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## **Creative Marketing Strategies for Food SMEs: Enhancing Brand Visibility and Customer Loyalty in a Competitive Market and Economy**

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### ***Abstract:***

*This study explores the effectiveness of creative marketing strategies for food SMEs in enhancing brand visibility and customer loyalty within competitive markets, specifically focusing on SMEs in East Java, Indonesia. Given the resource constraints typically faced by SMEs, creative marketing approaches such as storytelling, local collaborations, and social media engagement offer cost-effective means of differentiating brands and establishing strong customer connections. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, focusing on the perspectives and experiences of food SME owners and managers. Findings reveal that personalized customer interactions, community-centered branding, and digital engagement play a critical role in building both brand visibility and loyalty. Additionally, the study identifies key internal and external factors influencing the success of these marketing strategies, including resource limitations, customer preferences, and market competition. Practical implications suggest that food SMEs can enhance their market presence by focusing on authentic and customer-centric marketing tactics, while theoretical contributions highlight the need for adaptive, innovative approaches in creative marketing for SMEs. This study further proposes future research directions, including quantitative analyses and cross-cultural comparisons, to deepen the understanding of creative marketing impacts on SME sustainability and growth.*

**Keywords:** *Creative Marketing, Brand Visibility, Customer Loyalty, Competitive Markets, Local Collaborations, Social Media Engagement.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the food sector play a crucial role in contributing to economic growth, employment, and local development, often representing a significant portion of the food industry in many countries (Duarte Alonso et al., 2018). Despite their importance, food SMEs face intense competition, both from large corporations and other small-scale businesses, which can limit their market share and hinder growth (Ghobadian et al., 2020). In response to this competitive environment, creative marketing strategies are essential for these businesses to improve brand visibility, foster customer loyalty, and differentiate themselves from competitors (Jones & Rowley, 2011). Creative approaches, such as storytelling, experiential marketing, and social media engagement, enable food SMEs to build strong, lasting relationships with customers, which is vital for survival in highly saturated markets (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Research has shown that SMEs

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implementing innovative marketing strategies often see improved customer loyalty and sustained competitive advantage, making these strategies invaluable for long-term business success (Resnick et al., 2016).

The central focus of this study is to explore how creative marketing strategies can improve brand visibility and customer loyalty among food SMEs in East Java, Indonesia—a region renowned for its vibrant cultural diversity and competitive food market. With a highly saturated and varied market landscape, food SMEs in East Java face significant challenges in distinguishing their brands and cultivating a dedicated customer base. Innovative marketing techniques, such as personalization, community engagement, and digital marketing, have been effective in other areas and hold potential for these SMEs to establish a competitive edge (Laukkanen et al., 2013). Recognizing the success of these strategies elsewhere, this study seeks to understand how they can be adapted to meet the distinct characteristics and demands of the East Java market, where building customer loyalty and brand presence is essential for success in such a competitive environment (Franco et al., 2014). Creative marketing strategies, beyond enhancing brand identity, can lead to a sustainable advantage, positioning SMEs to excel in a crowded field (Zontanos & Anderson, 2004). The focus on East Java allows for an in-depth look at how specific strategies might be uniquely beneficial in supporting the region's food SMEs (Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, & Lye, 2011).

**Table 1. Five-Year Comparison Of East Java's Food And Beverage Industry**

Indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
East Java Economic Growth (YoY)	5.52%	-2.39%	3.57%	5.34%	4.69%
Food and Beverage Sector Growth	6.80%	-1.20%	5.10%	7.20%	7.70%
Production Index for Micro and Small Food Industry	4.50%	-2.00%	3.80%	5.00%	5.43%
Employment Growth in the Food Sector	3.20%	-1.50%	2.70%	4.50%	6.40%

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS)

The food and beverage industry in East Java has experienced fluctuating growth over recent years, highlighting both resilience and vulnerability within this sector. In 2020, the industry faced a downturn, with economic growth in East Java contracting by -2.39% and the food and beverage sector decreasing by -1.20% due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This negative impact was also felt in the micro and small food industries, with a production index drop of -2.00%, and employment in the food sector declined by -1.50%. However, post-2020 data reveals a robust recovery, with food and beverage sector growth reaching 7.70% in 2023, surpassing the region's overall economic growth of 4.69%. This rebound suggests the food and beverage industry's critical role in economic recovery, driven by increases in production and employment, especially among micro and small enterprises. Despite this recovery, the year-on-year variances underscore the challenges faced by East Java's food SMEs in maintaining consistent growth amid external economic pressures. This volatile environment emphasizes the need for resilient marketing and operational strategies that can help food SMEs stabilize their growth and sustain employment levels, forming the basis

for exploring innovative approaches to competitiveness and customer loyalty in this research.

While numerous studies have explored marketing strategies in SMEs, particularly within competitive markets, research specific to food SMEs in Indonesia, and especially in East Java, remains limited. Additionally, while marketing strategies like digital marketing and community engagement have proven effective in other contexts, there is limited evidence on their specific impact on food SMEs in culturally diverse and economically volatile regions like East Java (Sukumar et al., 2020). Studies have shown that creative marketing is vital for brand differentiation and customer loyalty, yet few have examined how these strategies can be adapted to the unique challenges faced by food SMEs in regions with fluctuating economic and sectoral growth (Abebe & Jember, 2018). Furthermore, while brand visibility has been highlighted as a crucial factor for SMEs' competitive advantage, research remains sparse on its integration with customer loyalty strategies tailored to SMEs in emerging markets (Karami et al., 2019). Previous studies also indicate that SMEs struggle with resource limitations, affecting their ability to implement consistent marketing efforts, yet research on overcoming these limitations through innovative, cost-effective marketing remains minimal (Revilla & Fernandez, 2018).

In addition, there is a gap in understanding the role of local culture and consumer behavior on the effectiveness of creative marketing strategies in the food sector, as most studies are conducted in Western contexts (Souto, 2015). Research in other countries emphasizes the importance of customer engagement and digitalization in improving competitiveness, yet their specific application to micro and small food industries in East Java has not been well documented (Ahmed et al., 2019). Studies have called for research that links digital marketing to sustainable growth for food SMEs, but findings are often generalized without addressing the unique economic pressures faced by SMEs in regional Indonesian markets (Castillo et al., 2016). Consequently, a deeper investigation is needed into how East Java's food SMEs can leverage creative marketing not only to recover post-pandemic but to build long-term resilience in a competitive and dynamic marketplace (Pandey & Jha, 2017). Filling these research gaps is crucial for developing tailored strategies that enhance both visibility and customer loyalty, paving the way for sustainable growth in the food SME sector of East Java.

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, it seeks to identify creative marketing strategies that are particularly effective for food SMEs, allowing them to stand out in competitive markets. By examining these strategies, the study aims to understand their impact on brand visibility and customer loyalty, two critical factors for long-term success and stability in a saturated market. Finally, based on these insights, the research will provide actionable recommendations tailored to food SMEs on how to implement creative marketing effectively, leveraging low-cost, high-impact strategies that can foster sustained customer engagement and competitive advantage. The significance of this study lies in its practical relevance for food SMEs striving to navigate and succeed amidst intense competition, offering them a toolkit of strategies to enhance brand perception and customer retention. Additionally, the findings will

contribute to the broader field of marketing by expanding theories and practices around creative marketing for small businesses, particularly in the context of culturally diverse and economically dynamic markets.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **Marketing Theory for SMEs**

Marketing concepts for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are distinct from those used by large companies, mainly due to resource limitations and the need for more flexible, adaptive strategies that resonate with local consumer bases. Unlike large corporations, SMEs often face constraints in budget, personnel, and marketing infrastructure, which necessitates a more entrepreneurial approach to marketing (Gilmore et al., 2013). These businesses typically employ a more relationship-oriented marketing strategy, focusing on building personal connections with customers and creating a strong local presence (O'Dwyer et al., 2009). This approach is especially relevant for food SMEs, where understanding local tastes and preferences can foster customer loyalty and brand engagement (Scalera et al., 2020).

One of the key differences in SME marketing strategies compared to larger firms is the emphasis on word-of-mouth and customer loyalty over mass advertising. Studies have shown that SMEs, especially in the food sector, rely heavily on customer relationships to generate repeat business, which can be more effective than traditional advertising for small businesses with limited marketing budgets (Bocconcetti et al., 2018). Rather than large-scale marketing campaigns, food SMEs often use direct engagement through social media, community events, and other localized marketing efforts to create awareness and build trust (Ghezzi & Cavallo, 2020). In the competitive landscape of food SMEs, customer feedback and brand advocacy play critical roles, as satisfied customers often become organic promoters, driving brand visibility through informal networks (Ogunnaike et al., 2014).

Furthermore, SMEs are typically more agile than larger companies, allowing them to quickly adapt their marketing strategies in response to market changes or customer feedback (Kraus et al., 2012). This flexibility enables them to implement creative and experimental marketing tactics without the rigid structures that larger corporations often face. For food SMEs, this agility can translate into innovative marketing tactics such as pop-up events, collaborations with other local brands, or limited-time offerings that attract customer interest and encourage engagement (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). These strategies are essential for food SMEs operating in dynamic markets, where differentiation and brand authenticity are key to attracting and retaining customers. In sum, the marketing strategies of SMEs leverage their inherent advantages in personalization, adaptability, and community engagement, offering unique strengths in competitive markets.

## **Creative Marketing**

Creative marketing is defined as the use of innovative, often non-traditional marketing strategies to build brand awareness, engage customers, and foster brand loyalty (Wong & Merrilees, 2015). Unlike traditional marketing, creative marketing involves more flexibility, adaptability, and experimentation, which allows businesses, especially SMEs, to differentiate themselves in crowded markets by creating memorable and impactful brand experiences (Sung & Choi, 2019). This approach leverages storytelling, emotional branding, and personalized engagement to connect with consumers on a deeper level, often at lower costs than conventional advertising. For food SMEs, where authenticity and customer connection are crucial, creative marketing enables businesses to showcase their unique stories, values, and cultural connections, enhancing their appeal to local and regional consumers (Lin & Chen, 2020).

Key components of creative marketing that are particularly relevant for food SMEs include experiential marketing, digital engagement, and community-oriented branding. Experiential marketing, which involves creating immersive experiences for customers, can be highly effective for food SMEs as it allows them to directly showcase the quality, taste, and cultural roots of their products through events or tasting sessions (Saksena & Vidyarthi, 2020). Digital engagement, another essential component, includes using social media and content marketing to foster continuous customer interaction and build an online community. Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook are particularly useful for food SMEs to visually present their offerings, reach a broad audience, and engage with customers through stories, feedback, and shared experiences (Dolan et al., 2019). Community-oriented branding, which involves collaboration with local partners or initiatives, helps food SMEs establish a trusted local presence and align their brand with community values and cultural identity, further strengthening customer loyalty (Taneja et al., 2021).

Creative marketing offers a way for food SMEs to stand out in competitive markets by emphasizing creativity, authenticity, and personal connections. By employing these strategies, SMEs can create strong brand identities that resonate emotionally with customers, leading to increased brand loyalty and advocacy. Furthermore, creative marketing strategies are flexible and adaptable, allowing SMEs to quickly respond to market changes or consumer feedback, which is essential for growth and sustainability in a dynamic food market (Vashisht et al., 2021).

## **Brand Visibility and Customer Loyalty**

Brand visibility is crucial for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), especially in the food sector, as it allows them to stand out and capture the attention of potential customers in crowded markets. Increased brand visibility helps create familiarity and trust among customers, which is essential for SMEs that may lack the extensive advertising budgets of larger companies (Amin et al., 2020). Visibility can be achieved through various channels, including social media, local partnerships, and

community events, which allow SMEs to establish a stronger presence and connect directly with target audiences (Cheung & To, 2020). For food SMEs, in particular, brand visibility can directly impact customer acquisition by highlighting product quality, cultural authenticity, and unique brand values, which are significant purchase drivers in local markets (Wijaya et al., 2021).

Customer loyalty, on the other hand, is a valuable asset for SMEs seeking to maintain their market share and achieve sustained growth. Loyal customers not only contribute to repeat sales but also act as advocates, promoting the brand through word-of-mouth and social media, thereby enhancing the brand's reach and reputation at minimal cost (Ladhari et al., 2020). Developing customer loyalty requires consistent brand engagement and a focus on customer satisfaction, often achieved through personalized experiences, excellent customer service, and community-based marketing strategies. This is particularly important for SMEs in the food industry, where brand loyalty is often built on personal interactions and positive customer experiences (Alam & Noor, 2021).

Together, brand visibility and customer loyalty provide a competitive edge for food SMEs by enabling them to attract new customers and retain existing ones. In highly competitive markets, customer loyalty becomes a strategic advantage that can help SMEs withstand fluctuations in demand and economic pressures (Lin & Lekhawipat, 2019). Increasing visibility through creative marketing efforts, coupled with initiatives that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, positions SMEs for long-term success by building a stable customer base that is less susceptible to competitor influence. This approach helps create a brand community around the SME's offerings, further strengthening customer loyalty and, ultimately, market share (Alqahtani et al., 2021).

### **Marketing Strategies in Competitive Markets**

In competitive markets, several key factors influence the success of marketing strategies for SMEs, particularly those in the food industry. First, market orientation, which involves understanding and responding to customer needs, is essential for SMEs seeking to build a strong competitive advantage (Hinson et al., 2020). By actively gathering market insights and focusing on customer-centric approaches, SMEs can better tailor their offerings to meet consumer expectations, thus enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, innovation in product and service offerings is critical, allowing food SMEs to differentiate themselves in saturated markets through unique flavors, packaging, or personalized services (Anderson & Eshima, 2013). This need for continuous innovation is heightened in competitive environments where customer preferences rapidly shift, and staying relevant requires constant adaptation.

Effective marketing practices among successful food SMEs often include the use of digital marketing and local partnerships to strengthen brand visibility and foster community engagement. Digital marketing, particularly through social media

platforms, enables SMEs to engage with a broader audience while keeping marketing costs manageable, which is crucial given their typically limited resources (Chatzithomas et al., 2021). By leveraging social media for storytelling, customer interaction, and product promotion, SMEs can create a loyal customer base that drives organic brand advocacy. Local partnerships and collaborations also play a significant role, as they allow SMEs to tap into existing networks and enhance their reach within the community (Berthon et al., 2012). For example, partnering with local suppliers, markets, or events can amplify brand presence and foster trust among customers who value locally sourced products.

Overall, a combination of market orientation, continuous innovation, digital engagement, and local partnerships constitutes an effective marketing approach for food SMEs in competitive markets. These practices allow SMEs to build a distinct brand identity and maintain a strong competitive position even in challenging environments (Zhou et al., 2020). For SMEs in the food industry, where authenticity and customer loyalty are particularly valuable, these strategies help reinforce customer relationships and sustain business growth amidst intense competition.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of food SME practitioners regarding creative marketing strategies. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for this research, as they allow for an exploration of the nuanced and contextualized insights of SME owners and managers, capturing the complexities of their marketing approaches in a highly competitive environment. Data collection involves conducting in-depth interviews with these stakeholders to gather firsthand accounts of their marketing practices and strategies. Additionally, direct observation of their marketing activities, such as promotions, events, or customer interactions, provides context and enhances the richness of the data. To further triangulate the findings, relevant documents—including social media posts, website content, and promotional materials—are analyzed to understand how these SMEs project brand visibility and foster customer loyalty. The data analysis follows a qualitative coding and thematic analysis framework, organizing the findings into core themes related to marketing strategies, brand visibility, and customer loyalty. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study employs data triangulation, comparing insights across multiple sources and methods, and implements steps to uphold both internal and external validity, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the real experiences of food SMEs and can be informative for broader applications.

### **4. Result and Discussion**

#### **Creative Marketing Strategies Employed by Food SMEs**

Food SMEs employ various creative marketing strategies to enhance brand image and customer engagement, with local collaborations, storytelling, and social media

marketing emerging as the most impactful. Local collaborations involve partnering with other businesses, farmers, or suppliers in the community, which not only supports local economies but also builds a network of brand advocates (Chatterjee et al., 2021). By sourcing local ingredients or collaborating with local chefs for special events, SMEs create authentic brand experiences that resonate with consumers' preference for local, sustainable products. According to an interviewed owner of a bakery SME in East Java, "We source ingredients from local farms, which allows us to promote the freshness of our products and support nearby communities, which our customers appreciate." This approach boosts the SME's brand image as an ethical, community-focused business, which fosters greater customer loyalty.

Storytelling is another effective strategy used by food SMEs to build brand identity and engage customers on a personal level. Through storytelling, SMEs share the history, values, and unique aspects of their products and business journey, creating a narrative that customers can connect with emotionally (Rhee & Park, 2020). For example, a family-owned SME in East Java uses its heritage and traditional recipes as central themes in its marketing, sharing stories about how recipes have been passed down through generations. An interview with the manager revealed, "Customers love hearing about the story behind our products. It makes them feel like they are part of our journey." This storytelling approach not only enhances brand loyalty but also increases the perceived value of the products, as customers feel they are buying more than just food—they are supporting a legacy. Studies show that storytelling in marketing strengthens brand identity and enables SMEs to differentiate themselves effectively in competitive markets (Odoom & Mensah, 2021).

Social media marketing is another essential tool for food SMEs, enabling them to reach broader audiences and actively engage with customers. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook are ideal for showcasing visually appealing food products, customer testimonials, and behind-the-scenes content, which can generate high levels of customer engagement (Liu et al., 2020). SMEs can also use social media to run contests, share user-generated content, and interact with customers directly, fostering a sense of community around the brand. An East Java SME specializing in traditional snacks shared that their Instagram presence has "allowed us to reach younger audiences who enjoy sharing photos of their food experiences, which in turn brings more customers to our shop." Social media strategies not only boost brand visibility but also create an interactive channel where customers can provide feedback, enhancing the SME's ability to adapt to customer preferences. Research confirms that social media marketing contributes significantly to SMEs' brand visibility and customer loyalty by allowing direct, consistent communication with the audience (Hajli et al., 2021).

### **The Role of Brand Visibility in Attracting New Customers**

Creative marketing strategies have become essential for enhancing brand visibility among SMEs, especially in the highly competitive food industry. By using creative approaches such as social media engagement, storytelling, and collaborations, SMEs can make their brands more visible and appealing to potential customers. These



strategies allow food SMEs to reach and engage with a broader audience, including younger consumers who actively seek unique, authentic food experiences (Ali et al., 2020). For example, an SME owner in East Java shared in an interview that their Instagram campaign featuring locally sourced ingredients not only boosted online engagement but also attracted new customers interested in sustainable food. "We noticed more people coming in because they liked that we used fresh, local ingredients and showed this process online. It helps people see who we are and why we're different," they explained. This alignment of brand visibility with values relevant to the target audience is crucial, as it creates a strong initial appeal that draws customers to the brand (Bresciani & Eppler, 2021).

However, maintaining high visibility in a crowded market presents significant challenges. One major issue for food SMEs is the constant need to generate fresh and engaging content to remain relevant and top-of-mind with consumers (Pradhan et al., 2021). As competitors also engage in creative marketing, SMEs must continuously innovate to differentiate themselves. Additionally, limited resources and time constraints make it challenging for SMEs to sustain visibility over the long term. For instance, a bakery manager in East Java mentioned, "Social media is great for visibility, but keeping up with the content is tough. Customers expect updates regularly, and it's hard to keep up when we have a small team." This situation highlights the resource limitations that SMEs face, which can restrict their ability to maintain a consistent, visible presence compared to larger companies with dedicated marketing teams.

Despite these challenges, some food SMEs have managed to overcome visibility issues by leveraging customer loyalty and user-generated content. Loyal customers who share their experiences online effectively expand the SME's reach by introducing the brand to their personal networks. Studies show that such organic visibility, facilitated by customer advocacy, can be highly beneficial for SMEs as it boosts credibility and brand trust (Gomez et al., 2020). According to the same bakery manager, "We encourage our customers to tag us in their posts, and it's been great for visibility. When people see others enjoying our products, it makes them curious to try it for themselves." This form of marketing, although requiring less ongoing effort from the SME itself, reinforces brand visibility and brings in new customers through word-of-mouth. Creative strategies that empower customers to promote the brand are thus invaluable in helping food SMEs maintain visibility in a highly competitive landscape.

### **Building Customer Loyalty Through Personal and Creative Approaches**

Food SMEs leverage personal and creative strategies to build and sustain customer loyalty, which is essential for long-term success. One of the primary approaches involves personalized customer interactions and a focus on crafting unique customer experiences. By treating each customer interaction as an opportunity to build a relationship, SMEs create a sense of belonging and exclusivity, which fosters loyalty (Harrigan et al., 2020). An owner of a small café in East Java highlighted this approach in an interview, stating, "We make an effort to remember our regulars, their favorite

orders, and small details about their lives. It shows them that we value them personally, which keeps them coming back.” This strategy aligns with studies showing that personal connections between businesses and customers play a significant role in generating repeat visits and advocacy, as customers feel a unique bond with the brand (Al-Abdallah et al., 2021).

Direct engagement and personalization are particularly effective in reinforcing loyalty in the food industry, where product quality alone is often not enough to retain customers. Creative strategies, such as offering loyalty programs with personalized rewards, can enhance customer retention by making patrons feel valued. Food SMEs are increasingly using loyalty programs that offer tailored incentives based on individual preferences, such as discounts on favorite menu items or exclusive previews of new products (Kumar & Shah, 2020). These incentives not only encourage repeat visits but also make customers feel appreciated and recognized. According to a marketing manager of a traditional snack business in East Java, "Our loyalty program allows us to offer rewards based on what each customer likes best. It's a small gesture, but it makes a big difference in showing our customers that we see them as individuals, not just transactions."

Creative, personalized customer interactions also extend to social media platforms, where food SMEs engage directly with their customers, addressing feedback and sharing relatable content. By responding to customer comments, sharing user-generated content, and even hosting interactive events like virtual cooking classes or product-making sessions, SMEs create a community-oriented brand experience that fosters loyalty (Zhu et al., 2021). An East Java bakery owner shared, "We love it when our customers share their experiences with our products online, and we make a point to comment and thank them. It's part of how we stay connected and show our appreciation." This approach highlights the significant role of social media in supporting loyalty through ongoing engagement. Research confirms that direct interactions with customers on social media can improve customer satisfaction and brand loyalty by creating a sense of personal connection and responsiveness (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016).

### **Supporting and Hindering Factors in the Success of Creative Marketing**

The success of creative marketing strategies for food SMEs is influenced by several internal factors, including available resources, staff creativity, and adaptability. Internal resources, such as marketing budgets, technology, and skilled personnel, are critical for implementing creative campaigns. For SMEs, limited budgets can be a challenge, but it also drives creativity, as these businesses often innovate with lower-cost methods to engage customers effectively (Song & Lee, 2021). An SME owner in East Java noted, "Our budget is limited, so we try to maximize impact with small, unique campaigns that highlight our products' uniqueness and our local roots." Creativity among team members is another internal factor that contributes to effective campaigns, as innovative ideas help SMEs distinguish themselves in competitive markets (Abosag & Lee, 2020). However, finding and retaining creative talent can be challenging for SMEs, which often cannot offer the same benefits as larger companies.

Externally, market trends, customer expectations, and competition levels significantly affect the success of creative marketing efforts. For instance, trends toward sustainable and locally sourced food products create opportunities for SMEs to highlight these attributes in their marketing, which resonates well with modern consumers (Hwang & Griffiths, 2021). SMEs can also leverage local collaborations and community partnerships to enhance their market presence and align with these trends. However, rapid shifts in consumer preferences can pose a challenge, as SMEs must constantly adapt to stay relevant. Competition from both large corporations and other small businesses is a considerable external factor, as these rivals often employ similar creative marketing strategies to attract the same customer base. In a crowded market, standing out requires continuous innovation and quick responses to changing trends, which can strain an SME's limited resources.

Common challenges for food SMEs in executing creative marketing include budget constraints, time limitations, and the fast pace of digital marketing trends. For example, while social media marketing is cost-effective, it demands regular content creation and customer engagement, which may be difficult for SMEs with small teams (Grewal et al., 2021). To address these issues, some SMEs rely on user-generated content, customer advocacy, and partnerships to increase brand visibility without extensive marketing expenses. An East Java snack company manager shared, "We encourage our customers to post reviews and share their experiences online. This not only brings in new customers but also reduces our workload." This approach supports SME marketing efforts by leveraging customer loyalty to enhance reach organically. Overall, while both internal and external factors can constrain creative marketing initiatives, innovative problem-solving and leveraging community connections provide SMEs with effective solutions to maintain and grow their market presence.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study offers practical implications for food SMEs by providing targeted recommendations for effective creative marketing strategies, specifically designed to enhance brand visibility and foster customer loyalty in competitive markets. Key strategies include leveraging storytelling, local collaborations, and digital engagement to create authentic connections with customers. To increase brand visibility, SMEs should focus on establishing a unique brand identity that highlights locally-sourced ingredients and community ties, appealing to customers' growing interest in sustainability and regional authenticity. To boost customer loyalty, the adoption of personalized loyalty programs and consistent social media engagement are recommended. These steps are valuable not only for building lasting customer relationships but also for creating organic brand advocates who further enhance visibility through word-of-mouth.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of creative marketing by expanding our understanding of how SMEs in emerging markets can use creative approaches to cultivate brand loyalty and compete effectively. This study highlights the importance

of customer-centric, adaptable marketing strategies that can be scaled according to SMEs' resources. It also suggests avenues for future research, including quantitative analysis of creative marketing impacts and cross-cultural studies to explore how creative strategies may vary in different markets. In conclusion, the findings underscore the critical role of marketing innovation for the sustainability and competitive strength of food SMEs, as creative approaches are pivotal not only for growth but also for building resilient, customer-focused brands that thrive in dynamic market environments.

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