themes relevant to the research objectives emerged. After the twentieth informant, additional data served to reinforce existing themes without generating new conceptual insights. At this point, data saturation was deemed to have been achieved.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using a two-phase qualitative approach comprising FGDs followed by in-depth interviews. The combination of FGDs and in-depth interviews has been widely applied in qualitative research on community well-being, as it enables both collective meaning-making and individual reflection, particularly in indigenous and community-based contexts [2,26]. This design enabled both collective exploration and individual reflection, providing a comprehensive understanding of the informants' experiences. In the first phase, FGDs were conducted to explore general perspectives and stimulate discussion among informants. These sessions allowed informants to share experiences collectively, generating rich data and identifying key areas for deeper exploration of subjective well-being. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with the same informants to obtain more detailed and personal accounts. This phase provided informants with the opportunity to elaborate on issues raised during the FGDs. Several informants participated in multiple sessions, which enabled the researchers to clarify responses, observe evolving perspectives, and build rapport. Correspondingly, this process contributed to the greater depth and credibility of the data. This sequential design allowed insights from the FGDs to inform the direction of the in-depth interviews, thereby enhancing the coherence of the data collection process.

An interview guide was used in both phases to ensure consistency across sessions while remaining flexible enough to allow discussions to follow the natural flow of the informants' narratives. This approach ensured that the data remained rich, nuanced, and grounded in the respondents' lived experiences. All FGDs and in-depth interviews were conducted by the researchers, who are trained in qualitative research methods. Data collection took place within the informants' village settings to ensure familiarity and comfort and was conducted by bringing together informants from the eight selected villages at the Kampung Bakar Batu Perling community hall, which the Tok Batin and JPKKOA organised. In-depth interviews were conducted at the informants' homes, where the researchers met with each informant individually to obtain more detailed information and clarify interpretations. They were divided into two FGDs, each consisting of 9 to 11 informants. Note that each FGD session lasted approximately 60 to 90 min, while in-depth interviews ranged between 45 and 60 min. Fieldwork was conducted between February and July 2024. All sessions were conducted in Malay and audio-recorded with informed consent. Consequently, the recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researchers shortly after each session. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [27]. In the first phase, all transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve familiarisation with the data. In the second phase, initial codes were generated inductively from the data. In the third phase, codes were organised into potential themes by identifying meaningful patterns across the dataset. In the fourth phase, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions between themes. In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named to capture the essence of the data. In the final phase, the report was produced by integrating the themes with supporting evidence from the data. The analysis involved two experienced qualitative-methods researchers. Initial coding was conducted independently, followed by regular discussions to compare interpretations and resolve discrepancies. Thematic analysis is also widely used in studies exploring subjective well-being in culturally specific contexts, as it allows themes to emerge inductively from the informants' lived experiences rather than imposing predefined categories [26].

Analytic consistency across the six phases was achieved through iterative movement between data, codes, and themes, as well as continuous refinement of the coding framework. A constant comparative approach was applied across transcripts to identify patterns and shared and divergent experiences of subjective well-being. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, a peer debriefing was conducted among the research team. Regular discussions were held to review emerging codes and themes, allowing researchers to compare interpretations, resolve discrepancies, and challenge potential biases. This process contributed to greater analytical rigour and ensured that the findings remained grounded in the data. The inclusion of verbatim quotations further strengthens credibility by ensuring that the respondents' own voices support the findings.

2.5. Reflexivity

The researchers acknowledge that their positionality may influence both data collection and interpretation. The research team consists of individuals with academic backgrounds in sociology and anthropology, community development, and prior experience working with indigenous communities in Malaysia. While this facilitated rapport-building and access to the field, it also required continuous reflexive awareness to minimise potential bias. As researchers who are not members of the Orang Seletar community, we paid attention to potential power imbalances in interactions. We worked to create a respectful, open environment where respondents could share their perspectives freely. Throughout the research process, the researchers remained attentive to the respondents' voices and meanings, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than preconceived assumptions. Reflexive notes were maintained during fieldwork to document observations, interactions, and emerging interpretations.

3. Results

Based on FGDs and in-depth interviews conducted with the Orang Asli Seletar youth, the study identified seven core concepts that shape their understanding of subjective well-being. These are (i) tranquillity; (ii) happiness; (iii) comfort; (iv) sufficiency; (v) preference; (vi) awareness; and (vii) satisfaction. These concepts reflect how youth define a meaningful life, grounded not in wealth or individual success, but in emotional stability, strong social ties, cultural expression, and connection to their environment. Each concept is rooted in youth's daily experiences and reflects their priorities as they navigate the transition to adulthood in a dynamic social and environmental context. Understanding these perspectives is essential to recognising how indigenous youth interpret well-being in their own terms and strive to maintain their identity while adapting to modern challenges. Table 2 presents a summary of the findings on the concept of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth.

3.1. Tranquility

Tranquillity emerged as a central concept in how Orang Asli Seletar youth understand subjective well-being. Informants described tranquillity as a sense of inner calm closely connected to their natural surroundings, spiritual practices, and emotional balance. Living near the sea and within a peaceful village environment was frequently mentioned as a key source of this feeling. This sense of tranquillity is also associated with emotional stability and mental balance in their daily lives. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

"I feel calm when I am near the sea. When I look at the water, it feels like all my problems disappear..."

"When we live here, it is not noisy like the city. We feel more peaceful. . ."

“When we pray and remember God or our ancestor, our hearts and mind become more peace. . .”

These responses demonstrate that tranquillity is strongly shaped by environmental attachment, particularly to the sea, which forms an important part of their daily life and identity. The Orang Asli generally prefer rural and isolated environments due to their strong ecological ties and cultural attachment to the natural environment [28]. In addition to the physical environment, tranquillity was also linked to spiritual practices. Informants described engaging in prayer and personal reflection as ways to maintain emotional stability and inner peace. However, several informants expressed concern about ongoing development near their villages, which they felt could disrupt this sense of calm. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“There is a lot of development now. We are worried that this place will not be the same anymore...”

“There is a lot of development happening around our village now. We are worried that the peaceful environment we have today will slowly disappear. . .”

“Before this, our place was very calm and quiet. But with all the new projects coming in, we feel uncertain about what will happen in the future...”

These concerns exhibit that tranquillity is not only an internal emotional state, but is also influenced by changes in the surrounding environment, which may create feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. This emphasis on tranquillity is consistent with past findings highlighting its role in sustaining mental well-being [29,30]. Overall, tranquillity reflects a balance between environmental harmony, spiritual practices, and emotional well-being, all of which are essential in shaping the lived experiences of Orang Asli Seletar youth.

3.2. *Comfort*

Comfort emerged as an important dimension of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth. Comfort is a state in which they feel supported, secure, and able to carry out their daily lives without excessive stress [31]. Informants described this sense of comfort as shaped by multiple factors, including the natural environment, family and community relationships, fulfilment of basic needs, physical ability, and access to basic infrastructure. Note that the natural environment plays a central role in shaping this experience. Living near clean and unpolluted seawater provides emotional reassurance and a sense of continuity. Relationships within the family and community were also frequently highlighted. Informants emphasised that being close to family members and maintaining strong social bonds contributed to emotional stability. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“When the sea is clean, we feel more at ease. It is part of our life, so it makes us feel comfortable...”

“When we are together with family, we feel safe. Even if we do not have much, we still feel comfortable...”

“Life feels easier and more comfortable for us when everyone in the community helps each other. . .”

Comfort was also closely linked to the fulfilment of basic needs. Having enough food, appropriate clothing, and a safe place to live were described as essential conditions [32]. In addition, access to infrastructure such as electricity, clean water, and roads contributed to their overall sense of comfort. Some informants also mentioned the importance of digital access in their daily lives. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“As long as we have food to eat and a place to stay, we already feel comfortable...”

“Being able to use the Internet, even at a basic level, helps us in our daily activities and makes things more convenient. . .”

“Being able to carry out daily activities gives us a sense of independence and comfort because we can take care of ourselves. . .”

Physical ability also emerged as an important aspect of comfort. Informants described feeling comfortable when they were able to carry out daily activities, work, and support their families without physical limitations. This reflects the importance of functional health in sustaining their sense of independence and well-being [15]. Overall, these findings indicate that comfort among Orang Asli Seletar youth extends beyond material conditions; it reflects a balance between environmental security, social support, physical functioning, and the ability to meet basic needs within both traditional and modern contexts.

3.3. Happiness

Happiness was described as a key emotional component of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth. Informants associated happiness with everyday experiences, particularly those involving family, community, and cultural practices. Rather than being linked to material success, happiness was understood as a shared and relational experience [33]. Many informants described simple daily activities as important sources of happiness. Activities such as eating together, fishing, and participating in community events were frequently mentioned. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“We feel happy when we spend time together, like eating or going to the sea. That is enough for us...”

“Even simple things can make us happy, as long as we are with our community and family. . .”

These responses highlight the importance of social relationships in shaping their emotional well-being. Happiness is closely tied to feelings of belonging, acceptance, and mutual support within the community. In addition, informants expressed happiness through their ability to maintain and express their cultural identity. Participating in cultural practices and continuing traditional ways of life were described as meaningful and fulfilling [17,34,35]. Despite facing challenges such as environmental changes and economic uncertainty, many informants emphasised the importance of maintaining a positive mindset. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“We are proud of who we are. When we follow our traditions, we feel happy...”

“Even when things are difficult, we try to stay positive so we can still feel happy...”

This highlights their ability to sustain happiness even in the face of socio-economic and environmental challenges. It reflects a form of resilience grounded in social support and cultural continuity [15,31]. Overall, these findings show that happiness among Orang Asli Seletar youth is not based on individual achievement but is deeply embedded in social relationships, cultural continuity and their capacity to remain emotionally resilient in everyday life.

3.4. Sufficiency

Sufficiency emerged as an important dimension of subjective well-being among the Orang Asli Seletar youth. Informants described sufficiency not in terms of material abundance, but as having enough to meet their basic needs and live a stable and meaningful life. This includes access to food, shelter, basic infrastructure, and the ability to contribute

to their household. Most informants emphasised that having enough for daily living was more important than pursuing wealth. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“We do not need a lot of money. As long as we have enough to eat and live, it is already sufficient...”

“Even if our income is small, we can still manage. As long as we are able to help each other in the family, we consider it sufficient. . .”

These responses reflect a modest, collective understanding of sufficiency, in which resources are shared and prioritised according to necessity rather than individual accumulation. This also reflects a sense of dignity and responsibility in fulfilling their roles within the household, where providing and contributing are seen as meaningful and valuable [32,33]. Employment also played a role in shaping their sense of sufficiency. While some informants continued traditional livelihoods such as fishing, others engaged in wage-based work in nearby industrial areas. Furthermore, access to basic infrastructure such as electricity, clean water, and roads further contributed to their sense of stability. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“Working in the factory helps me support my family. Even if the salary is not high, as long as I can bring food to home, I feel it sufficient”

“Working at the factory makes our life more stable because we know we will have income every month. . .”

“Roads make us to go to work easier. While electricity and clean water give us a sense of stability. That enough for us. . .”

Orang Asli communities often do not view poverty as a burden. Rather, they see it as a condition they navigate with resilience and cultural strength [22,32]. Overall, these findings demonstrate that sufficiency among Orang Asli Seletar youth is grounded in modest living, shared responsibility, and the ability to sustain daily life with dignity within both traditional and modern economic contexts.

3.5. Awareness

Awareness was identified as an important dimension shaping how Orang Asli Seletar youth understand their well-being. Informants described awareness as a form of consciousness about their future, their cultural identity, and the challenges they face in a changing environment. Education was frequently mentioned as a key aspect of this awareness. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“We are more aware now that we need knowledge and skills to face the changes around us. . .”

“We realise that without education, it is harder for us to improve our life and support our family...”

“We understand that education is important not only for ourselves but also for helping our family and community. . .”

Informants recognised that education plays an important role in improving their opportunities and shaping their future. Education is viewed as a symbol of empowerment, allowing individuals to navigate a rapidly changing socio-economic environment while maintaining their aspirations [19,20,36]. At the same time, informants demonstrated a strong awareness of the importance of preserving their cultural identity and expressed concern about the potential loss of traditions due to modernisation. Nevertheless, rather than rejecting modern influences outright, they consciously sought to integrate aspects

of both tradition and modernity, striving to maintain cultural continuity [15,18]. Despite these concerns, many informants described efforts to balance tradition and modern life. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“As young generation, if we do not keep our culture, it might disappear one day...”

“We do not reject development. We can accept modern life, but we still need to remember our roots...”

“We see many changes happening around us, but we try not to forget who we are...”

Awareness was also reflected in their ability to recognise external influences such as consumerism and social pressures while remaining grounded in their cultural values. This awareness also reflects their resilience in navigating external pressures while maintaining a strong sense of identity and continuity. Overall, these findings indicate that awareness among Orang Asli Seletar youth involves a reflective understanding of their identity, future aspirations, and the need to adapt to socio-economic changes while preserving cultural continuity.

3.6. Satisfaction

Satisfaction emerged as a dimension of subjective well-being that reflects how Orang Asli Seletar youth evaluate their overall life conditions. Informants described satisfaction as a sense of contentment derived from their environment, spiritual practices, and daily experiences. Many informants expressed satisfaction with their ability to continue living in their traditional villages. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“I feel satisfied living here because this is our place. Everything we need is here...”

“Being close to the sea makes me feel complete. It is part of who we are. . .”

The natural environment, particularly the sea, was frequently mentioned as a source of fulfilment and belonging. These responses indicate that satisfaction is closely tied to their environmental identity, where the sea and surrounding landscape form an integral part of their sense of self [13,37,38]. Some informants also expressed a sense of responsibility towards protecting their environment as part of their identity, reflecting a deeper connection between well-being and environmental stewardship. Spiritual practices also contributed to their sense of satisfaction. Informants described prayer as a way to express gratitude and maintain emotional balance. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“Praying makes us feel satisfied for what we have in life as it helps us be grateful and accept our life. . .”

“When we stay close to our beliefs, we feel balanced and satisfied inside.”

“Remembering our ancestors and following our traditions brings a sense of peace and satisfaction. . .”

They gain emotional strength through prayer and religious rituals. They pray for good health and for daily sustenance. These practices teach them to appreciate what they already have while continuing to strive for a better life [16]. Overall, these findings show that satisfaction among Orang Asli Seletar youth is not based on material achievement but is shaped by a sense of belonging, gratitude, and alignment between their environment, spiritual beliefs, and life experiences.

3.7. Preference

Preference reflects the choices and inclinations of Orang Asli Seletar youth towards lifestyles and activities that align with their cultural values and environmental context. Informants expressed a clear preference for living in peaceful, clean environments closely connected to nature. Many informants highlighted their preference for activities related to the sea, such as fishing and collecting marine resources. These activities were practical and meaningful. The following are the verbatim quotations from the informants on this matter:

“I prefer going to the sea because it is part of our life and makes me feel at peace.”

“Activities like fishing and collecting from the sea are important to us because they are part of our tradition.”

“I choose to stay here because the environment is peaceful and close to nature, which suits our way of living. . .”

These responses indicate that the sea is not only a place of daily activity but also holds deeper cultural and symbolic meaning in their lives. It represents continuity, identity, and a sense of belonging that shapes their preferences and daily practices [7,38,39]. These preferences reflect a strong attachment to their cultural identity and traditional ways of life. Informants indicated that engaging in familiar activities contributes to their emotional well-being and sense of fulfilment. Overall, these findings indicate that preferences among Orang Asli Seletar youth are closely tied to cultural meaning, environmental attachment, and personal values, which together shape their subjective well-being. Table 3 presents a summary of the concept of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth.

Table 3. Summary of concept of subjective well-being Orang Asli Seletar youth.

Concept	Meaning	Element
Tranquillity	Inner calm grounded in environment, spirituality and emotional balance	Sea as emotional anchor, quiet village, prayer, reflection, emotional stability, fear of development disrupting peace
Comfort	Sense of security, ease and stability in daily life	Family support, community cooperation, clean sea, basic needs (food, shelter), infrastructure (water, electricity, roads), digital access, physical ability and functional health
Happiness	Emotional fulfilment through shared and everyday experiences	Family time, communal activities, fishing, cultural participation, belonging, positive mindset despite hardship, and emotional resilience
Sufficiency	Having enough for a stable and meaningful living	Basic needs, modest income, shared resources, family responsibility, dignity, traditional and wage labour, infrastructure support
Awareness	Reflexive understanding of future, identity and change	Importance of education, future planning, cultural preservation, concern over cultural loss, balancing modernity, recognition of consumerism and social pressure, and adaptation strategies
Satisfaction	Overall contentment based on alignment of life conditions	Living in a village, attachment to sea, belonging, gratitude, prayer, spiritual balance, environmental stewardship (sense of responsibility)
Preference	Choices aligned with cultural values and environment	Preference for sea-based livelihood, natural setting, traditional practices, peaceful environment, identity continuity

4. Discussion

The findings of this study converge with and extend the existing literature on indigenous peoples' subjective well-being. As illustrated in the literature synthesis (Table 1), previous studies consistently emphasised the relational, cultural, and environmental nature of well-being. However, this study provides a more grounded and youth-centred articulation of how these dimensions are lived and experienced in everyday life. These patterns broadly align with indigenous and Orang Asli studies that conceptualise well-being as relational and context-dependent rather than individualistic [2,15,18,40]. The findings of this study demonstrate that Orang Asli Seletar youth conceptualise subjective well-being in ways that diverge significantly from dominant individualistic and material-oriented frameworks. Rather than grounding well-being in income, status, or personal achievement, their understanding is shaped by relational, cultural, environmental, and spiritual dimensions deeply embedded in lived experiences [1,2,4]. This indicates that subjective well-being is not merely an internal psychological evaluation but a socially and ecologically situated construct [21,39]; it is produced through ongoing interactions among individuals, their community, cultural identity, and the natural environment.

Importantly, the concepts identified in this study, namely tranquillity, comfort, happiness, sufficiency, awareness, satisfaction, and preference, should not be interpreted as discrete or independent categories. Instead, they form an interconnected system that reflects a holistic understanding of a meaningful life. This challenges conventional models of well-being that prioritise measurable indicators such as income, wealth, or status over lived experience, life satisfaction, and emotional states [1–3]. In contrast, the findings suggest that well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth is better understood as a process of maintaining balance across multiple domains of life. This process-oriented perspective highlights that well-being is dynamic and continuously negotiated rather than fixed or individually determined.

The findings also reveal that these seven concepts can be analytically grouped into four overlapping dimensions that extend existing theoretical discussions on well-being. First, the relational dimension, reflected in happiness and comfort, underscores the centrality of social relationships in shaping well-being. Emotional stability is not experienced individually but is produced through close ties with family and community. These findings do not prioritise individual autonomy and self-fulfilment, suggesting instead that well-being in this context is inherently collective [2,18,34]. Social connectedness is not a supporting factor. However, it is a foundational condition for emotional and psychological stability. This finding converges with prior studies highlighting the centrality of social relationships in indigenous well-being frameworks [2,18,34,41]. Next, the material-functional dimension, reflected in sufficiency and comfort, reframes the role of material conditions in well-being. Material resources are not valued for accumulation or upward mobility, but rather for adequacy and stability. Having enough to meet basic needs and fulfil social responsibilities is considered sufficient. This perspective challenges development narratives that equate improved well-being with increased income or consumption [39]. Instead, it aligns more closely with alternative frameworks that emphasise dignity, capability, and the ability to sustain everyday life without excess [15,41]. In this sense, sufficiency represents a moral and social standard rather than an economic threshold. Nevertheless, this interpretation diverges from studies that emphasise income and material conditions as primary indicators of well-being [22,42], highlighting instead a culturally grounded notion of adequacy.

Besides the cultural identity dimension, reflected in awareness and preference, it highlights the active role of youth in preserving and negotiating cultural identity. Awareness extends beyond knowledge acquisition. It reflects a reflexive understanding of their position within a changing social environment and the need to balance modern opportunities

with cultural continuity. Preference is not simply an expression of personal choice but a manifestation of deeply rooted cultural meanings. The preference for sea-based activities and natural environments reflects an enduring attachment to ancestral ways of life. This suggests that identity is not passively inherited but actively maintained through everyday practices and decisions [37,43]. These findings contribute to broader discussions on indigenous youth by showing that adaptation to modernity does not necessarily imply cultural loss but may involve selective integration and reinterpretation. This aligns with the literature suggesting that indigenous youth actively negotiate identity through selective engagement with modernity rather than passive cultural loss [19,20,44]. Finally, the environmental-spiritual dimension, reflected in tranquillity and satisfaction, demonstrates that well-being is inseparable from ecological and spiritual relationships. The natural environment, particularly the sea, is a source of livelihood and of emotional stability, identity, as well as meaning. Tranquillity emerges from a sense of harmony with the environment, while satisfaction reflects alignment between daily life, spiritual beliefs, and a sense of belonging. This challenges anthropocentric models of well-being that treat the environment as an external resource [26]. Instead, the findings suggest a relational ontology in which individuals understand themselves as part of the ecosystem. The disruption of this relationship, particularly through development and environmental degradation, has direct implications for emotional and psychological well-being. This supports existing indigenous well-being frameworks that emphasise land and nature as central to emotional and spiritual balance [15,37,40] while extending them by showing how Seletar youth explicitly link satisfaction to everyday environmental continuity.

The interaction between these dimensions becomes particularly evident when situated within the broader context of socio-economic change. The findings show that Orang Asli Seletar youth are not passive recipients of development processes. They actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to changes in their environment. Development introduces new opportunities such as education, wage employment, and improved infrastructure, which enhance aspects of comfort and sufficiency. Nonetheless, it simultaneously generates new forms of vulnerability by disrupting environmental stability, cultural continuity, and the sense of tranquillity that underpins their well-being. This duality reveals a fundamental tension between development and well-being, where progress in material terms does not necessarily translate into improved subjective well-being [2,7,9]. Rather than rejecting modernity, the youth demonstrate a capacity for selective adaptation. They engage with modern opportunities while maintaining cultural values and identity. This reflects a form of agency often overlooked in discussions of marginalised communities [18,36]. Their awareness of both the benefits and risks of development enables them to navigate external pressures such as consumerism, social change, and cultural erosion. This further highlights a divergence from development-centric models of well-being, which assume that material improvement automatically leads to improved life satisfaction [2,7,42].

Resilience emerges as a cross-cutting element that links all dimensions of well-being identified in this study. However, resilience should not be understood as passive endurance or coping. It is an active and reflective process through which youth sustain emotional stability, maintain social relationships, and preserve cultural identity despite ongoing challenges. Their ability to experience happiness with limited resources, maintain a sense of sufficiency in uncertain economic conditions and remain committed to cultural identity reflects a form of resilience deeply embedded in their social and cultural context. This further reinforces the idea that well-being is dynamic and evolves through continuous interaction between individuals, communities, and their environment [15–17]. In conclusion, these findings extend the existing literature by demonstrating that subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth is structured through interconnected relational, cultural,

environmental, and material dimensions. While the existing literature largely conceptualises indigenous well-being in broad, abstract terms, this study provides a grounded, youth-centred articulation of well-being as a lived, negotiated, and contextually embedded process. It highlights that for Orang Asli Seletar youth, well-being is not about maximising outcomes but about maintaining balance. It is about living in harmony with their environment, sustaining meaningful relationships, and preserving identity while navigating the complexities of social change. This supports prior indigenous studies that frame resilience as an active, culturally embedded process rather than passive coping [16,45,46].

5. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study focused specifically on Orang Asli Seletar youth in eight (8) villages in Johor, using a relatively small sample of twenty (20) informants. While the qualitative design yielded rich, in-depth insights, the findings are context-specific. They may not be representative of all Orang Asli groups or even of other Seletar communities in different locations. In addition, the use of purposive sampling, facilitated by community leaders, may have influenced participant selection, potentially favouring individuals who are more engaged or visible within the community. As the study concentrated only on youth aged 18 to 30, it did not capture intergenerational differences in the understanding of subjective well-being, which may vary across older or younger age groups.

Second, there are limitations related to data collection and interpretation. Although the combination of FGDs and in-depth interviews enhanced data depth, responses may still have been influenced by social desirability, particularly in group settings where informants may align their views with dominant community perspectives. The study also relied on self-reported narratives, which reflect personal perceptions at a specific point in time and may change as socio-economic conditions evolve. Furthermore, despite efforts to ensure reflexivity, the researchers' positionality as external observers may have shaped both their interactions with the informants and their interpretation of the data. Therefore, while the findings offer valuable insights into the subjective well-being of Orang Asli Seletar youth, they should be understood as contextually grounded and not intended for broad generalisation beyond similar settings.

6. Conclusions

The concept of subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth reflects a dynamic interplay between cultural identity, environmental attachment, emotional experiences, and personal aspirations. This study identified seven concepts that shape their understanding of well-being: (i) tranquillity, (ii) happiness, (iii) comfort, (iv) sufficiency, (v) preference, (vi) awareness, and (vii) satisfaction. These concepts are closely connected and together form a holistic framework through which Orang Asli Seletar youth interpret a meaningful and balanced life. This study contributes to the literature on the subjective well-being of indigenous people by proposing a context-specific, youth-centred relational model of well-being. In contrast to dominant Western frameworks that prioritise individual satisfaction and material indicators, the findings demonstrate that well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth is shaped by relational, environmental, cultural, and emotional dimensions. In particular, the emergence of seven concepts highlights how subjective well-being is actively constructed through lived experience, environmental continuity, and cultural consciousness.

The findings have important implications for policymakers and relevant agencies, particularly JAKOA. Development interventions should move beyond income-based indicators and incorporate culturally grounded dimensions of well-being, such as cultural

continuity and environmental attachment. Programmes targeting Orang Asli Seletar youth should prioritise cultural preservation, protection of coastal and riverine environments, and youth empowerment initiatives that respect their identity as Orang Asli. In addition, mental health and community well-being initiatives should recognise that emotional well-being in this community is closely linked to land, spirituality, and social relationships, rather than relying solely on individualised psychological approaches. Future research should expand in several directions. Comparative studies across different Orang Asli groups in Malaysia may help refine and validate the proposed dimensions of well-being. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how youth well-being changes over time in response to development, education, and digital exposure. In addition, mixed-method approaches could integrate qualitative lived experiences with quantitative indicators to provide a more comprehensive understanding of indigenous well-being. Further studies may also examine in greater depth the relationship between environmental change and emotional well-being in coastal indigenous communities.

In conclusion, subjective well-being among Orang Asli Seletar youth should be understood as a culturally grounded, value-laden process shaped by lived experience and interactions with their social and ecological environments. It extends beyond material conditions and reflects a holistic integration of emotional, cultural, environmental, and relational life. Development efforts must therefore engage with these local frameworks to ensure that interventions are culturally meaningful, environmentally sensitive, and responsive to youth voices. Only through such alignment can well-being be meaningfully strengthened in a way that is sustainable and contextually appropriate.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, M.A.A.R., M.R.R. and M.F.R.; Methodology, M.A.A.R., M.R.R., M.L.J.; Validation, M.R.R. and M.L.J.; Formal Analysis, M.R.R., M.A.A.R. and M.F.R.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, M.A.A.R., M.R.R. and M.F.R.; Writing—Review & Editing, M.R.R., M.F.R. and N.A.F.W.A.R.; Supervision, M.R.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, under two Fundamental Research Grant Schemes (FRGS/1/2019/SS06/UPM/02/4 and FRGS/1/2023/SS10/UPM/02/1).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (JKEUPM) at Universiti Putra Malaysia (protocol code JKEUPM-2020-099 and date 27 February 2020).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all informants involved in the study. Prior to participation, all informants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to acknowledge the Seletar youth group who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights for this research. Special thanks are extended to the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) for their kind assistance and support during the data collection process. Some of the data and contents in this paper were excerpted from the research of *Pembentukan Model Kesejahteraan Lestari Belia Orang Asli di Semenanjung Malaysia* (Development of a Sustainable Well-Being Model for Orang Asli Youth in Peninsular Malaysia).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

JAKOA	Department of Orang Asli Development
JPKKOA	Orang Asli Village Development and Security Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion

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