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Innovative Strategies in Developing Modern Desserts and Strengthening Human Resources: A Consumer Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how innovative strategies are applied in the development of modern dessert products from a consumer perspective, with a particular focus on the brand Bittersweet by Najla. The research focuses on product innovation, visual presentation, creative branding strategies, digital approaches, and human resources (HR) aspects that support the successful implementation of innovation. The study employed a descriptive qualitative method using semi-structured interviews with consumers who had purchased and experienced Bittersweet by Najla products. The findings reveal that consumers perceive Bittersweet by Najla as successfully delivering comprehensive innovation through a combination of unique flavors, aesthetic packaging, strong branding narratives, and services supported by well-trained HR. These innovative strategies positively impact emotional satisfaction, experiential value, and consumer loyalty to the brand. The results indicate that innovative strategies not only serve as differentiators in the competitive culinary industry but also as a means of building meaningful consumer relationships. Therefore, MSME players in the modern dessert sector are encouraged to consistently innovate and strengthen HR capacity through training, performance management, and appropriate recruitment strategies to meet the demands of a dynamic market.

INTRODUCTION

The food and beverage industry, particularly the dessert sector, has undergone significant changes due to the growing consumer demand for unique and innovative culinary experiences. Desserts are no longer perceived solely in terms of taste but are also evaluated based on visual appeal, service quality, and the experiential value they offer (Kaharudin, 2025). Advances in technology and culinary creativity have given rise to various innovations, ranging from modern presentation styles to flavor combinations that were previously unimaginable. Such innovations create opportunities for businesses to generate added value, expand their markets, and strengthen brand identity.

Previous studies have shown that product innovation and marketing strategies have a significant impact on consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Ginting and Rizqullah (2025) emphasized that innovations in flavor, product visuals, and presentation concepts influence the purchase intention of premium desserts.

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Arifin and Hidajat (2024), in their study on *Glacie Dessert*, highlighted the importance of flavor creativity and cost efficiency without compromising quality. Sidauruk (2022) found that the combination of unique flavors and attractive visuals increases consumer interaction on social media. (Desvi Vinata Sari & Irawati, 2025) further demonstrated that innovative orientation and product differentiation drive the performance of culinary MSMEs. On an international level, Ling, Chua, and Han (2023) reported that innovation perception in cafés and dessert shops positively affects consumer satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement.

In addition to product and branding factors, human resources (HR) also play a crucial role in the success of innovation in the modern dessert industry. Well-trained HR not only ensures product quality consistency but also enhances service quality and consumer interaction. Friendly, fast, and professional service is considered part of the innovative strategy that shapes the overall consumer experience. For MSMEs, HR management challenges include the need for continuous training, effective performance evaluation systems, and appropriate recruitment strategies to remain competitive amid rising consumer expectations and intense market competition.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze innovative strategies in the development of modern desserts and the strengthening of HR from a consumer perspective, with a particular focus on the brand *Bittersweet by Najla*. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to explore how consumers perceive product innovation, branding, service, and the role of HR in creating meaningful culinary experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Product Innovation in the Modern Dessert Industry

Product innovation is a key element in creating competitive advantage within the modern dessert industry. Innovation not only enhances product value but also strengthens long-term consumer appeal. In Indonesia, many MSMEs have grown through innovations in flavor, packaging, and unique presentation concepts. Ling, Chua, and Han (2023) emphasized that consumer perceptions of innovation significantly influence brand loyalty and emotional value. Yuliani et al. (2024) further noted that Millennials and Gen Z are more attracted to products that are not only delicious but also aesthetically aligned with digital lifestyles. Therefore, product innovation serves as the foundation of innovative strategies in the modern dessert industry.

Creative Branding and Visual Aesthetics

Creative branding is one of the essential strategies for building a strong brand identity. Emotional branding, as explained by Kim and Sullivan (2019), emphasizes psychological connections through consistent emotional messages and appealing visuals. In the context of modern desserts, packaging design, color schemes, and presentation methods are not merely visual attributes but also symbols of quality that shape consumer perceptions. Krishna (2022) highlighted that sensory branding particularly visual and textural aspects plays a significant role in purchase decisions based on sensory experience. Visual consistency across social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, has become an effective strategy for reinforcing brand identity while simultaneously increasing consumer engagement.

Consumer Perception as the Basis for Innovation Strategy

Consumer perception serves as the foundation for designing innovative strategies that are relevant to market dynamics. Modern consumers evaluate products not only by taste but also by alignment with personal values, sustainability, and the quality of digital interactions (Sipple et al., 2022). Faraji, Askaripoor, and Ghanbarzadegan (2024) emphasized that positive perceptions of innovation correlate with improved quality and the establishment of long-term brand trust. This indicates that innovative strategies should be directed toward fulfilling both the emotional and functional expectations of consumers, thereby fostering loyalty and repeat purchases.

The Role of Human Resources (HR)

Beyond product and branding factors, strengthening HR is a crucial dimension of innovative strategies. According to Yuliani, Wibowo, & Mahardika (2024), employee competence and creativity are key determinants in creating distinctive culinary experiences. Well-trained HR not only ensures consistency in product quality but also delivers friendly, fast, and professional service. Continuous training programs, performance management systems based on service indicators, and appropriate recruitment strategies can enhance the competitiveness of MSMEs. These findings are consistent with Dessler (2020), who argued that HR management is not limited to operational techniques but also involves long-term capability development to support innovation. However, in the MSME context, major challenges lie in limited training budgets, high employee turnover, and the need to adapt to new trends in the culinary industry. This gap highlights the

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relevance of this study, which positions HR not merely as a supporting factor but as an integral part of innovative strategies in the modern dessert industry.

The Interrelation of Innovative Strategies and HR

The four aspects product, branding, consumer perception, and HR are interconnected as a unified innovative strategy. Previous studies have primarily focused on product aspects (Arifin & Hidajat, 2024; Ginting & Rizqullah, 2025;) and branding (Krishna, 2022; Kim & Sullivan, 2019), but relatively few have directly linked them with the role of HR. This study fills that gap by demonstrating that product and branding innovations cannot be sustained without the support of competent HR. Moreover, positive consumer perceptions are shaped not only by product quality but also by interactions with employees. Therefore, this study underscores that strengthening HR must be placed on equal footing with product and branding innovations as key pillars in building innovative strategies in the modern dessert industry.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method with a case study approach focusing on the brand *Bittersweet by Najla*. This approach was chosen because it provides an in-depth understanding of the implementation of innovative strategies in modern dessert development while also examining the role of HR strengthening from the consumer perspective.

Data Collection Techniques were carried out through semi-structured interviews with consumers selected purposively, as they had prior experience purchasing and consuming *Bittersweet by Najla* products. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to obtain directed information while still giving participants the flexibility to share their experiences and perceptions naturally (Kallio et al., 2016). In addition, observations were conducted on product visuals, branding strategies, and the services delivered by HR, both directly and through digital platforms.

Data Analysis was conducted descriptively using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) framework to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in the brand's innovative strategies, including the role of HR in supporting innovation (Gurel & Tat, 2017). This analysis aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of the interrelation between product innovation, branding, consumer perception, and HR quality.

Through this approach, the study is expected to provide practical contributions for modern dessert MSMEs in formulating innovative strategies that focus not only on product and branding but also on strengthening HR as a key pillar for long-term success.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are presented to explain consumer perceptions of the innovative strategies implemented by *Bittersweet by Najla*, based on the interviews conducted. The analysis was carried out descriptively to illustrate the findings thematically according to the predetermined indicators. This approach is consistent with Castleberry and Nolen (2020), who state that qualitative descriptive analysis aims to present field data systematically and directly, without excessive manipulation or interpretation of participants' narratives. Therefore, the discussion focuses on four main indicators: (1) product innovation strategies; (2) creative branding strategies; (3) consumer perceptions; and (4) the role of human resources (HR) in supporting innovation.

Discussion

This section presents a descriptive analysis of the research findings based on four main indicators: product innovation strategies, creative branding strategies, consumer perceptions, and the role of human resources (HR).

1. **Product Innovation Strategies**

   Consumers perceive *Bittersweet by Najla* as having an innovative approach that distinguishes its products from competitors in the modern dessert market. This can be seen in the development of menu items such as Turkish desserts, the special *Snacktok* edition, and the use of premium chocolate. These innovations not only enhance appeal but also strengthen brand character. Ling, Chua, and Han (2023) stated that consumer perceptions of dessert innovations can elevate social image and foster positive emotional responses toward the brand. The online ordering system was also appreciated, although some technical issues occurred during

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peak periods. Social media promotional strategies were considered effective, but consumers suggested that they could be further improved through more personalized and participatory digital communication.

2. **Creative Branding Strategies**
   Product visualization is one of the key differentiating elements in *Bittersweet by Najla*'s branding strategy. Packaging design that aligns with social media visual trends, such as Instagrammable concepts, enhances consumers' perceptions of product exclusivity. Krishna (2022) explained that sensory branding, particularly visual and aesthetic dimensions, can create deep emotional bonds between consumers and brands, thereby strengthening loyalty. However, storytelling aspects have not yet been fully optimized to build stronger emotional connections. Narratives that touch consumers' psychological dimensions need to be developed so that the relationship between products and customers becomes more personal and sustainable.
3. **Consumer Perceptions**
   Consumers demonstrated positive responses toward *Bittersweet by Najla*, particularly due to consistent taste quality and aesthetically appealing visuals. The products are often positioned as a form of self-reward or a personal gift with emotional value. Although the price is considered relatively high, consumers perceived the product quality as being worth the cost. Soni, Mishra, and Singh (2024) emphasized that consumption experiences involving both emotional and functional aspects play a significant role in building customer loyalty, particularly in the food industry, which heavily relies on subjective perceptions. In this context, exclusivity and emotional engagement become dominant factors driving repeat purchases.
4. **The Role of HR in Supporting Innovative Strategies**
   Beyond product and branding, HR quality plays a vital role in shaping consumer experiences. Consumers assessed that the friendly, fast, and professional service of *Bittersweet by Najla* staff enhanced satisfaction and reinforced the premium image of the products. Employee competence in maintaining flavor consistency, presentation aesthetics, and communication skills was considered critical in supporting the success of innovative strategies. Regular training programs, performance management systems, and selective recruitment were seen as urgent needs for MSMEs to maintain competitiveness. Consumers also emphasized that HR with strong digital skills—such as managing social media and online ordering services—would strengthen interaction with modern markets.

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis was conducted to map the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of *Bittersweet by Najla* from the consumer perspective. In terms of strengths, the brand excels through its premium taste, aesthetic appearance, attractive packaging, and the support of friendly and professional HR. However, weaknesses remain, such as relatively high prices, limited product innovation, and a brand narrative that has not yet been strongly developed. Significant opportunities arise from the growing trend of modern dessert consumption, the effectiveness of digital promotion, as well as the potential to strengthen storytelling and enhance HR capacity through training. On the other hand, threats include price competition, the rising popularity of healthy food trends, distribution challenges, and the risk of high employee turnover.

Thus, this SWOT analysis highlights that strengthening HR must go hand in hand with product innovation and branding strategies for modern dessert MSMEs to maintain competitiveness while meeting consumer expectations. A summary of this analysis is presented in **Table 1**

Table 1. SWOT Analysis of Bittersweet by Najla

Strengths (S)	**Weaknesses (W)**
Premium and distinctive taste	Brand narrative (storytelling) remains weak
Aesthetic product appearance aligned with social media trends	Price perceived as relatively high by some consumers
Elegant and attractive packaging	Limited product variation and menu innovation
Well-trained, friendly, and professional HR in service delivery	Continuous HR training programs not yet optimized
Opportunities (O)	**Threats (T)**
Increasing consumer interest in modern desserts	Competition from brands offering lower prices
Growing effectiveness of digital promotion through social media and influencers	Growing trend of healthy food (low sugar, plant-based)

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Potential to strengthen emotional connection through storytelling	Distribution challenges during high-demand seasons
Capacity building for HR through training in customer service, product innovation, and digital marketing	High employee turnover that may disrupt service quality consistency

Based on the SWOT results, the development strategy of *Bittersweet by Najla* does not only focus on product innovation and creative branding but also on strengthening human resources (HR) as a key pillar of success. The presence of well-trained, professional, and adaptive HR is an integral factor in maintaining the consistency of both product quality and service. For modern dessert MSMEs, strengthening HR through continuous training, selective recruitment, and effective performance management systems will enhance competitive positioning in the market while simultaneously increasing consumer loyalty. The details of this strategy are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Development Strategies Based on SWOT Analysis

SO (Strengths – Opportunities)	**WO (Weaknesses – Opportunities)**
Leverage unique flavors and product presentation to create more creative digital campaigns on social media.	Develop a stronger and more personal brand narrative through *behind-the-product* campaigns.
Optimize well-trained HR to support premium service promoted digitally.	Provide continuous HR training programs to improve service and digital communication skills.
Capitalize on the modern dessert trend to expand the market through influencer collaborations.	Offer bundling packages or special promotions to reduce the perception of high prices.
ST (Strengths – Threats)	WT (Weaknesses – Threats)
Highlight premium quality and aesthetics as differentiators from lower-priced competitors.	Develop alternative pricing strategies (e.g., mini box options) without reducing product quality.
Introduce healthy variants (low sugar, plant-based) to respond to health food trends.	Reduce employee turnover through incentive systems and improved welfare.
Rely on HR professionalism to maintain service consistency during high-demand seasons.	Strengthen selective recruitment programs to ensure HR meets innovation and service needs.

Based on the SWOT analysis, the main strength of *Bittersweet by Najla* lies in its creative product innovations that differentiate it from other dessert brands. Menu variations such as Turkish desserts and special editions are considered capable of delivering unique and exclusive taste experiences. In addition, the visual presentation of the products and their aesthetic packaging serve as key attractions that create a premium impression, making them suitable both as gifts and for personal consumption. The convenience of the ordering system, whether online or offline, also represents an advantage in meeting the needs of consumers who prioritize practicality. Consumers further appreciate promotional strategies through social media and influencer collaborations as effective steps to strengthen the brand's appeal.

On the other hand, identified weaknesses include the limited use of emotional storytelling, which could otherwise enhance the psychological bond between consumers and the brand. Furthermore, the relatively high price of the products poses a barrier for some consumers to make repeat purchases. Major opportunities for the brand stem from the growing trend of modern dessert consumption, particularly among younger generations, as well as the potential for market expansion through digital platforms. However, threats persist, such as competition from similar brands offering more affordable prices, the increasing popularity of healthy food trends, and distribution challenges during high-demand periods.

By understanding these factors, *Bittersweet by Najla* can formulate a more comprehensive development strategy, not only by strengthening emotional connections through storytelling and diversifying its product range but also by enhancing HR quality. Well-trained HR in customer service, digital marketing proficiency, and efficient distribution management will be key factors in maintaining the brand's relevance and competitiveness within the dynamic modern dessert market.

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CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that innovative strategies in modern dessert development can deliver valuable consumption experiences for consumers. *Bittersweet by Najla* is perceived as successful in presenting products with unique flavors, attractive visual appeal, convenient ordering services, and creative digital promotions, thereby creating a premium impression. Nevertheless, there remain aspects that require strengthening, such as emotional storytelling, to allow consumers to feel more connected to the brand.

Consumers also highlighted the relatively high product prices and the emergence of healthy food trends as challenges for the brand. Therefore, continuous innovation, emotional approaches, and interactive promotions are essential steps to maintain competitiveness in the dynamic culinary industry.

Beyond products and branding, strengthening human resources (HR) has proven to be an integral part of innovative strategies. Well-trained, professional, and adaptive HR plays a crucial role in ensuring product consistency, enhancing service quality, and supporting digital promotion. For MSMEs, continuous training, performance management, and selective recruitment are key recommendations to ensure that innovation can be implemented consistently and competitively. By understanding consumers while simultaneously strengthening HR, businesses can build meaningful long-term relationships.

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