

Creative Innovation and Experiential Marketing as Differentiation Strategies for MSMEs in Competitive Markets

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the role of creative innovation and experiential marketing as differentiation strategies for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in responding to increasingly competitive market conditions. The study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review method with descriptive analysis. Data were collected from scientific articles accessed through Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, MDPI, and ResearchGate. The literature search covered publications from 1985–2026 using keywords related to creative innovation, experiential marketing, differentiation strategy, and MSMEs. The initial search identified 50 articles, which were subsequently screened using inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 41 relevant articles for analysis. The findings indicate that creative innovation plays a significant role in developing unique products, services, and business models, thereby enhancing the value creation and competitiveness of MSMEs. Experiential marketing strengthens differentiation by creating positive customer experiences that improve satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term customer relationships. The synthesis of several theoretical perspectives, namely the Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Experiential Marketing Theory, and Blue Ocean Strategy, demonstrates that integrating creative innovation with customer experience generates a sustainable competitive advantage that is more difficult to imitate than strategies focused solely on products or pricing. This review highlights that continuous innovation, effective customer experience management, and digital transformation represent relevant strategic approaches to strengthening the sustainability and competitiveness of MSMEs in the digital economy.

Keywords: Creative Innovation, Experiential Marketing, Differentiation Strategy, MSMEs, Competitiveness, Digital Transformation.

1. Introduction

Increasingly intense business competition has encouraged Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) to develop strategies capable of creating sustainable competitive advantages. Rapid changes in consumer preferences have shifted competition beyond price and product quality toward the ability of firms to deliver unique value that is difficult for competitors to imitate. In such dynamic market environments, differentiation has become one of the most important strategies for ensuring the long-term sustainability of MSMEs. Creative innovation serves as a critical source of competitive advantage by enabling businesses to develop products, services, processes, and business models that provide greater value than those offered by competitors. Creativity in product design, packaging, brand identity, and customer interaction contributes to positive market perceptions that enhance business attractiveness. [1] explained that innovation and creativity strategies contribute to product differentiation, thereby improving MSME competitiveness through product development and marketing strategies that are more responsive to consumer needs.

Changes in consumer behavior in the digital economy indicate that purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by the experiences customers gain during their interactions with a brand. Consumers no longer evaluate products solely based on their functional benefits but also consider the emotional, social, and psychological experiences obtained before, during, and after the purchasing process. The concept of experiential marketing suggests that companies can establish stronger customer relationships by creating experiences

involving sensory (sense), emotional (feel), cognitive (think), behavioral (act), and social relationship (relate) dimensions. [2] emphasized that such experiences create emotional bonds that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. The study conducted by [3] demonstrated that experiential marketing positively influences customer satisfaction and loyalty among MSMEs, making this approach increasingly relevant in highly competitive business environments.

Creative innovation refers to an organization's capability to generate new ideas that are transformed into products, services, and business processes that create added value for customers. This capability represents a strategic resource because it enables firms to develop distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from competitors. Innovation is not limited to creating entirely new products but also includes design modifications, service quality improvements, business model development, digital technology adoption, and stronger brand identity formation. [4] explained that product innovation and differentiation constitute the primary foundation for enhancing MSME competitiveness in the digital era by generating unique value that competitors find difficult to replicate. These findings indicate that creativity and innovation represent strategic investments for long-term business sustainability.

Differentiation strategies have become increasingly important because most MSMEs face limitations in financial capital, technology, and human resources, making cost leadership strategies difficult to implement. Consequently, business owners are encouraged to establish product uniqueness and superior customer experiences as the foundation of competitive advantage. Differentiation can be achieved through product design, service quality, packaging innovation, marketing communication, and brand identity that align with the characteristics of target markets. [5] argued that differentiation enables firms to achieve a competitive position because consumers are willing to pay higher value for products perceived as unique. The study by [6] revealed that innovation, creativity, design differentiation, and product value-added are dominant factors in enhancing MSME competitiveness within increasingly competitive markets.

The relationship between creative innovation and experiential marketing demonstrates a strong synergy that generates more effective differentiation than implementing either strategy independently. Innovative products provide greater value when supported by enjoyable consumption experiences, while customer experiences become more meaningful when accompanied by products possessing unique characteristics. The integration of these two approaches strengthens perceived quality, increases customer engagement, and fosters long-term loyalty. [7], [8] explained that experiential marketing enhances brand awareness and customer loyalty among MSMEs by creating positive experiences throughout customer interactions with the brand. These findings suggest that differentiation becomes more effective when creative innovation is integrated with consistent customer experiences.

Previous studies have extensively discussed product innovation, creativity, market orientation, and experiential marketing as determinants of MSME performance. However, these studies generally examined each variable independently, leaving the synergistic relationship between creative innovation and experiential marketing relatively underexplored. [9] found that innovation and creativity positively influence MSME marketing performance, while [10] demonstrated that innovation orientation represents a key dimension of entrepreneurial marketing contributing to MSME business success. These findings confirm the substantial contribution of innovation to business performance improvement, although its integration with experiential marketing as a differentiation strategy still requires more comprehensive investigation.

The Resource-Based View (RBV) perspective explains that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved through the effective utilization of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources. Organizational creativity, innovation capability, and the ability to create memorable customer experiences represent intangible assets that satisfy these criteria. These capabilities enable MSMEs to establish stronger competitive positions than businesses relying solely on price competition. [11], [12] explained that culturally based brand identity and visual differentiation strengthen customers' emotional attachment while improving brand performance through integrated digital strategies. This perspective indicates that differentiation is no longer dependent solely on the physical characteristics of products but has evolved toward creating meaningful experiences and symbolic value perceived by customers.

Based on the foregoing discussion, studies examining creative innovation and experiential marketing as differentiation strategies for MSMEs in competitive markets still offer substantial opportunities for further development, particularly in explaining how these two concepts complement each other in building sustainable competitive advantage. This study is expected to enrich the strategic marketing literature by developing a conceptual framework that integrates creative innovation and experiential marketing as sources of differentiation for MSMEs. Furthermore, the findings are expected to provide practical contributions for business practitioners in designing marketing strategies that are more adaptive to changing consumer behavior while simultaneously strengthening business competitiveness in increasingly dynamic market environments.

1.1. Creative Innovation

Creative innovation refers to the ability of individuals or organizations to generate and implement new ideas that create added value for both customers and the organization. It extends beyond the development of new products to encompass innovations in services, business processes, business models, packaging design, marketing strategies, and the adoption of digital technologies. In the context of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), creative innovation is a critical factor that determines a firm's ability to adapt to changing consumer needs and evolving market dynamics. According to [13], innovation is defined as the implementation of new or significantly improved products, processes, marketing methods, or organizational methods that enhance organizational performance. From the perspective of the Resource-Based View [14], creativity and innovation are considered strategic intangible resources capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage because they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Therefore, creative innovation is regarded as a fundamental driver of sustainable differentiation for MSMEs.

1.2. Experiential Marketing

Experiential marketing is a marketing approach that focuses on creating positive customer experiences through interactions involving sensory, emotional, intellectual, behavioral, and social dimensions. This concept was introduced by [2], who proposed five experiential dimensions: sense, feel, think, act, and relate. This approach positions customer experience as the primary foundation for building customer satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term relationships with a brand. Unlike traditional marketing, which primarily emphasizes the functional benefits of products, experiential marketing seeks to establish emotional connections that enable customers to enjoy memorable experiences before, during, and after the purchasing process. Within MSMEs, this strategy can be implemented through friendly customer service, attractive store design, distinctive product packaging, digital storytelling, active engagement on social media, and customer-oriented activities that directly involve customers. Positive customer experiences enhance customers' perceived value while simultaneously strengthening business differentiation in increasingly competitive markets.

1.3. Differentiation Strategy

A differentiation strategy refers to a firm's effort to create distinctive characteristics that make its products or services superior to those offered by competitors. According to [5], differentiation is one of the generic competitive strategies that enables firms to achieve competitive advantage by delivering superior value perceived by customers. Differentiation can be achieved through product innovation, service quality, design, technology, brand image, customer experience, and after-sales services. For MSMEs, differentiation is particularly important because most businesses face financial constraints that limit their ability to compete through low-price strategies. Products with unique characteristics are more easily recognized by customers, enhance perceived quality, strengthen brand identity, and reduce customers' sensitivity to price fluctuations. Consequently, a successful differentiation strategy fosters customer loyalty, increases product value, and reinforces the competitive position of MSMEs in increasingly competitive markets.

1.4. Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are productive business entities operated by individuals or business organizations that meet specific criteria regarding assets, annual turnover, and workforce size, as stipulated in Indonesian Law No. 20 of 2008 and subsequently updated through Government Regulation No. 7 of 2021. MSMEs make significant contributions to the Indonesian economy by creating employment opportunities, increasing household income, promoting equitable economic development, and strengthening national economic resilience [15], [16], [17]. MSMEs are generally characterized by their high level of flexibility in responding to market changes; however, they frequently encounter challenges related to limited financial resources, restricted access to technology, insufficient innovation capacity, and inadequate human resource competencies. These challenges require MSMEs to adopt strategies that enhance competitiveness through creative innovation, product differentiation, and marketing practices that are more adaptive to technological advancements and changing consumer behavior.

1.5. Competitiveness

Competitiveness refers to the ability of an organization or business to create greater value than its competitors, thereby ensuring long-term business sustainability and improved organizational performance. According to [5], competitiveness is influenced by a firm's ability to achieve superiority through innovation, efficiency, quality, productivity, and adaptability to changes in the business environment. In the context of

MSMEs, competitiveness is reflected in the ability to retain customers, expand market share, generate sustainable profits, and establish competitive advantages that are difficult for competitors to imitate. Competitiveness depends not only on product quality but also on the capability to foster innovation, build a strong brand identity, deliver superior customer experiences, leverage digital technologies, and establish enduring relationships with customers. The stronger the competitiveness of MSMEs, the greater their opportunities for sustainable growth and long-term survival in increasingly dynamic markets.

1.6. Digital Transformation

Digital transformation refers to a comprehensive organizational change driven by the adoption of digital technologies to improve operational efficiency, stimulate innovation, enhance customer experience, and develop new business models. It encompasses not only the implementation of digital technologies but also changes in organizational mindset, corporate culture, business processes, and marketing strategies to improve responsiveness to an evolving business environment. According to [18], digital transformation enables organizations to create greater customer value through technology integration, data analytics, process automation, and the development of digital services. Within MSMEs, digital transformation is reflected in the adoption of online marketplaces, social media platforms, digital payment systems, business management applications, customer relationship management (CRM) systems, customer data analytics, and artificial intelligence technologies to support managerial decision-making. Effective digital transformation improves operational efficiency, expands market reach, strengthens customer experience, and facilitates innovation and differentiation, thereby enhancing the long-term competitiveness of MSMEs.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review methodology. This approach was selected to identify, examine, compare, and synthesize findings from previous studies on creative innovation and experiential marketing as differentiation strategies for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) operating in competitive markets. A literature review enables researchers to develop a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of concepts, empirical findings, research gaps, and future research directions related to the topic under investigation. This approach is consistent with the view of [19], who argued that a literature review is a systematic research method for integrating scientific knowledge to produce a more comprehensive conceptual understanding.

The study relied on secondary data obtained through electronic literature searches. Google Scholar served as the primary database because of its broad coverage of scholarly publications. The search was further complemented by articles retrieved from reputable academic databases and publishers, including ScienceDirect (Elsevier), SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, Emerald Insight, MDPI, SAGE Journals, and ResearchGate to identify nationally published peer-reviewed articles. The use of multiple databases was intended to improve the comprehensiveness of the literature while minimizing potential bias associated with relying on a single data source.

The literature search was conducted in July 2026 using combinations of the keywords creative innovation, experiential marketing, creative innovation AND experiential marketing, SMEs, MSMEs, competitive advantage, competitive market, and differentiation strategy, together with their Indonesian equivalents, namely inovasi kreatif, experiential marketing, strategi diferensiasi, and UMKM. The review included articles published between 1985 and 2026 to capture the evolution of research on MSME innovation and marketing strategies. This publication period was selected because it reflects the development of marketing strategies and innovation practices, particularly during the rapid advancement of digital transformation over recent decades.

The initial search identified 50 potentially relevant articles based on the relevance of their titles and keywords. These studies were subsequently screened using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles published between 1985 and 2026; (2) peer-reviewed journal articles; (3) studies addressing creative innovation, experiential marketing, differentiation strategy, competitiveness, or MSMEs; (4) availability of the full-text article; and (5) direct relevance to the objectives of this study. The exclusion criteria included: (1) duplicate articles identified across multiple databases; (2) conference proceedings, undergraduate theses, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, books, and popular publications; (3) articles containing only abstracts; (4) studies unrelated to the primary research variables; and (5) articles that did not provide sufficient methodological descriptions or research findings.

The screening process resulted in 41 articles that met all the predefined inclusion criteria and were therefore selected as the primary sources for the analysis. A total of 3 articles were excluded because they were duplicate records, 2 articles were removed because they did not examine the relationship between creative innovation or

experiential marketing and MSME differentiation strategies, 2 articles were excluded due to the unavailability of full-text versions, and 2 additional articles were excluded because they were conference proceedings or non-peer-reviewed publications. This selection process was conducted to ensure that all analyzed references possessed adequate scientific quality, substantive relevance, and credibility, thereby supporting the development of an objective research synthesis. A transparent selection procedure is considered one of the fundamental principles of conducting a high-quality literature review.

The selected studies were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis through several stages, including data reduction, thematic categorization, data presentation, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. The analysis focused on identifying the concepts of creative innovation, the implementation of experiential marketing, the forms of differentiation strategies adopted by MSMEs, the factors influencing successful implementation, and their implications for business competitiveness. The findings were subsequently synthesized to identify relationships among variables, similarities and differences across previous studies, and remaining research gaps that may serve as directions for future research. A descriptive analytical approach was employed because it provides a systematic, comprehensive, and in-depth understanding of the development of research on creative innovation and experiential marketing as differentiation strategies for MSMEs operating in competitive markets.

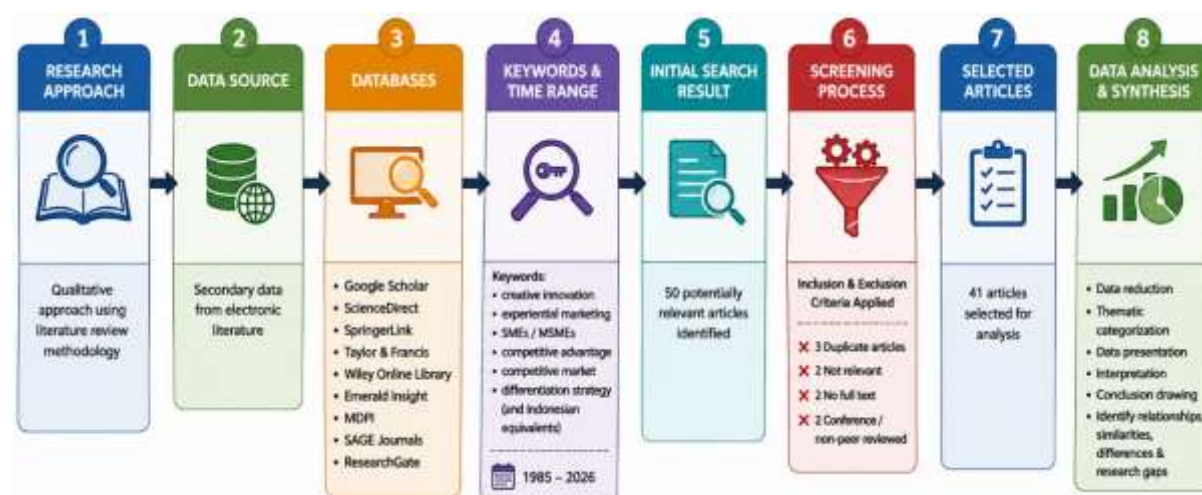


Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

3. Result and Discussion

Increasingly intense business competition has transformed the way Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) establish competitive advantage in markets saturated with products that often possess similar characteristics. Under these conditions, differentiation has become an increasingly critical strategy because consumers are presented with numerous product alternatives and can make purchasing decisions within a very short period. The Resource-Based View (RBV) proposed by [14] argues that sustainable competitive advantage is derived from resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Organizational creativity represents one of these strategic resources because it originates from knowledge, experience, organizational culture, and the capabilities of human resources to generate economically valuable ideas. When creativity is translated into product innovation, service innovation, and business model innovation, MSMEs are able to develop distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from competitors, providing consumers with stronger reasons to choose their products. [5] further explains that differentiation enables firms to reduce the intensity of price competition because consumers begin to evaluate products based on perceived value rather than price alone. The study by [20] demonstrates that innovation has a positive effect on enhancing MSME competitiveness by creating value propositions that better address customer needs. These findings indicate that creativity is not merely the generation of new ideas but serves as the foundation for differentiation strategies that strengthen business resilience in a continuously changing competitive environment.

The rapid advancement of digital technology has shifted the orientation of marketing from a product-centered approach toward a customer experience-centered approach. This transformation is consistent with the Experiential Marketing theory developed by [2], which argues that purchasing decisions are influenced by experiences involving the dimensions of sense, feel, think, act, and relate. These experiential dimensions shape

customers' perceptions of a brand through visual, emotional, intellectual, behavioral, and social stimuli encountered throughout the consumption process. Such developments provide significant opportunities for MSMEs because delivering meaningful customer experiences does not necessarily require substantial financial investment. Friendly customer service, attractive packaging, compelling product stories, interactive social media communication, and a pleasant business atmosphere can all contribute to memorable customer experiences. Research by [21] demonstrates that experiential marketing enhances customer satisfaction and brand loyalty by fostering emotional connections between consumers and the products they purchase. Similarly, [22] found that customer experience positively influences customer engagement, which subsequently encourages repeat purchases. The synthesis of these studies suggests that experiential marketing has evolved into a strategic instrument capable of creating meaningful differentiation without relying heavily on costly conventional promotional activities.

The relationship between creative innovation and experiential marketing demonstrates a complementary synergy in strengthening the competitive advantage of MSMEs. Innovation generates products and services with distinctive characteristics, while experiential marketing enhances customers' perceptions of those unique attributes through enjoyable consumption experiences. The Dynamic Capabilities Theory proposed by [23] explains that organizations must continuously integrate, develop, and reconfigure their resources in response to changes in the business environment. This capability has become increasingly important as consumer preferences evolve much more rapidly than in previous decades. MSMEs that successfully combine product innovation, creative design, digital technology utilization, and superior customer experiences are more likely to possess greater strategic flexibility in responding to market changes. Research by [24] indicates that adaptive innovation capability enhances MSME competitiveness by improving business strategy flexibility. Likewise, [25] found that customer experience strengthens the positive influence of innovation on customer loyalty, thereby making differentiation strategies more effective. These findings suggest that sustainable competitive advantage is not achieved through isolated strategies but through the integration of multiple organizational capabilities that collectively create superior value for customers.

As a case study, the development of Kopi Kenangan illustrates how creative innovation can be successfully integrated with experiential marketing to establish differentiation within the ready-to-drink beverage industry. According to a report by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), summarized by Databoks Katadata, Kopi Kenangan operated 872 outlets in 2024, making it the largest modern coffee chain in Indonesia, surpassing Starbucks, which operated 324 outlets. USDA also reported that this expansion reflected the company's aggressive growth strategy and its success in expanding into Southeast Asian and Oceanian markets [26]. In addition to expanding its retail network, Kopi Kenangan reported that its sales increased by 27% in the second quarter of 2024 compared with the same period of the previous year. During the same period, EBITDA doubled, the Matcha Series sold more than 940,000 cups within two months, and the O.G Aren Series exceeded 890,000 cups in sales. The company also reported continuous growth in the use of the Kopi Kenangan mobile application as part of its strategy to strengthen long-term customer relationships through digital services and loyalty programs [27]. These achievements demonstrate that the company's success has been driven not only by continuous menu innovation but also by the integration of customer experience through outlet design, seamless digital ordering, loyalty programs, and consistent brand communication. According to Schmitt's Experiential Marketing framework, positive experiences at every customer touchpoint foster emotional attachment to a brand [2]. This case study illustrates that integrating creative innovation with experiential marketing can create sustainable differentiation, enhance customer loyalty, and strengthen a firm's competitive position within the increasingly dynamic beverage industry.

The analysis of previous studies indicates that the success of differentiation strategies largely depends on the ability of MSMEs to sustain both innovation and customer experience over time. While many businesses are capable of developing creative products during the initial stages of their operations, they often encounter difficulties in maintaining the quality of innovation due to limitations in financial resources, human capital, and their ability to anticipate changing market conditions. As a result, differentiation that initially serves as a competitive advantage gradually loses its effectiveness when competitors introduce similar products. Several strategic solutions can address this challenge. First, MSMEs should foster a culture of innovation through creativity training, collaboration with universities, business incubators, and entrepreneurial communities to ensure the continuous generation of new ideas. Second, digital capabilities should be strengthened through the effective use of social media, customer behavior analytics, and technology-based customer relationship management to continuously enhance customer experience. Third, MSMEs should establish a strong brand identity by emphasizing product storytelling, local cultural values, and consistent brand communication. Through these efforts, differentiation extends beyond product characteristics to develop emotional connections

between customers and the brand. Collectively, these strategies provide a solid foundation for MSMEs to sustain competitive advantage in rapidly changing markets.

The successful implementation of creative innovation and experiential marketing among MSMEs also depends on entrepreneurs' ability to understand rapidly evolving consumer behavior driven by digital technological advancements. Contemporary consumers no longer purchase products solely to satisfy functional needs; instead, they increasingly seek experiences that deliver emotional, social, and symbolic value. This phenomenon can be explained by the Experience Economy Theory proposed by [28], which argues that experiences have evolved into a distinct form of economic value capable of enhancing customers' perceptions of products and services. Even products with comparable functional quality may generate different levels of customer satisfaction when presented through distinctive consumption experiences. This shift creates significant opportunities for MSMEs to differentiate themselves by designing comfortable retail environments, attractive packaging, personalized customer service, interactive social media engagement, and compelling narratives regarding production processes or local cultural heritage embedded within their products. [28] further emphasize that personalized experiences strengthen customer engagement and foster closer relationships between consumers and brands. Likewise, [29] demonstrate that consistent customer experiences across all customer touchpoints positively influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. These findings suggest that experience-based differentiation has become an increasingly relevant competitive strategy because it is considerably more difficult for competitors to imitate within a short period.

The integration of creative innovation with digital technology has further accelerated the development of competitive advantage among MSMEs. The adoption of social media platforms, online marketplaces, artificial intelligence, and digital payment systems has fundamentally transformed interactions between businesses and customers. According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) developed by [30], technology adoption is primarily influenced by perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. When MSME owners perceive digital technologies as effective tools for improving marketing performance and expanding market reach, their willingness to adopt digital innovations increases significantly. [18] argue that digital transformation enables organizations to deliver more personalized customer experiences through the utilization of real-time customer data. Similarly, [31] found that the effective use of digital media enhances customer engagement while simultaneously strengthening brand image among small and medium-sized enterprises. The synthesis of these studies indicates that creative innovation in the digital era extends beyond the development of new products to include the effective management of digital interactions, enabling customers to experience consistent service quality across both offline and online channels. Consequently, digital technology has become an essential strategic instrument for building customer-oriented differentiation.

As a case study, EIGER Adventure demonstrates how creative innovation can be effectively integrated with experiential marketing to strengthen brand positioning within the outdoor equipment industry. According to the Sustainability Report 2024 published by PT Eigerindo Multi Produk Industri, EIGER operated 306 retail outlets across Indonesia and had established an international presence in Malaysia and Switzerland, reflecting the company's capability to develop an extensive retail network while enhancing customer experience across multiple markets [32]. Beyond expanding its retail presence, EIGER has introduced the "Adventure Home" concept, in which each store functions not merely as a retail outlet but as an immersive adventure environment through its interior design, product displays, and exploratory shopping experience that reflects the lifestyle of outdoor enthusiasts. The company also actively organizes community events, environmental conservation campaigns, outdoor education programs, and the Eco-Friendly Store Assessment initiative as part of its efforts to create customer experiences aligned with sustainability values [33]. This approach is consistent with the Relationship Marketing theory proposed by [34], which emphasizes that long-term relationships between companies and customers are built upon trust, commitment, and continuous interaction. From an experiential marketing perspective, EIGER's strategy extends beyond selling outdoor equipment by creating emotional experiences through customer participation in outdoor communities, adventure activities, and sustainability campaigns. This case illustrates that brand differentiation can be achieved through the integration of product innovation, immersive shopping experiences, and organizational values, thereby fostering stronger customer loyalty and sustainable competitive advantage.

The findings of previous studies consistently demonstrate a strong relationship between creative innovation, customer experience, differentiation, and improved business performance. [35], through a meta-analysis, found that innovation has a positive impact on the performance of small businesses, particularly when innovation is aligned with the characteristics of the target market. Similarly, [36] reported that the creativity of MSME entrepreneurs contributes to enhanced competitive advantage through the development of value-added products. [37] further showed that customer-oriented innovation strengthens a firm's ability to sustain its competitive position over the long term. Meanwhile, [38] explained that customer experience reinforces the relationship

between innovation and customer loyalty by increasing consumers' emotional engagement with the brand. The synthesis of these studies indicates that creative innovation and experiential marketing should not be viewed as independent concepts but rather as complementary strategic capabilities that collectively establish effective differentiation. These findings suggest that the success of MSMEs depends not only on their ability to develop new products but also on their capability to continuously create meaningful customer experiences that generate long-term value.

As a case study, BT Batik Trusmi Cirebon illustrates how a culture-based MSME has successfully integrated creative innovation and experiential marketing to strengthen its competitiveness within Indonesia's batik industry. BT Batik Trusmi has evolved from a small batik shop into the largest batik center in Indonesia by adopting a one-stop shopping concept that integrates retail activities with education, cultural experiences, culinary attractions, and tourism. The company offers not only batik products but also a wide range of customer experiences through Museum Trusmi Park, weekly Cirebon Mask Dance performances, batik-making workshops for students and the general public, and Batik Kitchen, which serves traditional Cirebon cuisine within an authentic cultural setting. This strategy transforms the purchasing process into a cultural experience that combines education, entertainment, aesthetics, and active customer participation. In addition to serving the domestic market, BT Batik Trusmi has expanded internationally, exporting its products to countries across Asia, the Americas, and Europe, demonstrating that culture-based differentiation can significantly enhance product competitiveness in global markets [39]. The Experience Economy Theory proposed by [28] explains that experiences created throughout the consumption process generate greater economic value than the sale of products alone. This case study demonstrates that integrating culture-based creative innovation with experiential marketing enables firms to establish a strong brand identity, increase customer engagement, and create differentiation that is difficult for competitors to imitate because it is rooted in local cultural heritage and authentic customer experiences.

The synthesis of theoretical perspectives and previous empirical studies suggests that creative innovation and experiential marketing represent two complementary strategic capabilities for strengthening MSME differentiation in increasingly competitive markets. The Blue Ocean Strategy proposed by [40] argues that firms can achieve more sustainable competitive advantage by creating new market space through value innovation rather than competing solely on price. This perspective emphasizes the creation of new customer value through the integration of innovation and marketing strategies that deliver distinctive customer experiences. Such an approach is particularly relevant for MSMEs because many operate with limited financial resources and therefore face challenges in competing through large-scale promotional campaigns or low-cost strategies. Creativity in developing local products, integrating cultural elements, utilizing digital technologies, and designing authentic customer experiences enables MSMEs to create superior value propositions compared with competitors offering functionally similar products. [40] further explain that value innovation serves as the foundation for sustainable differentiation because firms shift their focus away from direct competition toward creating unique market offerings unavailable from competitors. Likewise, [41] found that positive customer experiences across every customer touchpoint enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and customers' willingness to recommend products or services to others. Collectively, these findings indicate that integrating creative innovation with experiential marketing generates competitive advantages that not only improve short-term sales performance but also strengthen brand positioning and ensure long-term business sustainability.

Despite its considerable potential, the implementation of creative innovation and experiential marketing among MSMEs continues to encounter various internal and external challenges. Internal barriers generally include limited financial resources, inadequate innovation capabilities, insufficient digital competencies, weak brand management, and the underutilization of customer data in managerial decision-making. External challenges arise from rapidly changing consumer preferences, intensifying market competition, continuous technological advancements, and the introduction of increasingly diverse competing products. Previous studies indicate that these conditions have led many MSMEs to rely primarily on price-based competition, resulting in declining profit margins. These circumstances demonstrate that successful differentiation depends not only on entrepreneurial creativity but also on the effective management of organizational resources, a thorough understanding of market needs, and the ability to adapt continuously to the evolving business environment.

The first strategic solution is to strengthen innovation capacity through the continuous development of human resource competencies. MSME entrepreneurs should be provided with greater access to training programs covering product development, packaging design, business model innovation, brand management, and the application of technology in production and marketing activities. Collaboration with universities, research institutions, business incubators, creative communities, and local governments can accelerate knowledge transfer, enabling MSMEs to generate innovations with greater added value. This approach is consistent with the Resource-Based View, which recognizes knowledge, skills, and creativity as strategic assets capable of

generating competitive advantages that are difficult for competitors to imitate. Continuous investment in innovation capacity will enable MSMEs to develop products and services that are more responsive to changing customer needs while reducing their dependence on price-based competition, which often undermines long-term business profitability.

The second solution is to improve the quality of customer experience management through the implementation of a more structured and long-term relationship-oriented experiential marketing strategy. Customer experiences can be cultivated through responsive service, personalized communication, the utilization of customer relationship management (CRM), the development of digital storytelling, customer loyalty programs, and the effective management of customer feedback as a foundation for improving products and services. Such an approach enables every interaction between customers and business owners to become a meaningful experience that generates positive impressions while strengthening customers' emotional attachment to the brand. The more positive the customer experience, the greater the likelihood of repeat purchases, positive word-of-mouth recommendations, and the development of customer loyalty. This strategy is particularly relevant for MSMEs because strong emotional relationships are often more difficult for competitors to imitate than product innovations that are primarily based on physical attributes.

The third solution is to expand the implementation of digital transformation as a supporting mechanism for creative innovation and experiential marketing. The utilization of marketplaces, social media, digital payment systems, customer data analytics, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence can assist MSMEs in understanding consumer behavior more accurately while designing more targeted marketing strategies. Digital transformation also enables business owners to deliver consistent customer experiences across multiple marketing channels, both offline and online. Information obtained from customer data can be utilized to personalize promotional activities, develop products that align with market preferences, and continuously improve service quality. The integration of digital technology with creative innovation accelerates the creation of new value while simultaneously expanding market reach, thereby enhancing MSMEs' ability to compete in the increasingly dynamic digital economy.

Based on the overall discussion, it can be understood that MSME differentiation in the era of modern competition is no longer established through a single determinant but rather through the integration of multiple complementary capabilities. The perspectives of the Resource-Based View, Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Experiential Marketing Theory, and Blue Ocean Strategy collectively explain that business success is largely determined by an organization's ability to manage internal resources, adapt to changes in the business environment, create valuable customer experiences, and generate innovations that are difficult for competitors to imitate. The synthesis of previous studies indicates that creative innovation enhances product differentiation, whereas experiential marketing strengthens customers' emotional attachment, thereby increasing customer loyalty and the likelihood of repeat purchases. The illustrative case studies of Kopi Kenangan, Eiger Adventure, and Batik Trusmi Cirebon demonstrate that the successful development of competitive advantage is determined not only by product quality but also by the ability to create customer experiences that are relevant, authentic, and consistent throughout every customer interaction. These findings imply that MSMEs need to shift their business orientation from merely selling products toward creating value and delivering memorable customer experiences. Such an approach will strengthen competitiveness, enhance customer loyalty, expand business growth opportunities, and support the long-term sustainability of MSMEs in an increasingly competitive business environment. Therefore, the integration of creative innovation and experiential marketing can be regarded as one of the most promising differentiation strategies for the development of MSMEs in the digital economy era and within an increasingly dynamic competitive landscape.

Table 1. Summary of Main Findings

No.	Research Aspect	Main Findings	Supporting Theory/Reference
1	Creative innovation as a source of competitive advantage	Creative innovation serves as a strategic organizational resource that generates product, service, and business model uniqueness, thereby strengthening competitiveness and reducing dependence on price-based competition.	Resource-Based View
2	Role of experiential marketing	Customer experiences involving the dimensions of <i>sense</i> , <i>feel</i> , <i>think</i> , <i>act</i> , and <i>relate</i> enhance customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, and emotional attachment toward the brand.	Experiential Marketing Theory
3	Synergy between	Creative innovation creates product uniqueness,	Dynamic Capabilities

	creative innovation and experiential marketing	while experiential marketing strengthens customers' perceptions of that uniqueness, resulting in more sustainable differentiation.	Theory
4	Case study: Kopi Kenangan	Kopi Kenangan successfully integrated menu innovation, digital ordering systems, loyalty programs, and customer experience, operating 872 outlets in 2024 while recording a 27% sales growth in Q2 2024.	-
5	Challenges in implementation	MSMEs continue to face internal challenges such as limited financial resources, innovation capability, digital competencies, and brand management, alongside external challenges including rapidly changing customer preferences and intense market competition.	Literature synthesis
6	Changing consumer behavior	Modern consumers increasingly value emotional, symbolic, and social experiences over purely functional product attributes, making customer experience an important source of economic value.	Experience Economy Theory
7	Digital transformation	Digital technologies—including social media, marketplaces, artificial intelligence, digital payment systems, and customer analytics—improve marketing effectiveness, customer personalization, and experience-based differentiation.	Technology Acceptance Model
8	Case study: EIGER Adventure	EIGER strengthened its competitive position through the <i>Adventure Home</i> retail concept, outdoor communities, sustainability campaigns, and experiential retail, supported by 306 retail outlets across Indonesia and an international presence.	Relationship Marketing Theory
9	Evidence from previous studies	Previous empirical studies consistently demonstrate that creative innovation improves competitive advantage, while customer experience enhances customer loyalty and business performance. The integration of both strategies produces stronger outcomes than either strategy alone.	-
10	Case study: BT Batik Trusmi	BT Batik Trusmi successfully differentiates itself through a one-stop shopping concept combining retail, cultural tourism, batik workshops, museums, and culinary experiences, while expanding sales to international markets across Asia, the Americas, and Europe.	Experience Economy Theory
11	Value-based differentiation	Sustainable differentiation is achieved through the creation of unique customer value by integrating product innovation, local cultural identity, digital technology, and memorable customer experiences instead of competing solely on price.	Blue Ocean Strategy
12	Strategic recommendations	Three strategic priorities were identified: (1) strengthening innovation capability through continuous training and collaboration; (2) improving experiential marketing through CRM, digital storytelling, and loyalty programs; and (3) accelerating digital transformation through AI, customer analytics, digital payments, and	Resource-Based View; Experiential Marketing Theory; Technology Acceptance Model

		marketplace integration.	
13	Overall synthesis	Sustainable MSME differentiation in the digital economy depends on integrating creative innovation, experiential marketing, and digital transformation. This integration enhances customer loyalty, strengthens brand positioning, expands business opportunities, and supports long-term business sustainability.	Resource-Based View; Dynamic Capabilities Theory; Experiential Marketing Theory; Blue Ocean Strategy

4. Conclusion

The findings of this literature review indicate that creative innovation and experiential marketing are two complementary strategies for developing MSME differentiation in increasingly competitive markets. Creative innovation enables business owners to develop products, services, and business models with distinctive characteristics, while experiential marketing strengthens customer perceptions through emotional, sensory, and social experiences. The synthesis of several theoretical perspectives, including the Resource-Based View (RBV), Dynamic Capabilities Theory, Experiential Marketing Theory, and Blue Ocean Strategy, demonstrates that sustainable competitive advantage is determined not only by product quality but also by the ability of MSMEs to create distinctive value that is difficult for competitors to imitate. Evidence from previous studies and illustrative case studies further shows that integrating creative innovation with customer experience enhances customer loyalty, strengthens brand image, and expands business growth opportunities. This review confirms that differentiation based on innovation and customer experience represents a highly relevant strategy for MSMEs seeking to maintain competitiveness amid digital transformation and rapidly changing consumer behavior.

This study offers both theoretical and practical implications for the development of marketing knowledge and MSME management. From a theoretical perspective, the study enriches the literature on differentiation strategies by integrating the concepts of creative innovation and experiential marketing within a single analytical framework supported by several strategic theories. This integration provides a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainable competitive advantage is developed among MSMEs. From a practical perspective, the findings provide guidance for MSME practitioners in developing business strategies that focus not only on improving product quality but also on creating valuable customer experiences through the adoption of digital technologies, strengthening brand identity, enhancing service quality, and fostering continuous innovation. Furthermore, governments, MSME support institutions, and educational organizations may utilize these findings as a reference for designing training programs, business assistance initiatives, and policy interventions aimed at improving MSME competitiveness at both local and national levels.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research employed a qualitative literature review approach, meaning that all findings were derived from the synthesis of previous studies without collecting primary data directly from MSME practitioners. Second, the literature was limited to publications released between 1985 and 2026, with only 41 articles meeting the predefined selection criteria. Consequently, relevant studies published outside these criteria may not have been included in the analysis. Third, the review focused exclusively on creative innovation and experiential marketing as differentiation strategies and therefore did not comprehensively examine other influential factors, such as entrepreneurial orientation, digital capabilities, leadership, organizational culture, or government policy support, which may also contribute significantly to MSME competitiveness.

Future research is recommended to extend this study through empirical approaches involving primary data collected from MSMEs across various industrial sectors and geographical regions. Such studies would enable the relationships among creative innovation, experiential marketing, differentiation, and business performance to be tested using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches. Future research may also incorporate additional variables, including digital transformation, entrepreneurial orientation, customer engagement, digital marketing capability, and government support, as mediating or moderating variables to develop a more comprehensive research model. For MSME practitioners, it is recommended that creative innovation be embedded as a sustainable organizational culture while experiential marketing strategies are systematically integrated into business activities through the utilization of digital technologies, the strengthening of brand identity, and the consistent management of customer experiences. Such efforts are expected to generate adaptive and sustainable competitive advantages in increasingly dynamic market environments.

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