
Driving Economic Competitiveness through Innovation and Differentiation Strategies

Khoirunnisa Lailaturrahmah MD ¹, R Deni Muhammad Danial ²,
Tetty Sufianty Zafar ³

Abstract:

This study investigates the influence of innovation capability on competitive advantage, with differentiation strategy as a mediating variable, among Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) engaged in the early morning snack market at Toserba Selamat, Sukabumi City. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected from 270 MSME respondents using a structured questionnaire. The analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the assistance of AMOS software. The findings reveal that innovation capability has a significant positive effect on both differentiation strategy and competitive advantage. Additionally, differentiation strategy plays a mediating role in strengthening the impact of innovation capability on competitive advantage. These results highlight the importance of fostering innovation among MSMEs, not only as a means of adapting to dynamic market conditions but also as a strategic foundation for creating distinctive offerings that enhance market competitiveness. The study provides practical implications for MSME development through innovation-driven differentiation strategies.

Keywords: Innovation Capability, Differentiation Strategy, Competitive Advantage, MSMEs

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1. Introduction

In the era of globalization and digital disruption, Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) play a pivotal role in supporting national economic resilience. In Indonesia, MSMEs contribute more than 60% to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and absorb a large share of the labor force (Juwita & Mutawali, 2022). Despite their vital role, MSMEs face increasing pressure from both domestic and

¹Business Administration Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sukabumi, Indonesia.

Khoirunnisalmd004@ummi.ac.id

²Business Administration Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sukabumi, Indonesia.

rdmdanial043@ummi.ac.id

³Business Administration Program, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sukabumi, Indonesia.

tetty@ummi.ac.id

global competition. To survive and grow in this dynamic environment, it is essential for MSMEs to continuously strengthen their competitive advantage.

One of the key enablers of sustained competitive advantage is innovation. Innovation capability empowers MSMEs to generate added value in their products and services, adapt to market changes, and enhance customer loyalty (Sain, 2021). The ability to innovate is not only a technical competency but also a strategic resource that determines long-term business viability. Purwanto (2023) emphasized that innovation capability, especially when managed effectively, has a significant influence on various innovation types and business performance among export-oriented SMEs.

However, innovation alone may not suffice if it is not supported by a relevant and well-executed business strategy. Among various strategic options, differentiation stands out as an approach that allows firms to create uniqueness in their offerings, making them less substitutable and more attractive to niche markets (Zahara et al., 2020). A successful differentiation strategy enhances brand identity, enables premium pricing, and fosters customer loyalty (Mariyana, 2017). Particularly in the local culinary sector, combining innovation with differentiation presents a promising path for building sustainable advantage.

Despite growing interest in MSME development, there is a noticeable lack of empirical studies exploring the simultaneous effects of innovation capability and differentiation strategy on competitive advantage in local culinary enterprises. Previous studies have often examined these variables in isolation, without exploring their integrative impact or possible mediating relationships (Munawaroh et al., 2024). This research attempts to address this gap by analyzing how innovation capability can directly or indirectly (through differentiation strategy) influence competitive advantage among local food MSMEs.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on a specific group of MSMEs known as *Jajanan Subuh* (early morning snack vendors) located at Toserba Selamat in Sukabumi City. These MSMEs represent a unique segment that blends traditional culinary heritage with emerging trends in packaging, presentation, and customer engagement. Although this group exhibits innovation in various forms, it still struggles to solidify its market position and brand distinctiveness. This context offers fertile ground for investigating the mechanisms linking innovation, strategy, and performance.

This study is also urgent due to the growing concerns regarding the sustainability of local MSMEs amid shifting consumer preferences and heightened market saturation. MSMEs that fail to differentiate and innovate risk losing their customer base and becoming obsolete. As pointed out by Supriyanto et al. (2021), competitive advantage is no longer solely reliant on pricing but must be supported by strategic leadership, innovation, and adaptability. Hence, understanding the dynamics between these strategic elements becomes increasingly crucial.

Given the above considerations, the primary objective of this research is to examine the extent to which innovation capability influences competitive advantage directly and indirectly through differentiation strategy as a mediating variable. By focusing on the case of Jajanan Subuh MSMEs at Toserba Selamat, this study aims to offer context-specific insights that are both theoretically grounded and practically applicable. The findings are expected to enrich business strategy literature and provide concrete recommendations for MSME practitioners and policymakers.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on MSME empowerment by emphasizing innovation-based strategies in traditional sectors. As noted by Murisa et al. (2024) and Manikotomo (2017), factors such as management capability, market understanding, and strategic differentiation must be developed in tandem to enhance performance and sustainability. By empirically investigating these relationships in a real-world setting, the research offers a valuable model for other MSMEs facing similar challenges.

2. Theoretical Background

Strategic Management

Strategic management is the process of formulating, implementing, and evaluating decisions that enable an organization to achieve its long-term goals. It is a systematic planning approach designed to create sustainable impact and long-term competitiveness, especially within dynamic and uncertain business environments. Otache (2024) emphasizes the significance of strategic management in developing innovative strategies that sustain competitive advantage for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), particularly in volatile markets. In the context of MSMEs, the ability to design adaptive and unique strategies is essential to differentiate themselves from competitors and secure a superior market position.

Innovation Capability

Innovation capability refers to an organization's capacity to generate, adapt, and apply new ideas in products, processes, and business models to enhance performance. According to Purwanto (2023), innovation capability includes three key dimensions: strategic skills, process capability, and networking skills. These dimensions determine how effectively a firm can translate innovative ideas into practical business outcomes. Latifah et al. (2021) found that innovation positively influences MSME performance when supported by strategic alignment and appropriate information systems. Moreover, Fabrizio et al. (2022) identified innovation as a dynamic capability that fosters adaptability and long-term competitiveness in SMEs.

Ramayah et al. (2024) further argue that digital innovation and technological capabilities are now integral to the innovation landscape in MSMEs, enabling faster responses to market shifts and enhancing customer experience. In the Indonesian MSME context, innovation capability is crucial not only for product development but also for navigating operational constraints, regulatory shifts, and consumer demand volatility.

Differentiation Strategy

Differentiation strategy is a business approach focused on creating unique value in products, services, or brand image, making a firm stand out from its competitors. Zahara et al. (2020) explain that differentiation can be achieved through distinctive features in product design, personnel, and brand image. This strategy enables MSMEs to avoid direct price competition by delivering unique value propositions that are hard to replicate.

Sivaslioglu et al. (2021) found that firms with strong innovation capabilities tend to adopt differentiation strategies more effectively, resulting in better market performance. Differentiation, therefore, serves as a strategic pathway for MSMEs to translate their innovation capacity into recognizable market advantages. Kustina et al. (2024) also highlight that innovation-driven differentiation improves growth prospects and customer loyalty, particularly in micro and small enterprises seeking to develop competitive edges in traditional sectors.

Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage refers to a firm's ability to maintain superior market performance by creating value that is difficult for competitors to imitate. Fabrizio et al. (2022) categorize competitive advantage into three core dimensions: quality, flexibility, and differentiation. This perspective is reinforced by Gonzalez-Varona et al. (2024), who argue that firms gain sustainable advantage when they align organizational competencies with innovation and strategic responsiveness.

In MSMEs, competitive advantage often extends beyond product quality to include timely service delivery, customer relationship management, and adaptability to customer needs. Yawson (2021) emphasizes the importance of an ecosystem-based approach to innovation and strategic resource deployment as key to achieving competitive sustainability in small enterprises. Similarly, Gambal et al. (2022) suggest that strategic outsourcing and innovation can synergize to reinforce competitive positioning.

Research Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: *Innovation capability has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.*

H2: *Innovation capability has a positive and significant effect on differentiation strategy.*

H3: *Differentiation strategy has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.*

H4: *Differentiation strategy mediates the effect of innovation capability on competitive advantage.*

This research framework is intended to explore how MSMEs, particularly in the local culinary sector, can leverage innovation to build differentiation and ultimately gain a competitive edge. By addressing the mediating role of differentiation, the study fills a

gap in current empirical research and contributes to both theoretical advancement and practical strategy development for MSMEs in emerging markets.

3. Methodology

The method employed in this study is a quantitative approach using a causal research design to examine the relationships between innovation capability, differentiation strategy, and competitive advantage. This approach is chosen to identify cause-and-effect relationships among variables and to test the proposed hypotheses within a real-world MSME context. The target population of the research consists of MSMEs engaged in *Jajanan Subuh* (early morning snack businesses) operating at Toserba Selamat, Sukabumi—an area known for its local culinary entrepreneurs and traditional food vendors.

To obtain relevant data, the study applies purposive sampling—a non-probability sampling technique where respondents are selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. A total of 270 respondents were selected, representing business owners or operators who have been active in the *Jajanan Subuh* sector for at least one year. Data analysis is conducted using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the aid of AMOS software, which allows for comprehensive testing of both direct and indirect relationships between variables and ensures the validity and reliability of the measurement and structural models.

4. Empirical Findings/Result

CFA Test for Exogenous and Endogenous Constructs

This study analyzes the effect of innovation capability on competitive advantage with differentiation strategy as a mediating variable. Data processing was carried out using the second-order **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** approach to assess the relationships among dimensions, indicators, and constructs within the structural model. Prior to model testing, validity and reliability tests were conducted using factor loading, AVE, CR, and Cronbach's Alpha. The results showed that all indicators were valid (loading factor > 0.50) and constructs were reliable (CR > 0.70), in accordance with the standards outlined by Priambodo & Rozza (2025) and Munawaroh et al. (2024).

Table 1. CFA Test for Exogenous and Endogenous Constructs

	Loading Factor (SLF)	SLF ²	Measurement Error	CR	AVE
X1	0.569	0.324	0.676	0.805	0.068
X2	0.436	0.190	0.810		
X3	0.518	0.268	0.732		
X4	0.597	0.356	0.644		
X5	0.579	0.335	0.665		
X6	0.698	0.487	0.513		
X7	0.602	0.362	0.638		
X8	0.521	0.271	0.729		

X9	0.524	0.275	0.725
Sum	5.044		
M1–M9		0.806	0.682
Y1–Y9		0.768	0.727

The CFA test results show that all indicators have standardized loading factor values above 0.50, indicating good convergent validity. No indicators were eliminated. In addition, the Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs exceeded 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. Thus, all constructs were deemed valid and reliable for further structural model analysis.

Normality Test

Using the Maximum Likelihood estimation method, the multivariate normality assumption was tested through kurtosis values. If the critical ratio (c.r.) falls within ± 2.58 , the data can be considered normally distributed. AMOS output indicated that while the data were univariately normal, multivariate normality was not achieved due to kurtosis exceeding the threshold. However, according to Manikotomo (2017), this violation is tolerable for large samples with no extreme outliers and acceptable model fit. Therefore, the analysis could proceed by applying **bootstrap estimation** to address non-normality.

Outlier Test

Outliers were assessed using **Mahalanobis Distance (D²)**, where data are considered valid if $P^2 \geq 0.001$. The highest Mahalanobis value observed was 55.466, which falls within the maximum threshold. Hence, no outliers were detected, and the data were deemed appropriate for further analysis.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Test

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS was conducted to evaluate the direct and indirect relationships among latent variables, including the mediating effect of differentiation strategy. The modified full model is presented below:

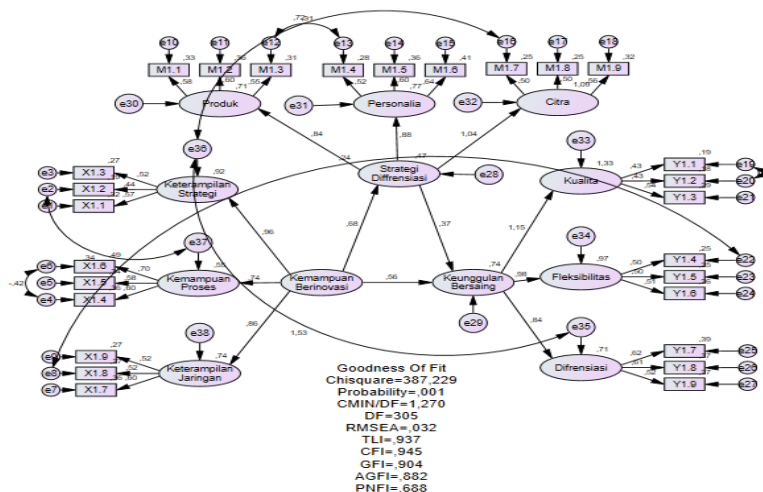


Figure 1. Modified Full Structural Model

Following model modification, the overall model fit improved. Although the p-value remained below the ideal threshold, the majority of fit indices were acceptable, validating the model for hypothesis testing and analysis of structural and mediating relationships.

Goodness of Fit Test

The Goodness of Fit test evaluates the model’s compatibility with empirical data. If most fit indices meet the required criteria, the model is deemed acceptable.

Table 2. Goodness of Fit Test

Fit Index	Cut-off Value	Result	Interpretation
Chi-Square	DF: 309	387.229	Good Fit
Probability	≥ 0.05	0.001	Marginal Fit
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.032	Good Fit
CMIN/DF	≤ 2.00	1.270	Good Fit
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.937	Good Fit
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.945	Good Fit
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.904	Good Fit
AGFI	≥ 0.90	0.882	Marginal Fit
PNFI	≥ 0.50	0.688	Good Fit

Based on the table above and following Murisa et al. (2024), who emphasize the principle of parsimony in model evaluation, the model is accepted as 7 out of 9 indices met the required criteria. Thus, the model is considered a good fit for further analysis.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis testing determines whether there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis (H₀). Following Juwita & Mutawali (2022), hypotheses are accepted if p-values < 0.05.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Innovation Capability → Competitive Advantage	0.573	0.149	3.853	0.000
Differentiation Strategy → Competitive Advantage	0.406	0.130	3.129	0.002

H1: Innovation Capability has a significant positive effect on Competitive Advantage. Higher levels of innovation among MSMEs correlate with stronger market competitiveness, reinforcing the idea that innovation creates uniqueness and value.

H2: Differentiation Strategy has a significant positive effect on Competitive Advantage. MSMEs that apply differentiation in product design, services, and brand image are more likely to capture customer attention and build loyalty.

H3: Differentiation Strategy significantly mediates the relationship between Innovation Capability and Competitive Advantage. This means that innovation enhances competitive advantage through well-executed differentiation strategies.

The mediation effect was analyzed to determine the role of Differentiation Strategy as an intervening variable.

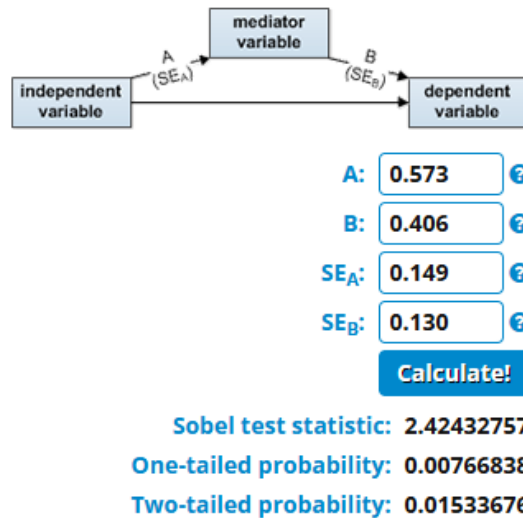


Figure 2. Sobel Test Calculation Output

The results indicate a significant and **partial mediation** effect. This is evident as the direct path between Innovation Capability and Competitive Advantage remains significant even with the presence of the mediator. Thus, Differentiation Strategy is confirmed as a significant mediator in the proposed model.

5. Discussion

The results of this study indicate that innovation capability has a significant positive effect on competitive advantage, supporting the view that the ability to innovate is a critical driver for MSMEs seeking sustainable market positioning. This finding aligns with Otache (2024), who emphasized that innovation capability enhances strategic flexibility and enables SMEs to navigate competitive pressures effectively. Similarly, Latifah et al. (2021) found that innovation, when supported by organizational systems, contributes substantially to improved MSME performance. Innovation not only enables firms to adapt to changes but also fosters the development of new value propositions that strengthen market competitiveness (Purwanto, 2023; Gonzalez-Varona et al., 2024). Furthermore, Abbasi et al. (2021) reinforced the notion that cognitive and behavioral innovation within organizations directly influences stakeholder commitment and long-term strategic outcomes.

The study also confirms that differentiation strategy positively influences competitive advantage, highlighting the role of uniqueness in product, service, or brand perception as a mechanism to gain customer preference. This supports the findings of Zahara et al. (2020), who argued that differentiation enables SMEs to escape direct price competition by offering distinct and meaningful value to consumers. Mariyana (2017) also demonstrated that differentiation significantly affects customer loyalty, especially when implemented through consistent brand messaging and unique customer experiences. The importance of differentiation is further echoed by Sivaslioğlu et al. (2021), who emphasized that firms with well-executed differentiation strategies are better positioned to achieve superior market performance. In the MSME context, this strategy allows businesses to target niche markets and build emotional connections with customers, thereby increasing retention and brand strength.

Most notably, the study demonstrates that differentiation strategy serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between innovation capability and competitive advantage. This suggests that innovation alone is not sufficient; it must be strategically translated into tangible differentiation that resonates with the market. These findings are in line with Gambal et al. (2022), who noted that innovation, when integrated with strategic initiatives like differentiation, can maximize organizational value and competitive positioning. Fabrizio et al. (2022) also stressed the importance of combining dynamic capabilities with strategic execution to enhance competitive advantage. Furthermore, the role of mediation is particularly relevant in MSMEs, where resource constraints often require innovation to be highly targeted and market-oriented (Ramayah et al., 2024; Kustina et al., 2024). By effectively channeling innovation into differentiation, MSMEs can achieve not only operational improvement but also a strong, defensible market identity.

These findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of strategic management by reaffirming the dynamic link between internal capabilities and market-based outcomes. They also align with the perspective of Yawson (2021), who introduced the concept of innovation ecosystems as a framework for firms to leverage both internal and external capabilities to sustain competitive performance. Additionally, from a practical standpoint, the study confirms the importance of aligning innovation processes with customer expectations, as previously discussed by Juwita & Mutawali (2022) and Supriyanto et al. (2021), especially in sectors like culinary MSMEs where differentiation is often experiential rather than technological. Overall, the empirical results highlight the necessity for MSMEs to not only invest in innovation but also to strategically integrate it into their brand identity and market offerings to sustain competitive advantage.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the effect of innovation capability on competitive advantage with differentiation strategy as a mediating variable, using MSMEs in the local culinary sector—specifically *Jajanan Subuh* vendors at Toserba Selamat Sukabumi—as the

research context. The findings confirm that innovation capability plays a significant role in enhancing competitive advantage, both directly and indirectly through differentiation strategy. These results emphasize the importance of not only developing internal innovative capabilities but also strategically translating them into unique offerings that distinguish MSMEs from their competitors.

The research contributes to the strategic management literature by validating the mediating role of differentiation strategy, reinforcing the theoretical argument that competitive advantage arises not only from the ability to innovate but also from the firm's capacity to apply that innovation in market-relevant ways. From a practical perspective, the findings provide actionable insights for MSME owners and policymakers: innovation must be followed by strategic differentiation—whether in product design, service delivery, or brand positioning—to achieve long-term market success.

Future research can build on this study by applying a longitudinal design to assess how innovation and differentiation strategies evolve over time and how they respond to changing consumer behaviors and market disruptions. Moreover, expanding the study across multiple sectors and regions would enhance the generalizability of the findings and offer broader insights into the dynamics of competitive advantage in diverse MSME contexts.

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