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Does Being Innovative Make Employees Happier? Evidence from Start-Up Employees in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The high-pressure environment of start-up ecosystem in Indonesia underscores the critical need to understand what contributes to employee well-being within this context. Start-ups are characterized by fast-paced workflows and continuous demands for adaptability, all of which can intensify psychological pressure on employees. This study examined the effect of innovative work behavior on subjective well-being among 421 start-up employees in Indonesia. Innovative work behavior was measured using Janssen's (2000) nine-item scale, while subjective well-being was measured with the Satisfaction with Life Scale and Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with the disjoint two-stage approach. The analysis demonstrated that innovative work behavior has a positive and significant effect on subjective well-being (β = 0,393, R^2 = 0,154), indicating that employees who more frequently generate, promote, and realize new ideas tend to experience higher levels of subjective well-being. This finding suggests that although innovative work behavior is typically emphasized for its organizational value, it also plays an important role in supporting employees' subjective well-being. This study contributes new empirical insight to the existing start-up literature and offers implications for future research.

Keywords: innovative work behavior, innovation, subjective well-being, start-up employees, PLS-SEM

Introduction

Indonesia's start-up industry has grown rapidly (StartupRanking, 2024). A start-up is a temporary and adaptive organization established to develop, test, and refine innovative business models under conditions of high uncertainty, typically characterized by scalability and a strong reliance on external funding (e.g., venture capital) to support rapid growth (Ries, 2011; Skala, 2019; Susilo, 2020). Despite the growth of start-ups in Indonesia, the industry is now facing substantial volatility and declining investment. Funding values plunged by 66%, and the country's contribution to regional funding dropped sharply, from 40.3% in 2021 to only 9.6% in 2024 (Meilina, 2025). This period has also been characterized by mass layoffs (Dewi, 2022b; Putri, 2025) and rising business failures (Dewi, 2022a; Mutia, 2022; Situmorang & Putri, 2023; Suhartanto, 2024). Operating in environments characterized by high uncertainty, intense pressure, and limited resources (Ries, 2011; Skala, 2019), start-up employees become particularly vulnerable to psychological strain which may impact subjective well-being. Therefore, subjective well-being becomes an critical organizational concern.

Subjective well-being refers to individual's comprehensive evaluation of their own life, encompassing both affective and cognitive assessments, and is characterized by a high level of pleasant emotions, a minimal amount of negative emotions, and a high level of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Oishi et al., 2022). Beyond its psychological value, subjective well-being has been shown to play a broader functional role in individuals' lives. Previous studies demonstrate that higher subjective well-being is associated with better health outcomes and reduced mortality risks (Martín-María et al., 2017; Steptoe, 2019), and it also intersects with economic and behavioral domains, as reflected in the growing body of economic studies on happiness (Piekalkiewicz, 2017) and its associations with successful work-related outcomes (Pavot & Diener, 2004). Within organizational settings, high subjective well-being should therefore not be regarded as a peripheral or intangible benefit, as it functions as a strategic resource. It is consistently linked to higher productivity (Burger et al., 2025; DiMaria et al., 2020), lower turnover intentions (Gordon et al., 2019; Hao et al., 2014), and higher performance (Lester et al., 2022; Mallin et al., 2025; Thompson & Bruk-Lee, 2021). These outcomes are essential for start-ups striving to maintain stability and competitive advantage.

Nevertheless, empirical attention to Indonesian start-ups remains limited, particularly regarding factors that enhance employees' subjective well-being. This gap is important given the sector's strategic role in national economic development and its alignment with UN SDGs, promoting inclusive growth, decent work, and sustainable organizational practices (Ressin, 2022). Identifying determinants of subjective well-being in start-up contexts is therefore a key research priority. Among the potential determinants, innovative work behavior stands out as a theoretically meaningful but empirically underexamined factor. It is defined as the deliberate creation, introduction, and application of new ideas within a work role, group, or organization to benefit the performance of the role, group, or organization (Janssen, 2000; Scott & Bruce, 1994).

Innovative work behavior encompasses three stages: idea generation, which involves producing novel and useful ideas; idea promotion, where employees secure support, resources, and commitment to advance these ideas; and idea realization, in which ideas are transformed into practical applications in the workplace (Janssen, 2000). It has been shown to enhance organizational capabilities, job performance, and organizational performance (Al Daboub et al., 2024; Harlianto et al., 2018; Utomo et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is closely linked to employees' subjective well-being, which can be explained through Job Demands–Resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014; Demerouti et al., 2001) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to the JD-R theory, job resources are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that help employees achieve goals, reduce the costs of job demands, and promote personal growth (Demerouti et al., 2001). Innovative work behavior is associated with these job resources. Autonomy enables employees to generate, refine, and implement ideas, while also buffering the negative effects of high-speed job demands, allowing creativity and effective application of new practices (Dediu et al., 2018). It also

depends on social support, particularly during the idea promotion stage, where employees secure commitment, endorsements, and coalitions to advance their ideas within the organization (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010, 2007; Janssen, 2000; Scott & Bruce, 1994). Additionally, innovative work behavior strengthens mental competence as employees identify opportunities, develop and champion ideas, and implement solutions, thereby enhancing task mastery and capability. Together, autonomy, social support, and competence function as job resources (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014; Scholze & Hecker, 2024).

In line with JD-R theory, these resources support well-being by sustaining motivation and supporting personal growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Engaging in innovative work behavior activates and expands these resources, which contributes to greater satisfaction and higher levels of well-being. This suggests that innovative work behavior also also fulfills the basic psychological needs identified in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness has been consistently linked to higher well-being (Jin & Kim, 2017; Martela et al., 2023; Šakan et al., 2020; Tay & Diener, 2011; Yu et al., 2018). Fulfillment of these needs is crucial because autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for supporting individuals' natural tendencies for growth, self-integration, and constructive social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). Furthermore, Miller et al. (2008) also argues that well-being can serve as an outcome of innovation, as successful innovation enhances positive functioning, improves products and services, and ultimately elevates the well-being of employees and beneficiaries.

Based on these theoretical frameworks, we hypothesize that innovative work behavior has a positive and significant effect on subjective well-being among start-up employees. While prior studies have largely positioned subjective well-being as an antecedent of innovative work behavior, which shows that employees with higher well-being tend to be more innovative (Athifah et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2017), the reverse relationship has received far less attention. This raises an important question: does innovative work behavior have an effect on subjective well-being?

Existing literature has primarly linked innovation to subjective well-being through economic pathways, suggesting that innovation stimulates economic growth, which in turn increasing or decreasing well-being through income and living conditions (Frey & Stutzer, 2014; Li & Shi, 2019; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2008). However, direct evidence remains limited (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012; Miller et al., 2008). Although previous study by Aldieri et al. (2025) and Popescu & Reis Mourão (2024) showed that innovation fosters well-being, these studies measured innovation with patents and Global Innovation Index. Dolan & Metcalfe (2012) provides one study linking innovation-related characteristics to subjective well-being, showing that individuals with higher innovation (e.g., originality, imagination) tend to report greater subjective well-being. However, this research focuses on general innovation or creative tendencies rather than innovative work behavior, and it did not measure the behavioral stages of innovative work behavior (idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation), leaving the workplace relationship largely unexplored.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to provide empirical evidence on whether engaging in innovative work behavior contributes to subjective well-being among employees working at start-ups in Indonesia.

Methods

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental cross-sectional design targeting employees working at start-ups operating in Indonesia. Participants were required to be currently employed in a start-up for at least six months, ensuring adequate organizational socialization (Ghanie et al., 2018; Schein, 2003; Yusuf & Etikariena, 2023). Data were collected online via SurveyMonkey, with participants recruited through employee representatives and targeted LinkedIn outreach. Minimum sample size was calculated using the inverse square root method (Kock & Hadaya, 2018) for PLS-SEM, with 155 respondents required, and 421 valid responses were obtained. A purposive non-probability sampling approach was used to ensure participants had relevant characteristics (Ark & Ark, 2014; Campbell et al., 2020).

Participants were aged 19–50 (M = 29.48, SD = 5.69), with 60% Gen Z (<28 years), 39% Millennials (29–44), and 1% Gen X (45–60). Gender distribution was balanced (48% male, 52% female), and most held a bachelor's degree (85%), followed by master's (9%) and high school diplomas (6%). Job positions included staff (55%), senior staff/supervisors (26%), assistant managers (7%), managers (8%), and senior managers (4%). Company sizes ranged from 11–100 employees (28%), 101–500 (41%), 501–1000 (17%), to over 1000 (14%). Employment duration varied: 6 months–1 year (27%), 1–2 years (30%), 2–5 years (38%), and 5–10 years (5%), with nearly equal permanent (52%) and contract (48%) employees.

Innovative work behavior was measured using Janssen's (2000) nine-item scale, covering idea generation, promotion, and realization, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never to 5 = always). Sample items include: "How often do you create new ideas for difficult issues?" and "How often do you introduce innovative ideas into the work environment systematically?". Subjective well-being was assessed using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988), both previously validated in Indonesian (Akhtar, 2019; Muttaqin, 2022). SWLS includes five items rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), and PANAS has 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = almost never to 5 = almost always). Example items are: "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal" (SWLS) and "Interested"/"Distressed" (PANAS).

Results

Measurement Model Evaluation

Lower-Order Constructs (LOCs)

The evaluation of the measurement model began with examining indicator reliability. Following Hair et al. (2019, 2022), loadings of 0.708 or higher are satisfactory. Items with

loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 can be retained or removed depending on their contribution to construct reliability and convergent validity, while those below 0.40 should be removed.

Based on these criteria, PA6 was removed due to its very low loading (–0.020). Several negative affect items—NA2 (0.564), NA3 (0.549), NA5 (0.429), NA6 (0.605), and NA7 (0.558)—were also removed because, despite falling within the 0.40–0.70 range, their inclusion reduced the construct's reliability and AVE. Other indicators within the 0.40–0.70 range, such as IWBJ1 (0.681), IWBJ8 (0.679), LS5 (0.662), PA1 (0.698), PA3 (0.617), PA10 (0.615), and PA9 (0.629) were retained because removing them weakened the internal consistency and convergent validity of their respective constructs. All remaining items demonstrated satisfactory loadings—particularly those above 0.708, including IWBJ2–IWBJ7, IWBJ9; LS1–LS4; NA1, NA4, NA8–NA10; and PA2, PA4, PA5, PA7, PA8—and were retained for further analysis. Figure 1 shows the measurement model following the removal of the specified items.

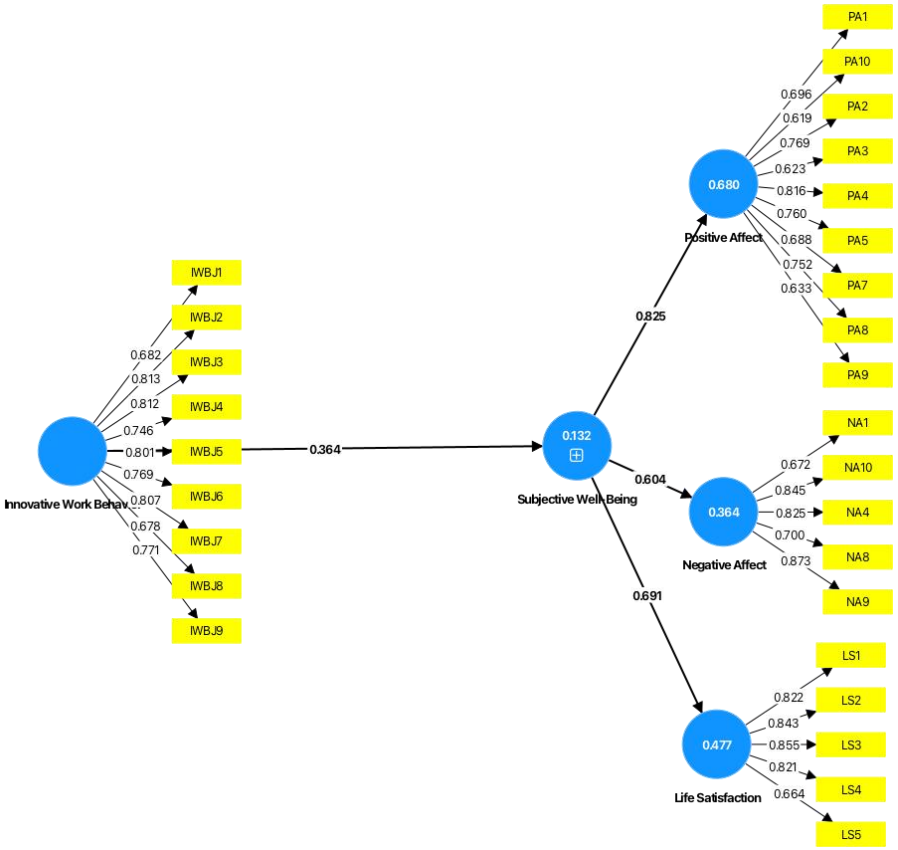

Figure 1. Lower-Order Constructs' Outer Loadings

Internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, reliability ρA, and composite reliability (ρC), with 0.70 as the minimum acceptable threshold (Hair et al., 2022). Convergent validity was examined through the average variance extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50). All constructs demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.843 to 0.911, ρA values from 0.855 to 0.918, and composite reliability values from

0.890 to 0.927—each exceeding the recommended standard. Additionally, the AVE values for all constructs (0.503–0.646) surpassed the 0.50 criterion, indicating satisfactory convergent validity across the measurement model.

Table 1. LOCs Reliability and Convergent Validity

	Cronbach's alpha	ρA	ρC	AVE
Innovative Work Behavior	0,911	0,918	0,927	0,587
SWB – Life Satisfaction	0,861	0,874	0,901	0,646
SWB – Negative Affect	0,843	0,855	0,890	0,620
SWB – Positive Affect	0,875	0,881	0,900	0,503

Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2019, 2022), which requires the square root of each construct's AVE (diagonal values) to be greater than its correlations with other constructs (off-diagonal values). As shown in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct—Innovative Work Behavior (0.766), Life Satisfaction (0.804), Negative Affect (0.787), and Positive Affect (0.709)—exceeded all corresponding inter-construct correlations in their respective rows and columns. These results confirm that each construct is empirically distinct, demonstrating satisfactory discriminant validity across the measurement model.

Table 2. LOCs' Fornell-Larcker Criterion

		1	2	3	4
1	Innovative Work Behavior	0,766			
2	SWB – Life Satisfaction	0,250	0,804		
3	SWB – Negative Affect	0,088	0,280	0,787	
4	SWB – Positive Affect	0,382	0,354	0,233	0,709

Higher-Order Constructs (HOCs)

In the second stage, outer loadings for the higher-order construct of subjective well-being were assessed. As shown in Figure 2, innovative work behavior, included as a single construct without sub-dimensions, demonstrated an outer loading of 1.000. Among the subjective well-being dimensions, positive affect showed a strong and acceptable loading (0.871), while life satisfaction (0.713) met the minimum recommended threshold of 0.70. In contrast, negative affect exhibited a lower loading (0.448), falling within the 0.40–0.70 range. Although below the ideal criterion, this dimension was retained as it remained conceptually important and did not adversely affect the overall reliability or validity of the higher-order construct.

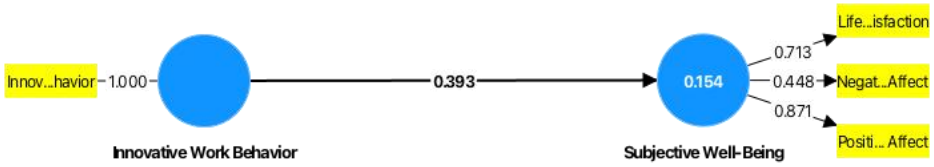

Figure 2. Higher-Order Constructs' Outer Loadings

In the second stage, reliability and convergent validity were assessed for the higher-order construct of subjective well-being. As shown in table 1, the construct demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency with a composite reliability (ρC) of 0.730, surpassing the recommended 0.70 threshold. The ρA value of 0.624 also falls within the acceptable range for hierarchical models. Although the average variance extracted (AVE) value of 0.490 is slightly below the 0.50 standard, it is considered acceptable for a higher-order construct given the adequate reliability. Overall, these results confirm that the subjective well-being construct possesses sufficient reliability and convergent validity to be retained in the structural model.

Table 3. HOCs Reliability and Convergent Validity

	ρA	ρC	AVE
Subjective Well-Being	0,624	0,730	0,490

The Fornell–Larcker criterion further confirmed that discriminant validity was established. As shown in table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct exceeded its correlation with the other construct. Specifically, subjective well-being had a square root of AVE of 0.700, which was higher than its correlation with innovative work behavior (0.393). Likewise, innovative work behavior showed a square root of AVE of 1.000, surpassing its correlation with subjective well-being. These results indicate that each construct is empirically distinct, thereby supporting discriminant validity within the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019, 2022).

Tabel 4. LOCs' Fornell-Larcker Criterion

		1	2
1	Innovative Work Behavior	1,000	
2	Subjective Well-Being	0,393	0,700

Structural Model Evaluation

Before evaluating the structural model, potential collinearity among the latent variables was examined. In line with standard measurement model procedures, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were computed for all constructs. As presented in table 5, all VIF scores fall well below the recommended value of 3, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in the model (Hair et al., 2019, 2022).

Table 5. Collinearity

	VIF
Innovative Work Behavior	1,000
Life Satisfaction	1,164
Negative Affect	1,114
Positive Affect	1,135

The structural model was evaluated using several key criteria: the direction of each relationship (positive or negative), the magnitude of the path coefficients, and their statistical significance. These assessments were complemented by examining the coefficient of determination (R^2) and effect size (f^2).

Table 6. Hypothesis Testing Results

	β	*t*-value	*p*-values	Decision (sig. <0.05)
Innovative Work Behavior -> Subjective Well-Being	0,393	9,909	0,000	Accepted

As shown in table 6, innovative work behavior has a positive and statistically significant effect on subjective well-being. The bootstrapping results reveal a substantial relationship, with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.393$ and a highly significant t-value of 9.909 ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that a one-unit increase in innovative work behavior is associated with a 0.393-unit increase in subjective well-being. Overall, these results confirm that employees who engage more frequently in innovative behaviors tend to report higher levels of subjective well-being, supporting the acceptance of the hypothesis.

Table 7. Model Explanatory Power

Constructs	R^2	f^2
Subjective Well-Being	0,154	0,184

Table 7 shows that subjective well-being has a coefficient of determination (R^2) of 0.154, indicating that the model explains 15.4% of the variance in subjective well-being. Although this value may appear modest, it represents a meaningful level of explanatory power in behavioral research, where employee attitudes and well-being are influenced by multiple individual, social, and organizational factors. Explaining over 15% of variance in a complex psychological construct with a focused predictor highlights the substantive role of innovative work behavior in shaping employee well-being.

Furthermore, the effect size (f^2) of 0.184 indicates a medium effect according to Cohen's (1988) benchmarks (0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large). This suggests that the predictor contributes a practically meaningful increment in explained variance. In other words, innovative work behavior is not merely statistically significant but exerts a substantive impact on subjective well-being. Taken together, these findings suggest that innovative work behavior represents an important psychological resource within start-up

contexts, accounting for a meaningful proportion of employees' well-being despite the inherently multifaceted nature of the construct.

The model fit assessment further indicates that the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) value is 0.116 < 0.08, suggesting that the model fit is marginal. However, in the context of PLS-SEM, SRMR functions as an approximate model fit index and should be interpreted in conjunction with other structural model evaluation criteria. In this study, the model demonstrates meaningful explanatory power (R^2 = 0.154) and a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.184), indicating that innovative work behavior contributes substantively to explaining variance in subjective well-being. Therefore, despite the marginal SRMR value, the model exhibits adequate predictive and explanatory capability, supporting its overall robustness. Therefore, the model can be considered to demonstrate acceptable overall fit based on established academic criteria.

Discussions

The finding of this study support the theoretical expectation derived from JD-R theory that innovative work behavior embeds key job resources that promote employee well-being. Innovative work behavior typically requires autonomy, allowing employees to explore, evaluate, and implement ideas. Autonomy not only facilitates creativity but also buffers the strain associated with fast-paced and demanding start-up environments (Dediu et al., 2018). Furthermore, innovative work behavior is inherently relational as its idea promotion and implementation stages depend on social support, such as colleague cooperation, endorsement from leaders, and access to information networks (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010, 2007; Janssen, 2000; Scott & Bruce, 1994). Together with competence development through mastering complex problem-solving tasks, these resources align with the JD-R proposition that job resources stimulate motivation and enhance well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001).

When employees identify opportunities, generate solutions, and negotiate support from others, they experience a greater sense of agency and effectiveness which are key drivers of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). Thus, innovative work behavior may enhance subjective well-being because it provides work experiences that support natural human growth tendencies. buffer against negative consequences of a high workload.

Well-being is also enhanced when work activities are structured as "complete" tasks, as proposed by Action Regulation Theory (Hacker, 2003; Pot, 2017). This theory suggests that work encompassing goal setting, planning, execution, and evaluation promotes learning, intrinsic motivation, and psychological functioning, and can buffer the negative effects of high workload (Hacker, 2003). Innovative work behavior inherently involves these stages—such as generating ideas, mobilizing support, and implementing solutions (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; Janssen, 2000)—thereby enabling higher-level cognitive regulation and continuous learning. Through engagement in such complete and intellectually demanding activities, employees are more likely to experience mastery, competence, and psychological growth, which contributes positively to their subjective well-being.

These findings are also consistent with arguments that innovation can be an input of well-being. Miller et al. (2008) proposed how innovation affects well-being at multiple levels. He argued that innovation doesn't just improve products, services, or organizational performance, it can also directly enhance the well-being of consumers and employees. For consumers, better products and services increase satisfaction; for employees, engaging in creative work supports positive functioning and well-being. Dolan & Metcalfe (2012) also finds that individuals with stronger innovation-related traits—such as originality and imagination—report higher subjective well-being, suggesting an underlying positive link between innovation and psychological functioning.

Moreover, evidence from Indigenous entrepreneurship literature similarly suggests that innovation can significantly improve the quality of life and overall well-being of Indigenous communities (Mika et al., 2017; Savira et al., 2025). When individuals have the freedom to innovate, they experience greater satisfaction and happiness (Savira et al., 2025). This relationship can be understood through the capability approach, wherein innovative practices expand individuals' capabilities by enabling them to pursue and achieve goals they value, which in turn enhances their overall well-being.

The positive relationship found in this study helps clarify a previously inconsistent body of research. Prior work highlights that innovation can have both beneficial and harmful effects on well-being. On one hand, innovation enhances creativity, competence, and positive functioning (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012; Miller et al., 2008). On the other hand, innovation can produce stress, burnout, and negative affect when changes are disruptive or poorly managed (González-Romá & Hernández, 2016). Brulé & Munier (2021) emphasize that the innovation–well-being link is nonlinear: innovation can increase happiness through creativity and autonomy, but can also decrease well-being when it generates unpredictability, inequality, or excessive workload.

The current study's positive findings suggest that within start-up environments in Indonesia, innovative work behavior may be experienced as engaging, motivating, and resource-enhancing rather than as an imposed or disruptive demand. Employees may perceive innovation as a channel for capability development, particularly in start-ups where flexibility, autonomy, and collaborative problem-solving are culturally embedded (De la Gala-Velásquez et al., 2023; Finger & Samwer, 1998; Garidis et al., 2024; Lopez Hernandez et al., 2018; van Gelderen & Jansen, 2006). Thus, the context may play a pivotal role in determining whether innovation enhances or hinders well-being.

This study provides empirical evidence that innovative work behavior is positively associated with employee well-being which is the area of research that remains weakly examined, with prior work focusing largely on well-being as an antecedent of innovation. It addresses a significant gap in the context of start-ups in Indonesia. The results also underscore the importance of fostering innovative climate and designing jobs that support innovative work behavior by providing autonomy, adequate resources, and supportive relationships. Rather than viewing innovation solely as a performance driver, organizations

should also recognize innovative work behavior as a well-being–enhancing mechanism that can ultimately contribute to higher productivity and overall organizational performance.

To prevent innovation efforts from becoming a source of strain, organizations must ensure sufficient time, information, and material resources. Resource adequacy transforms innovation from a stressor into a developmental opportunity. Organizations should redesign jobs to enhance task autonomy, allowing employees discretion in how they approach idea generation. Increased autonomy enables employees to experience innovation as intrinsically meaningful, thereby enhancing well-being.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Although the theoretical frameworks suggest directional effects, longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to determine causality between innovative work behavior and subjective well-being. Second, this study did not examine potential mediators or moderators if the relationship between innovative work behavior and subjective well-being. Future research should therefore investigate the mechanisms through which innovative work behavior influences well-being, including the roles of leadership styles, team dynamics, and broader organizational practices.

Conclusion

This study found that innovative work behavior has a positive and significant effect on subjective well-being among employees working at start-ups in Indonesia. By shifting the focus from subjective well-being as merely an antecedent of innovation to subjective well-being as a potential outcome of innovative work behavior, this research addresses an important gap in the literature. In a volatile and high-pressure start-up environment, recognizing innovative work behavior as both a strategic and human-centered practice may help organizations foster sustainable performance alongside subjective well-being.

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