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Customer Experience: Analysis of Creativepreneur Differentiation Strategies in The Development of Local Culinary Services

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the differentiation strategies employed by creative entrepreneurs in improving customer experience in the domestic culinary service industry, with Makaroni Ngehe as a case. The research process utilizes the qualitative descriptive methodology by employing observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies on customers who have been selected with the purposive sampling method. The results show that sensory features (colour, aroma, touch, flavour), quality of packaging of the product, and ease of availability online all play an important role in creating positive consumer perceptions. The SWOT analysis shows that strengths are product quality and loyalty of customers, and weaknesses are product shelf life after opening and lack of interest among consumers in nutrition facts. Brief discussion confirms that customer experience-based differentiation strategies have the potential to create a strong brand identity, increase competitiveness, and keep up with changing local food trends. The result of this study reveals that Makaroni Ngehe has managed to apply creativity, innovation, and consumer behavior knowledge in maintaining its business existence. The contribution of this study is expected to be practically and theoretically significant in establishing innovative marketing strategies and improving the competitiveness of Indonesian culinary MSMEs.

INTRODUCTION

Customer experience, also known as customer experience, has become an important strategic component in creating competitive advantage in the increasingly competitive local culinary industry. A customer experience-based approach helps creative entrepreneurs, especially in the snack food industry, meet their needs and create loyalty and emotional value for their brands. As one of Indonesia's successful local culinary examples, Makaroni Ngehe employs this strategy by combining product innovation, strong brand communication, and unique packaging to reach a broad and dynamic young market. Over the past five years, Indonesia's local culinary industry has seen significant growth. This growth is driven by increased purchasing power, lifestyle trends, and demand for more

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personalized dining experiences. In today's internet and social media era, customer experience is crucial to the success of culinary businesses. Consumers are not just buying products; they are also seeking stories, environments, and meaningful interactions from the services provided (Suryani et al, 2022; Kim & Hwang, 2021). Therefore, managing customer experience is essential for maintaining loyalty and creating sustainable differentiation.

Creative entrepreneurs in the local culinary industry are becoming increasingly important because they have the ability to combine culture, technology, and creativity to create unique added value. These entrepreneurs often develop culinary concepts that blend experience, aesthetics, and strong local narratives with food (Santoso et al, 2019; Rahman, 2023). Creativepreneurs use various approaches to make their products stand out from others; they innovate in service, presentation, location design, and social media interaction with customers. The Customer Experience Orientation (CXO) approach is gaining popularity in the service and retail industries worldwide. This approach requires companies to view customer interactions from pre-consumption to post-consumption, with experience serving as the foundation for building long-term relationships with customers. In the culinary industry, customer experience is no longer limited to the taste of food; it now encompasses service experience, ease of transaction, digital touchpoints, and brand communication that reflects consumers' lifestyles. These principles have been successfully incorporated into Makaroni Ngehe's marketing strategy. A national study by Hayati and Permai (2025) in Yogyakarta shows that product quality, service, and price have a significant influence on customer satisfaction with Makaroni Ngehe. This indicates that fundamental elements such as taste, friendly service, and affordable prices remain the foundation for creating a positive customer experience. The study by Yusuf and Nurhadi (2024) reinforces these findings by showing that a significant increase in purchasing interest at Makaroni Ngehe stores in the Pamulang area can be achieved through continuous digital promotions and improvements in product quality.

Differentiation is the main strategy for gaining competitive advantage, especially in the highly competitive local culinary service industry. By using this strategy, entrepreneurs can offer products that are not easily imitated by competitors. Customer experience is significantly influenced by strategic factors such as cultural storytelling, thematic approaches, local branding, and menu uniqueness (Suharto & Yuliansyah, 2023; Chandra, 2014). Customer experience in this context stems from active interaction between customers and the entire service system, not passive engagement. Internationally, elements such as emotion, digital innovation, and authenticity are increasingly dominating the formation of customer experience in the food and beverage industry (Zaid & Patyawati, 2021). This means that creative culinary businesses like Makaroni Ngehe employ a highly relevant differentiation strategy: providing a customer experience that touches on emotional aspects, packaged in an authentic story, and combined with technological convenience.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine how creativepreneurs can use differentiation strategies to develop local culinary services to enhance customer experience. This study will also examine key components that influence the success of differentiation strategies, such as digitalization, the role of local culture, and customer involvement in the value creation process (Chalenga et al, 2017). It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute theoretically and practically to the advancement of the creative culinary industry in Indonesia. Makaroni Ngehe has built a strong foundation in creating memorable and highly competitive customer experiences by combining various components, such as product innovation, consistent service, communicative packaging design, and attractive digital promotions. The analysis of customer experience-based differentiation strategies at Makaroni Ngehe is relevant to examine as a model for developing adaptive and consumer-oriented local culinary services because this approach not only strengthens the brand's position in the market but also provides added value for customers whose tastes, expectations, and lifestyles are constantly evolving.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Experience

Customer experience is a strategy that emerged during the industrial revolution, when the agricultural sector was displaced by the manufacturing sector, along with improvements in the economic conditions of society and the process of automation, resulting in increased income for the public and more leisure time, leading people to prefer purchasing services over simply obtaining the goods and services they needed (Barbu et al, 2021). In this context, customer satisfaction in customer experience is measured using five dimensions: sense, feel, think, act, and relate. This experience can be observed from how consumers consume or use the product, the circumstances in which they consume it, and their level of involvement in the consumption or use of the product.

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Differentiation Strategy

A differentiation strategy is a product that is different from one or more competitors, through one or many ways that can be evaluated by customers, thereby influencing customer choice. Differentiation strategy is often, but not always, associated with higher prices, as the magnitude of the increase makes the price less appropriate for consumers. In addition to being based on cost advantages, the success of the strategy will be differentiated in many ways, including by improving its appearance, quality, prestige, key features, service guarantees, reliability, or confidence in the product (Sulistiani, 2013; Maulana, et al., 2023).

Development of Local Culinary Services

Kartika Nuringsih (2021) defines local food entrepreneurship as commercial activities involving traditional cuisine developed as sustainable entrepreneurial ventures, with an approach that integrates the socio-cultural, environmental, and economic values of rural communities. This system is used as a strategy for developing local cuisine through business designs based on local wisdom and commercialization strategies for regional specialties. Ni Komang Nariani (2019) also formulated a strategy for developing local cuisine based on tourist perceptions using quantitative and qualitative methods. The definition focused on how local cuisine is perceived in terms of diversity, uniqueness, presentation, price, promotion, and service, in order to form a development strategy that is targeted and contextual to tourist expectations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to understand and describe in depth the differentiation strategies employed by creative entrepreneurs in the context of developing local culinary services, with a focus on how these strategies influence customer experience. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of students in a natural and real-world context.

The research was conducted at Makaroni Ngehe Store, Jl. Dipati Ukur No.76, Lebakgede, Coblong District, Bandung City, West Java 40132, specifically targeting Makaroni Ngehe customers. The research took place over a two-week period, beginning with observation, in-depth interviews, and data documentation. The research subjects were Makaroni Ngehe customers. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with a total of five informants chosen based on specific criteria, such as having purchased Makaroni Ngehe products for at least the past three months and being willing to participate in interviews.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on in-depth interviews with five consumers of Makaroni Ngehe. Several sensory and non-sensory indicators, such as color, aroma, texture, taste, packaging, nutritional information, and food shelf life, were found to influence consumers' perceptions of product quality. Through 7 pre-designed questions.

A. Color and Taste

Questions:

1. How fresh does the color of the food you consume appear?
2. Does the aroma of the food meet your expectations?

Most respondents stated that the visual appearance of the food was very appealing and appetizing. Consumers expect light snacks with strong flavors, while bright and eye-catching colors indicate product freshness. Initial sensory perceptions, especially for instant packaged foods, significantly influence customer interest.

B. Texture and Taste

Questions:

3. What is the texture of the food when you consume it (e.g., crispy, soft, or hard)?
4. How satisfied are you with the taste of the food?

Overall, all informants stated that the food's texture was crispy and enjoyable when consumed. The spicy flavor variation was considered a distinctive feature that made customers feel “addicted.” The food's taste remained satisfying and met expectations, although some observed changes in texture when stored for too long.

C. Packaging

Question:

Does the food packaging look clean and well sealed?

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Almost every respondent stated that the products were cleanly packaged, well sealed, and had clear expiration date information. This makes customers feel safe and confident in the quality and safety of the products. Positive perceptions of the brand are reinforced by attractive and functional packaging.

D. Nutritional Value

Question:

Do you read the nutritional information label before purchasing food?

Meanwhile, based on nutritional value indicators, most buyers said they do not pay attention to the nutritional information on product labels because they consider them to be light snacks consumed occasionally.

E. Shelf Life

Question:

How long does the food remain edible after opening/cooking?

Regarding product shelf life, customers stated that food can be consumed for two to four days after opening the packaging if stored properly (e.g., tightly sealed or stored in an airtight container). Changes in texture, such as becoming softer, are considered a sign of quality decline, although the taste remains acceptable.

Overall, these results indicate that consumers have a very positive perception of Makaroni Ngehe in terms of taste, aroma, and appearance. Packaging quality and shelf life, as well as consumer satisfaction, are the main factors influencing consumer loyalty and preference for spicy snacks, even though nutritional information is not a top priority.

SWOT Analysis

Essentially, a SWOT analysis involves systematically identifying various elements and determining factors in the development of an institutional area to evaluate the conditions of relevant activities. Furthermore, SWOT analysis can be used to formulate appropriate regional development strategies in line with the conditions and potential of the region (Fadilah & Weriantoni, 2019). SWOT analysis is used to evaluate the relevant activity environment. Furthermore, this method can be used to develop company development strategies that are more in line with the company's circumstances and potential (Monika et al., 2023).

Table 1. Strenghts Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs

Strenghts	Integrity	Rating	Score
Good and consistent taste	4	4	16
Texture variants suitable for all ages	3	3	9
Distinctive and tempting aroma	3	3	9
Hygienic and neat packaging	3	2	6
Easy access via GoFood	2	3	6
Total	**15**	**15**	**46**

Table 2. Weakness Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs

Weakness	Integrity	Rating	Score
Consumers do not pay attention to nutritional information	3	2	6
Texture changes after too long storage	4	3	12
Product shelf life is limited after opening	3	2	6
Total	**10**	**7**	**24**

Table 3. Opportunities Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs

Opportunities	Integrity	Rating	Score
Broad market: youth, families, social	4	4	16
Potential for consumer education about nutrition	3	3	9
Limited edition variant innovation	3	2	6
Development of durable packaging	3	3	9
Total	**13**	**12**	**40**

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Table 4. Threats Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs

Threats	Integrity	Rating	Score
Competition with other spicy snack products	4	3	12
Healthy food trends (low fat/sugar/sodium)	3	3	9
Low durability can cause complaints	3	2	6
Reliance on appearance and taste alone	2	2	4
Total	**13**	**10**	**31**

Table 1 shows scores with a total of 46, Table 2 shows scores with a total of 24, Table 3 shows scores with a total of 30, and Table 4 shows scores with a total of 31. The next step is to enter the total scores into the following formula.

(X) , (Y)

$$S - W/_2 \, , \, O - T/_2 \tag{1}$$

$$= 46 - 24/_2 \, , \, 30 - 31/_2$$

X, Y = 11, -0,5

From the calculation results, we obtain X = 3 (as the X-axis) and Y = -3 (as the Y-axis), so when entered into the diagram, it becomes:

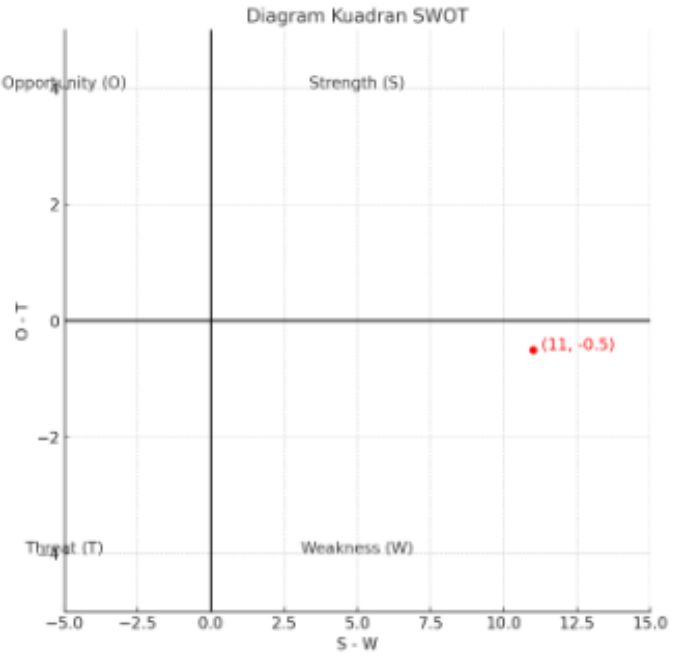


Figure 1. SWOT Quadrant Diagram.

According to the SWOT analysis results illustrated in the quadrant diagram, Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs are positioned in the Strength–Attraction (ST) quadrant, as indicated by the coordinates (X = 11, Y = -0.5). This position shows that MSMEs not only have great internal strengths, but also face external problems and threats.

Therefore, the best strategy is diversification. This strategy aims to leverage the company's strengths, such as product quality, customer loyalty, and marketing innovation, to address and mitigate existing market threats, such as market competition, changes in consumer trends, or fluctuations in raw material prices.

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It is hoped that the Makaroni Ngehe SME can maintain its existence and become more competitive in the face of increasingly complex market dynamics through this approach.

Table 5. IFAS Analysis

No	Internal Factor	Value	Rating	Score
	Strenghts			
1	Good and consistent taste	0.15	4	0.30
2	Texture variants suitable for all ages	0.10	3	0.30
3	Distinctive and tempting aroma	0.10	3	0.30
4	Hygienic and neat packaging	0.08	2	0.16
5	Easy access via GoFood	0.07	3	0.21
	Weakness			
6	Consumers do not pay attention to nutritional information	0.10	2	0.20
7	Texture changes after too long storage	0.15	3	0.45
8	Product shelf life is limited after opening	0.10	2	0.20
	Total	**1.00**		**2.42**

IFAS interpretation: A score of 2.42 indicates that the company's internal conditions are quite good, but there are several areas that need improvement, particularly in the areas of resilience and consumer awareness of nutrition.

Table 6. EFAS Analysis.

No	Eksternal Factor	Value	Rating	Score
	Strenghts			
1	Broad market: youth, families, social	0.15	4	0.60
2	Potential for consumer education about nutrition	0.12	3	0.36
3	Limited edition variant innovation	0.10	2	0.20
4	Development of durable packaging	0.13	3	0.39
	Weakness			
5	Competition with other spicy snack products	0.15	3	0.45
6	Healthy food trends (low fat/sugar/sodium)	0.12	3	0.36
7	Low durability can cause complaints	0.08	2	0.16
8	Reliance on appearance and taste alone	0.05	2	0.10
	Total	**1.00**		**2.62**

EFAS interpretation: A score of 2.62 means that the company is in a fairly good position to respond to opportunities and manage threats, although competition and healthy trends need to be anticipated more seriously.

CONCLUSION

It is concluded in this study that Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs have succeeded in building customer loyalty in the local culinary industry through the implementation of a differentiation strategy based on creativity, innovation, and understanding of consumer behavior, thereby establishing a strong and unique identity. According to the differentiation strategy theory and IFAS–EFAS analysis results, Makaroni Ngehe MSMEs have sufficient internal strength to build competitive advantages through product innovation and creativity. However, they need to translate this strength into more operational implementation. The IFAS-EFAS results show that the internal position of MSMEs is strong enough to face external threats, so that a core diversification strategy can be applied through the development of informative packaging that shows the level of spiciness and product composition, as well as the use of digital media for consumer education and brand identity strengthening. Theoretically, this study expands the application of differentiation strategies in local culinary MSMEs by showing that differentiation based on innovation and consumer understanding has the ability to

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foster customer loyalty. This study also shows that IFAS-EFAS can be used as a tool to build adaptive strategies in MSMEs amid the dynamics of competition in the culinary industry.

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