
BUILDING CUSTOMER LOYALTY THROUGH PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION AND COMPETITOR ANALYSIS: EVIDENCE FROM A NATURAL COSMETICS MSME

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Abstract

The natural cosmetics industry is experiencing intensified competition as consumer awareness of product safety and environmental sustainability increases, particularly affecting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). This study examines how PT Karya Iwin Insani, an MSME operating in the natural cosmetics sector, builds customer loyalty through product differentiation informed by competitor analysis. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, documentation, and literature review, and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. The findings show that customer loyalty is constructed primarily through consistent product quality, safety assurance, and environmentally oriented differentiation rather than through price competition or formal loyalty programs. Competitor analysis functions as a strategic mechanism that guides product innovation, value-based promotion, and market positioning. The study contributes theoretically by integrating customer loyalty theory with differentiation and competitor analysis within the context of sustainable marketing. In practice, the findings offer strategic insights for MSMEs in the natural cosmetics industry on how to develop a sustainable competitive advantage through quality-based differentiation and value alignment. This study enriches the literature on sustainable marketing strategy by demonstrating how competitor analysis and customer loyalty interact in MSME-driven natural product markets.

Keywords: *Customer Loyalty, Competitor Analysis, Product Differentiation, Natural Cosmetics, MSMEs, Sustainable Marketing Strategy*

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive business environment, companies are no longer oriented solely toward short-term transactions but toward building long-term relationships with customers (Monferrer et al., 2019). Customer loyalty has become a strategic asset that determines business sustainability, particularly in industries characterized by high competition and product similarity (Adriana & Rusyda, 2024). Loyal customers not only contribute to stable revenue but also strengthen a company's competitive position by reducing sensitivity to competitors' offerings (Mutmainnah, 2017).

This condition is particularly evident in the natural cosmetics industry, where rising consumer awareness of product safety, environmental sustainability, and ethical production has

intensified market competition (Tengli & Srinivasan, 2022). Companies are required to continuously innovate and offer value beyond basic product functionality, including quality consistency, safety assurance, and alignment with environmental values. In such a context, customer loyalty reflects a company's ability to consistently deliver value that meets both functional and emotional consumer expectations (Moosa & Kashiramka, 2023).

Alongside customer loyalty, competitor analysis plays a crucial role in formulating effective marketing strategies (Nawawi, 2022). Understanding competitors' strengths, weaknesses, product attributes, and promotional approaches enables firms to develop differentiation strategies aligned with market needs. For micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), competitor analysis is critical because limited resources require strategic focus rather than price-based competition (Setiawan, 2023).

However, existing studies on customer loyalty predominantly emphasize internal factors such as satisfaction, service quality, and trust, while paying limited attention to the integration of external competitive dynamics. Research that explicitly examines how competitor analysis informs product differentiation strategies to strengthen customer loyalty, especially within MSMEs in the natural cosmetics sector, remains scarce (Primasari & Dwita, 2025). This gap indicates a lack of comprehensive understanding of how internal loyalty-building efforts and external competitive analysis interact to create sustainable competitive advantage (Satti et al., 2020).

PT Karya Iwin Insani, a natural cosmetics company in West Lombok, operates in an intensely competitive industry. The uniqueness of this company lies in its use of local raw materials and focus on environmental preservation, including the development of coral reef-friendly products. However, various challenges remain, including an increasing number of competitors, rapid product innovation, and the need to maintain customer loyalty amid numerous similar products. This is an important reason to examine how customer loyalty training strategies are implemented and to what extent competitor analysis forms the basis for the company's decision-making (Mntande et al., 2023).

PT Karya Iwin Insani, a natural cosmetics company based in West Lombok, operates in a highly competitive market characterized by similar environmental claims and rapid product innovation. The company distinguishes itself through the use of local natural ingredients and environmentally oriented product development, including reef-safe cosmetics. Despite these strengths, the company faces ongoing challenges, including intensifying competition and the need to maintain customer loyalty in a crowded market. This context makes PT Karya Iwin Insani a relevant case for examining the strategic integration of customer loyalty and competitor analysis.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how PT Karya Iwin Insani builds customer loyalty through product quality and service, and how competitor analysis is utilized to strengthen product differentiation strategies. This research also seeks to explain the relationship between customer loyalty and competitive strategy in the natural cosmetics industry. The contribution of this study lies in providing empirical insights into the integration of loyalty-building strategies and competitor analysis within MSMEs, thereby enriching marketing strategy literature and offering practical guidance for sustainable business development in the natural cosmetics sector.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach to explore in depth the strategies used by PT Karya Iwin Insani in building customer loyalty and strengthening competitiveness through product differentiation and competitor analysis (Fadli, 2021). The research site was purposively selected because the company operates in the natural cosmetics industry, which is characterized by intense competition and growing consumer concern for sustainability. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and expertise in customer relationship management, marketing strategy, and production processes. In total, six informants participated in this study, comprising one company director, two marketing staff members, one customer service staff member, and two production staff members. This number was considered adequate because data saturation was achieved, as evidenced by recurring themes and consistent explanations across interviews.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation review. Interviews were conducted to capture informants' perspectives on customer loyalty strategies, product differentiation, and responses to competitors. Observations were conducted to understand service practices, quality-control processes, and internal workflows related to customer satisfaction. Documentation, including company profiles, promotional materials, and internal reports, was analyzed to support and verify the empirical data. Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, comprising data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Data credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation and member checking, in which key findings were reconfirmed with selected informants to minimize misinterpretation.

This study acknowledges the researcher's positionality and potential subjectivity, as qualitative research inherently involves interpretive processes shaped by the researcher's academic background and prior assumptions. To reduce bias, analytical decisions were continuously

grounded in empirical data, supported by direct quotations, and accompanied by reflective notes throughout the research process. Ethical considerations were explicitly addressed by applying fundamental research ethics principles: all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participated voluntarily, and provided informed consent prior to interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding personal identifiers, and all data were used solely for academic purposes to ensure the integrity and ethical soundness of the study.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Product Quality in Improving Customer Loyalty

The interview results indicate that PT Karya Iwin Insani builds customer loyalty by emphasizing the quality and safety of its natural products. Informants reported that the company consistently uses local natural ingredients from Lombok and Sumbawa, including coconut oil, pounded rice, seaweed extract, and tropical fragrances. As one informant stated, "*PT KII always strives to use local natural ingredients from Lombok and Sumbawa, such as coconut oil, pounded rice, seaweed extract, and tropical fragrances like lemongrass and coconut.*" This finding indicates that product quality is not defined solely by cosmetic functionality, but also by sustainability considerations and raw material safety. Such an approach shapes a distinctive product identity. It differentiates the company from its competitors, reflecting a differentiation strategy in which competitive advantage is created through product uniqueness that is perceived as valuable by customers (Alaburo Abdulsalam et al., 2024).

In addition to emphasizing natural ingredients, the company also prioritizes product safety. Informants explained that "*Sunscreen products manufactured by PT Karya Iwin Insani have passed hypoallergenic testing and are considered safe for various skin types.*" This safety guarantee provides tangible evidence of product quality and strengthens customer trust. According to Kotler and Keller (2016), consistent product quality supported by safety certification increases customer satisfaction, which in turn drives loyalty. In this context, safety certification and testing serve not only as technical requirements, but also as strategic tools to strengthen consumer trust in the brand (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Customer loyalty is also supported by service responsiveness, particularly in handling customer complaints. When complaints arise, the company documents customer dissatisfaction and evaluates possible solutions internally. As stated by an informant, "*When there is a complaint, our team usually records the dissatisfaction felt with our product on a form, then looks for a solution to the problem.*" This practice demonstrates that post-purchase experience is treated as an integral component of

service quality. Emphasize that effective complaint handling contributes to customer satisfaction and increases the likelihood of repeat purchases (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Interestingly, the interview results show that PT Karya Iwin Insani has not implemented formal loyalty programs such as membership schemes or point systems. Instead, the company prioritizes building loyalty through consistent product quality and customer trust (Hanum, 2024). This condition reflects Oliver's (1999) concept of loyalty as a deep commitment that emerges from satisfaction and trust rather than short-term incentives. Communication with customers is conducted directly through open interaction, allowing consumers to provide feedback, criticism, and suggestions (Oliver, 1999). According to Griffin (2005), loyal customers not only engage in repeat purchases but also develop emotional attachment and positive attitudes toward the company, which can be strengthened through responsive communication (Griffin, 2005).

However, reliance on quality-based and trust-driven loyalty may also indicate that customer loyalty is concentrated among consumers who place high value on product safety and environmental sustainability. This suggests that while the strategy is effective in building strong relational loyalty, it may have limitations in attracting more price-sensitive segments. Overall, the findings show that customer loyalty at PT Karya Iwin Insani is built through the integration of product quality, safety assurance, responsive service, and clear differentiation, supporting theoretical perspectives that emphasize satisfaction, trust, and sustainable competitive advantage as core foundations of loyalty (Hortovanyi et al., 2024).

Competitor Analysis in Strengthening Marketing Strategy

The results indicate that PT Karya Iwin Insani operates in a highly competitive natural cosmetics market in which many competitors make similar claims about natural ingredients and environmental friendliness. Interview results show that the company is aware of this condition and actively conducts competitor analysis to understand market dynamics and determine strategic positioning (Anggraini et al., 2024). Informants stated that competitors are not perceived merely as threats but as references for identifying opportunities for differentiation. As expressed by one informant, "*We do not see competitors as something to imitate, but rather as a way to understand our position in the market and determine the advantages that need to be strengthened.*" This finding indicates that competitor analysis serves as a basis for strategic decision-making rather than as a reactive response to market pressure.

One of the main differentiation strategies identified is the development of environmentally friendly sunscreen products. Informants emphasized that these products are formulated to be safe for marine ecosystems. As stated by an informant, "*We use natural ingredients that also preserve the*

underwater environment. Our sunscreen products are coral-friendly, so our customers do not have to worry about coral bleaching when diving or snorkeling." In addition to environmental benefits, the products also offer functional advantages, as noted by another informant: "*Our sunscreen is water-resistant.*" These findings show that PT Karya Iwin Insani integrates environmental values with functional performance to create product differentiation. This strategy reflects Porter's (1985) differentiation concept, in which competitive advantage is achieved through unique and valuable product attributes that are difficult for competitors to replicate (Porter, 1985).

The findings further indicate that competitor analysis influences the company's promotional strategy. PT Karya Iwin Insani does not prioritize price-based competition; instead, promotional activities focus on educating consumers about product safety, ingredient composition, and environmental impact (Rust, 2020). One informant explained, "*If we compete on price, quality may be sacrificed, so we choose to focus on the uniqueness and safety of our products.*" This value-based promotion aligns with Kotler and Keller's (2016) view that emphasizing relevant product attributes can enhance perceived value and strengthen brand competitiveness. However, from a critical perspective, this approach may limit the company's appeal to more price-sensitive consumer segments, indicating that the effectiveness of the strategy is closely tied to consumers who prioritize sustainability and safety values (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that competitor analysis at PT Karya Iwin Insani serves as a strategic instrument for strengthening marketing strategy through differentiation rather than price competition (Yusepa et al., 2024). By combining competitor insights with environmental and functional product innovation, the company can maintain a competitive position while preserving product quality and brand values. This analysis highlights that competitor analysis, when applied strategically, can support sustainable competitive advantage in the natural cosmetics industry (Du et al., 2021).

The Relationship Between Customer Loyalty and Competitive Strategy

The interview results indicate that customer loyalty and competitive strategy at PT Karya Iwin Insani are interrelated and develop simultaneously. Informants emphasized that maintaining product and service quality is viewed as a strategic priority for sustaining long-term customer relationships (Teguh et al., 2025). As stated by one informant, "*PT Karya Iwin Insani, as a company engaged in cosmetics and contract manufacturing services, has a strong commitment to maintaining the quality of service to its customers.*" This commitment is reflected in consistent quality control, regulatory compliance, and responsive communication with consumers. These findings indicate that

customer loyalty is treated not merely as an outcome of marketing activities but as a strategic asset that supports the company's competitive position (Hendrayati et al., 2025).

From a strategic perspective, loyal customers contribute to competitiveness by reducing vulnerability to competitors' offerings. Interview data suggest that customers who trust the company's products tend to remain loyal despite numerous alternatives in the market. This condition aligns with Griffin's (2005) argument that loyal customers are more resistant to competitors' offerings and are more likely to make repeat purchases. In this context, customer loyalty functions as an internal stabilizing force that strengthens the company's market position amid competitive pressure (Griffin, 2005).

Conversely, the findings also show that competitive strategy reinforces customer loyalty through differentiation and value creation. PT Karya Iwin Insani consistently emphasizes the use of natural and, where possible, local raw materials as a core element of its competitive strategy (Botha et al., 2020). As expressed by an informant, "*KII focuses on using natural raw materials and, where possible, local materials to produce skin-friendly and healthy cosmetics.*" This differentiation strategy reflects Porter's (1985) view that competitive advantage arises from offering unique value that is difficult for competitors to imitate. By embedding naturalness and safety into its products, the company strengthens consumer trust, which in turn reinforces loyalty.

However, a critical reflection indicates that the mutually reinforcing relationship between loyalty and competitive strategy may not apply uniformly across all consumer segments. The reliance on differentiation based on quality and sustainability suggests that loyalty is more likely to develop among consumers who prioritize safety and environmental values. These strategic attributes may have less influence on price-sensitive consumers. This implies that while the strategy is effective in building strong relational loyalty, its competitive impact may be segment-specific (Baghel, 2025).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that customer loyalty and competitive strategy at PT Karya Iwin Insani are closely interconnected. Competitive strategies grounded in differentiation, quality assurance, and regulatory compliance enhance customer trust and satisfaction, which in turn strengthen loyalty (Botha et al., 2020). At the same time, loyal customers reinforce the company's competitive advantage by supporting market stability and reducing competitive pressure. This reciprocal relationship highlights the strategic importance of aligning customer loyalty initiatives with broader competitive strategy to achieve sustainable business performance.

The Role of Competitor Analysis in Determining Competitive Strategy

The results indicate that competitor analysis plays a central role in shaping PT Karya Iwin Insani's competitive strategy. Interview findings suggest that information on competitors' product characteristics, promotional approaches, and market positioning is systematically used as a reference in strategic decision-making (Nordin & Raval, 2023). Rather than adopting imitative strategies, the company positions competitor analysis as a learning process to identify strengths that require reinforcement. As stated by an informant, "*We do not see competitors as something to imitate, but rather as a way to understand our position in the market and determine the advantages that need to be strengthened.*" This finding indicates that competitor analysis functions as an anticipatory and reflective process rather than a reactive response to competitive pressure (Thirachoksawat et al., 2025).

A critical outcome of competitor analysis is the company's strategic decision to avoid price-based competition (Rust, 2020). Informants emphasized that competing on price could potentially undermine product quality and brand credibility. As explained by one informant, "*If we compete on price, quality may be sacrificed, so we choose to focus on the uniqueness and safety of our products.*" This decision reflects Porter's (1980) argument that differentiation strategies enable firms to avoid destructive price competition while maintaining competitive advantage through uniqueness and value creation. In this context, competitor analysis provides the empirical basis for choosing differentiation over cost leadership (Porter, 1980).

In addition, competitor analysis contributes to the development of marketing communication strategies. Interview data indicate that information about competitors' limitations is used to strengthen the company's emphasis on ingredient transparency, safety assurance, and environmental responsibility (Rua & Santos, 2022). One informant noted, "*We place more emphasis on educating consumers about ingredients and safety, because that is what other products often overlook.*" This approach aligns with Kotler and Keller's (2016) view that effective marketing communication should highlight attributes that are relevant to consumer needs and insufficiently addressed by competitors, thereby enhancing perceived value and brand clarity (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

In this context, excessive reliance on competitor analysis can lead to strategic consequences. When decision-making is overly oriented toward existing competitive patterns, the scope for broader innovation exploration can be limited. However, interview results reveal that PT Karya Iwin Insani applies competitor analysis proportionally, not as a limiting factor, but as a strategic reference for identifying market gaps and strengthening the company's position of differentiation (Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021).

In addition to supporting marketing communication strategies, competitor analysis also plays an important role in driving innovation and product development. Informants explained that observing competitors allows companies to identify market gaps and potential opportunities for innovation (Masood & Zaidi, 2023). As one informant stated, “By looking at other products, we know what is not yet available in the market, and that becomes the basis for further product development.” These findings confirm that competitor analysis serves not only as a defensive instrument, but also as a proactive mechanism for driving innovation. Overall, the results of the study show that competitor analysis at PT Karya Iwin Insani serves as a strategic foundation for building differentiation, strengthening marketing communications, and developing products, enabling the company to maintain its competitiveness without neglecting its core values and quality standards (Khan et al., 2024).

The Implications of Differentiation Strategy on Customer Loyalty

The findings in this study indicate that the differentiation strategy implemented by PT Karya Iwin Insani has clear implications for customer loyalty formation. Differentiation arises from the consistent use of natural and local ingredients, product safety assurance, and environmentally oriented innovation, collectively shaping a distinctive product identity. These attributes are not positioned merely as marketing claims, but are embedded in product development and service practices, thereby strengthening customer trust and long-term preference for the company’s products (Cardoso et al., 2022).

The implications of this differentiation strategy are reflected in the way customer loyalty is built without relying on formal loyalty programs. Previous interview data indicate that companies emphasize consistency in quality, safety, and professional service as the primary basis for customer retention. This commitment to quality and service, as previously highlighted by informants, supports customer trust and repeat purchasing behavior. Consistent differentiation encourages customers to view products as choices with unique characteristics rather than merely as alternatives among many similar products. This strengthens customer preference and places the brand in a more stable position in the competitive market structure (Cuong, 2020). In line with Oliver's (1999) perspective, loyalty in this context develops as a consequence of sustained satisfaction and trust, rather than short-term incentives or transactional rewards (Oliver, 1999).

Furthermore, differentiation based on environmental and safety values fosters emotional attachment among customers to the brand. The emphasis on environmentally friendly products and safety standards allows customers to associate the brand with responsibility and reliability,

strengthening relational loyalty (Bae et al., 2020). This finding aligns with Porter's (1985) differentiation framework, in which competitive advantage arises from offering unique value that is relevant and difficult for competitors to imitate. In this case, differentiation reinforces loyalty by positioning the brand as both trustworthy and value-driven (Porter, 1985).

At the same time, the findings suggest that the implications of differentiation for loyalty are not uniform across all consumer segments. Loyalty appears to be more strongly developed among customers who prioritize product safety and environmental considerations (Tojiri, 2023). This indicates that while differentiation effectively strengthens loyalty within specific segments, its broader impact depends on alignment between product values and consumer preferences. Overall, the results demonstrate that the differentiation strategy at PT Karya Iwin Insani functions as a key mechanism for reinforcing customer loyalty through trust, value alignment, and consistent quality delivery, supporting sustainable competitive advantage in the natural cosmetics industry.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that customer loyalty among MSMEs in the natural cosmetics industry is not primarily generated by transactional incentives or price-based competition, but rather by value-oriented differentiation grounded in product quality, safety assurance, and environmental responsibility. By integrating competitor analysis into strategic decision-making, PT Karya Iwin Insani can strengthen product differentiation, refine marketing communications, and maintain competitiveness without compromising brand values. These findings contribute to marketing strategy literature by empirically showing how customer loyalty, differentiation, and competitor analysis interact within the framework of sustainable marketing, particularly in MSME contexts that are often underrepresented in prior studies.

From a managerial perspective, this study provides practical insights for MSMEs in the natural cosmetics and similar sustainability-oriented sectors. The findings suggest that MSME managers should prioritize consistent quality control, safety certification, and transparent communication as long-term loyalty drivers rather than relying on short-term promotional tactics. Competitor analysis should be positioned as a strategic learning tool to identify opportunities for differentiation and unmet market needs, thereby enabling MSMEs to compete effectively despite limited resources. By aligning product attributes with consumer values, MSMEs can develop more resilient and trust-based customer relationships.

In terms of policy relevance, the results highlight the importance of institutional support for MSMEs engaged in sustainable product development. Policymakers may consider strengthening access to certification processes, sustainability standards, and innovation assistance

programs to help MSMEs enhance product credibility and market competitiveness. Supportive policies that facilitate environmental compliance, quality assurance, and market education can reinforce sustainable marketing practices and contribute to broader economic and environmental goals. Overall, this study underscores that sustainable competitive advantage in MSMEs can be achieved through the strategic integration of customer loyalty, differentiation, and competitor analysis, offering both theoretical advancement and actionable guidance for practice and policy.

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